

Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity: A Case against the Eternal Subordination of the Son

Selected Scriptures

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Introduction

This morning I'm going to take a detour from my current series on "Confronting the Culture." As you all know, we hosted the Shepherds' Conference this past week, and so over the past few weeks I have been rather consumed with preparing for the two messages I gave. (I thank you all for your prayers.) But because I was so consumed with the preparation, I feel this irresistible compulsion to share with you the fruit of that study—particularly from the seminar session I gave on the doctrine of the Trinity.

I called it, "Pursuing Unity on Triunity: Aiming for Clarity on the Recent Trinity Debates." And that's because there has been a lot of discussion and debate within Reformed evangelicalism recently over doctrinal matters related to the Trinity. And that's come up even in GraceLife, as many of you have asked several questions during our Sunday morning Q&A sessions on some of those issues—particularly the question of "EFS," the eternal functional subordination of the Son. And while we've given brief answers in that Q&A format, it's long been my desire to take a Sunday morning in GraceLife and give a biblical evaluation on the issue.

Now, many of you will be unaware of the online controversy. And that's OK. You're honestly better off for not following the Twitter debates and the back-and-forths of the blogosphere. But you do need to be familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity, as well as with current teachings that subtly undermine the Trinity. And why is that? Because the Triunity of God is the heart of the Christian faith! There is no Christianity without it, because there is no Christianity without God. And the Trinity is who God is. Herman Bavinck wrote, "The entire Christian belief system, all of special revelation, stands or falls with the confession of God's Trinity. It is the core of the Christian faith, the root of all its dogmas, the basic content of the new covenant... the essence of the Christian religion itself" (2:333). William G. T. Shedd said, "Christianity, in the last analysis, is Trinitarianism" (*NPNF*¹, 10–11).

And yet, sadly, many professing Christians are content to remain ignorant of the most fundamental confession of the Christian faith, content to remain ignorant of their God—because "It's difficult, and mysterious, and it makes my head hurt!" And so a majority of believers are content to study the creation, but not the Creator; to hear sermons on salvation, but not the Savior; to meditate on what God does rather than who God is. But we can never hope to rightly

understand the creation apart from the Creator. No one treasures their salvation properly who does not discipline themselves to know their Savior. And the most fundamental truth our God reveals about Himself is that He is Triune—that there is one and only one God, who subsists in three co-equal, consubstantial, co-eternal persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

And so yes, the Trinity is a mystery. It presses us to the edges of our understanding and even surpasses our understanding—beckoning us to humbly trust *in order* that we might understand. But it's worth it. One of the Dutch Puritans wrote, "The entire spiritual life of a Christian consists in being exercised concerning this mystery" (Brakel, 1:176). Augustine himself famously said, "In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable" than on the doctrine of the Trinity (*Trinity*, 1.3). Yes, the inquiry is often laborious, but because the errors are so dangerous, and because the discovery of truth is so profitable, we must be willing to press one another toward unity. And on this subject, our unity cannot consist merely in charitable conversation and agreement to disagree. Here, our unity must consist in the common confession of the truth.

Well then, what is the EFS debate? Well, we all agree that, as the incarnate Son, the man Christ Jesus submits to and obeys God the Father. The question is: Does that submission and obedience extend back to eternity past, even before He took on a human nature? In other words, is part of what it means to be Son His submission or subordination to the Father? Those who answer "yes" to those questions are careful to note that they do not intend to say that the Son is subordinate to the Father in *essence*; that would be Arianism. No, they say He is *functionally* subordinate to the Father in His role as Son. Hence: eternal functional subordination, EFS. Another way to say it: Are there eternal relations of authority and submission (ERAS) within the inner life of the Trinity?

You say, "Why is this even a question?" Well, for many years, otherwise-sound teachers used the doctrine of eternal functional subordination as a defense of the biblical doctrine of complementarianism—the doctrine that there are distinct roles of headship and submission for men and women in the home and in the church. The argument goes like this: submission in marriage is no indication of inferiority, because the Son is eternally functionally subordinate to the Father and is in no way inferior to the Father. Now, while not rejecting complementarianism, other teachers objected that such argumentation is contrary to Trinitarian orthodoxy.

And when that happened, the blogosphere erupted. Mountains of blog posts were written, articles were published, and between now and then even whole books have been published that have pressed us to consider what implications this debate has for our doctrine of the Trinity. It's become something of a touchstone that indicates the general health or sickness of our doctrine of God. And almost seven years later, it seems like it's every other week that a seminary student or an interested church member asks me about what I think of EFS.

Well, I want to spend the rest of our time together this morning persuading you to *reject* the doctrine of the eternal submission of the Son. And I'll aim to do that in **four parts**. First, I'll make a comment on **methodology**. Second, I'll address how a proper understanding of **metaphysics** guides us in this discussion. Third, I'll get into the **EFS debate** proper. And fourth, I'll respond to some **objections**.

I. Methodology: Scripture and Tradition

In the first place, then, it's necessary to begin with a word about **methodology**. We must begin by saying that Scripture alone is the sole infallible authority on all matters of Christian doctrine. The Bible reigns as “the supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined,” and by which all creeds and confessions, all the church fathers, and all the teachers throughout church history are to be examined (2LCF 1.10).

And so we believe that Jesus is the eternal Word become flesh, John chapter 1. He is the Word that was in the beginning with God, and so He is distinct from the Father. And yet that Word was God, and so He is fully God Himself. Along with the Father, the Son subsists in the undivided divine essence: Colossians 2:9 says “all the fullness of Deity dwells” in Him. This Word become flesh is, John 1:18, “the only *begotten* God”—eternally begotten from the Father's essence. “God of God” and “*Light of Light*,” so that all that the Father is, the Son is. We do not believe any doctrine simply because it was codified in a creed or taught by a preferred theologian. We believe the theology we believe, because we have been convinced that such doctrine is biblical—that it is, as the Westminster Confession puts it, “either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture” (WCF 1.6).

But notice what I've said, there. What Scripture implies is no less true than what Scripture expressly states. In other words, the logical implications of a divinely revealed truth are no less divinely revealed nor less true than the scriptural principle from which it's deduced. Or said still another way: from truth follows nothing but truth! If A is proven to be a scriptural truth, and if the rest of biblical testimony, along with the laws of logic, demand that A implies B, and B implies C, and so on through to Z, Z is no less biblical than A. What is deduced “by good and necessary consequence” is no less biblical than that which is “expressly set down in Scripture,” provided that is genuinely a good and necessary consequence.

And that is where the locus of this particular debate seems to be. It's not a disagreement *that* the biblical text says the Son is of the same nature as the Father. It's a disagreement about what the *implications* of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father *are*, and what those implications cannot be—whether it's possible that eternal submission can be spoken of two persons subsisting in the identical divine nature.

II. Metaphysics: Person and Nature

Now, even there, I use the phrase “*persons* subsisting in a *nature*.” And that leads me to a second preliminary comment. If the previous was about methodology, this one is about **metaphysics**—the study of the nature of *being, personhood, existence*, and so on. What is a person? What is a nature?

Think about this: If you believe that the cardinal confessions of the Christian faith are (1) that the only true God is three persons subsisting in one nature, and (2) that Christ our Savior is one person subsisting in two natures, you are necessarily interested, at the most basic level, in defining what a “person” is and what a “nature” is. If you can’t be a Christian without confessing three persons in one nature and one person in two natures, then the definitions of “person” and “nature” are of paramount importance. If “three persons in one nature” is a biblical summary of the nature of God’s being, then the Bible requires us to believe *something* about what a person is and what a nature is. And this means that every Christian is involved in a study of **metaphysics**.

Now, the simplest way to summarize how the Bible conceives of person and nature is: a **person** is an agent, an actor, a subject, a “who”; and a **nature** is that by which a person acts—that set of equipment employed by a person to carry out the actions he performs. While a person is a “*who*,” a nature is a “*what*.” Natures do not act or experience; persons act or experience according to, or by virtue of, their natures.

By and large, the historic Christian tradition subscribed to this “who” vs. “what” understanding of person and nature. It soon became standard to define a person as “an individual substance of a rational nature.” A person is an individual “who” who subsists in a “what” that is at the very least rational. That definition is representative of the Trinitarian and Christological thought of the pro-Nicene Fathers, who gave us the “one-nature-in-three-persons” formula that we all agree is essential to the Christian faith. And this understanding held sway through the Middle Ages, into the Reformation period, and was codified in the writings of post-Reformed theologians that we all regard as our heroes.

But during the Enlightenment of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, humanistic rationalism rejected Christianity, the Trinity, and the historic Christian definitions of person and nature. And when rationalist metaphysics combined with secular psychology, *personhood* became confused with *personality*. When we hear “personality,” we think of what a person is like—the set of traits or characteristics that define what kind of person he is. But what does that sound like but the very thing the Christian tradition had defined as “nature”?

Well, rather than rejecting such a shift outright, the professing Christian apologists of the time compromised with the world. They were terrified that no “enlightened” unbeliever would ever take the claims of Christianity seriously if it didn’t deal with this new metaphysics and epistemology on its own terms. And so they adopted the Enlightenment’s redefinitions to show that Christianity can still prove reasonable even on the unbelievers’ presuppositions. Immanuel Kant’s distinction between the “phenomenal” and “noumenal” realms is an example of this kind of compromise.

By the late 19th century, the definitional shift from “person” to “personality”—the shift to defining a person as a nature—began to bear rotten fruit in Christian theology. Theologians began to conceive the persons of the Trinity as **a society of personalities**—not three “who’s” subsisting in a single “what,” but three centers of consciousness—each with their own mind, will, and agency performing their own discrete operations by virtue of their distinct *personhood*. But the ancients would have heard the concepts of “consciousness,” “mind,” “will,” and “agency,” and said, “These are all the properties that constitute a *nature*! This is the set of equipment or characteristics that make a thing *what* it is, not a person *who* he is!”

Can you see what a disaster that makes for Christian theology? a theology whose cardinal confessions hinge on precise definitions of person and nature? After the Enlightenment, you had professing Christian theologians who affirmed the ancient formulas of “three persons in one nature” and “one person in two natures,” but who had been duped into redefining person and nature in such a way that would have been unrecognizable to the very men who gave us those formulations. I would argue that your confession of those formulas are meaningless if what you mean by “person” and “nature” are the opposite of what those men meant by the terms.

Well, that redefined, unbelieving, Enlightenment metaphysic continued to hold sway in many conservative theological circles through the 19th and 20th centuries. In fact, many pastors and scholars have been trained as if the post-Enlightenment evangelical doctrine of God was historic Christianity, rather than a departure from it. And so many of us don’t know any different. It’s the theological air we breathe to think of the three *persons* as if they were three *personalities*, with distinct minds, wills, and agencies. And it’s so upside-down that when you ask people to consider reflecting on whether their understanding of person and nature cohere with the biblical and historical Christian teaching, it feels almost sacrilegious to them! Asking them to embrace orthodoxy feels to them like you’re asking them to embrace heresy!

But lately, several theologians began to recognize this shift had taken place, and they’ve sought to recover the historic Christian teaching on the person-nature distinction, and to disentangle Enlightenment rationalism from Trinitarian theology. And the point is: for all our protestations that we believe in “three persons in one nature” and “two natures in one person”—we need to

stop and ask ourselves whether we're using definitions of person and nature that would have been unrecognizable to orthodox Christian theology before the 18th century.

III. The EFS Debate

And properly defining person and nature makes all the difference in **the EFS debate**, which we'll turn to now. Does the Son submit to the Father from eternity, even before the incarnation? Are there eternal relations of authority and submission (ERAS) within the inner life of the Trinity? I answer no to that question. Why? Well, because (1) submission is the subjection of one will to another, and therefore it requires multiple faculties of will; because (2) multiple faculties of will would require multiple natures (since will is a property of nature, not person); and (3) there is only one nature in the Godhead.

Now, the reason the incarnate Son can submit to and obey the Father (which, again, everyone grants) is because He has assumed a *human* nature (and thus a human will) into personal union with His divine nature. Before He assumed a human nature in the incarnation, there is no subjection of the Son's will to the Father's will, because they have the identical, selfsame will. Eternal submission would threaten the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son, the oneness of God's nature.

Now, that argument depends on the truthfulness of its key premises: namely, that submission requires two faculties of will, and that will is a faculty that is properly predicated of a nature, *not* a person. How can we go about proving the validity of these two premises?

A. The Nature of Submission

First, let's begin by considering the definition of submission. It seems virtually tautological to say that submission entails the subjection of one will to another will. That's just what submission *is*. If I submit to you, I bring my own will into subjection to your will; what I want is placed under and is governed by what you want. The Oxford English Dictionary defines submission as "the action of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the *will* or authority of another person." The leading Greek dictionary's entries for the New Testament words for submission are consistent with this.

And so I believe it's rather inescapable. For me to submit to someone is to subject my will to their will. And therefore, submission requires multiple faculties of will. In the almost-seven years this debate has been raging, no one has offered a compelling argument for why that's not the case.

B. Will is a Property of Nature, Not Person

You say, “OK, so submission requires multiple wills. Why does that matter?” Well, since (a) will is a property of nature, not person, and since (b) there is only one nature in the Godhead, there can only be one faculty of willing in the Godhead, which makes submission impossible. You ask, “But how do we know that will is a property of a nature and not a person? If will is a property of person, then each person of the Trinity can have His own distinct will, and submission makes total sense.”

Well, the way we can discern whether will is a property of nature or person is to consider the incarnate Christ. Jesus is one person subsisting in two natures, divine and human. He is not two persons, as the Nestorians taught, nor does He have just one nature (whether wholly divine, wholly human, or some amalgam of the two), as the monophysites and Eutychians taught. He is, as Chalcedon has put it, “one and the same Christ, ... acknowledged *in two natures* ... both concurring into *One Person*.”

Now, if will were a property of a person and not a nature, we would expect Christ, who is one person, to have only one will. If will were a property of a nature and not a person, we would expect that Christ, who has two natures, to have two wills. So which is it? Does the incarnate Christ have one will or two?

Well, that question was first hashed out in earnest in the events leading up to the Third Council of Constantinople in 680 and 681. It’s been dubbed “the monothelite controversy.” Those who taught that Christ only had one divine will were called monothelites, and those who taught that He had two wills—one divine and one human—were called dyothelites.

The Council concluded that Christ had to have both a divine will and a human will. Maximus the Confessor famously argued the dyothelite case by appealing to the fourth-century Cappadocian Father, Gregory Nazianzen’s well-known Trinitarian maxim: “That which is not assumed is not healed.” That is to say, Christ is our Savior by His substitutionary saving work. He saves us by taking on a full and true human nature, so that He is genuinely “consubstantial with us according to the manhood,” able to stand in man’s place as a genuine man, representing us in every way. When the Cappadocian Fathers argued against Apollinarius—who taught that Christ assumed a human body but not a human soul—they argued that if there was an aspect of humanity that Christ failed to assume to Himself, then that aspect was not healed in His saving work. If Christ was to heal the human will (along with the rest of human nature), he must have assumed a human will in His incarnation.

Besides that, if Christ didn’t assume a human will in His incarnation (as the monothelites contended), not only is our depraved will unsavable, but it’s difficult to argue convincingly that Christ was and is genuinely human. Genuine humans have human wills! They make human

choices by virtue of their human wills! Are you really human if you don't have a human will by which you make human choices? If not, then Christ must have had a human will.

And besides all that, the whole point of the incarnation was that our penalty had to be paid by a *man*, and that His obedience, which would be credited to us as righteousness, had to be the obedience of a man. If Christ, the Last Adam, cannot choose—as a man—to walk in obedience to God's law precisely in the way the first Adam failed, then He cannot stand in our place as our Substitute, and accomplish our justification as our federal head (Wellum, 348)—the way Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 says He does.

So you see, monothelism isn't just an arcane, Dark-Ages dispute about a meaningless point of doctrine. It undermines the genuine humanity of Christ altogether. This was what the Third Council of Constantinople concluded as well. Monothelism was condemned as heresy and dyothelism was established as the orthodox teaching of the Church.

Now follow me. If Christ assumed a human will—which He must have done for the sake of our salvation—then He had two wills, both divine and human. And since Christ is one person with two natures, it's fitting to conclude that will is a faculty properly predicated of a nature and not a person. Christ's two wills match up with His two natures and do not match up with His being a single person. If will were a property of person and not nature—which, incidentally, is what both Arius and Apollinarius taught—but if will were a property of person, since Christ had two wills we'd have expected Christ to be two persons, which of course He is not. Christ had two faculties of willing in accordance with His two natures: one divine and one human.

Now, besides all that, I'd argue that most of us already implicitly know that will is a property of nature and not person. When we engage in the debate over the bondage and freedom of the will and man's depravity, we explain the reality that apart from regenerating grace man's will is free to make choices but not to choose rightly. He's not an automaton unable to choose between alternatives, but he *is* deprived, unable to choose righteousness. He has a will, but his will is bound to act in accordance with his what? With his *nature*. See? Even without the monothelite controversy we know that will is a property of nature.

C. One Nature, One Will

So, since the Godhead is three persons fully subsisting in the single undivided divine nature, and since will is a predicate of nature and not person, there are not three faculties of will in the Godhead by virtue of the three persons. Instead, there is one faculty of will in the Godhead by virtue of the one nature. Consubstantial persons—that is, persons who subsist in the selfsame, numerically-identical nature all will by virtue of the selfsame, numerically-identical faculty of willing. And that means, by definition, they cannot submit to one another. The single divine will

cannot be “subjected” or “subordinated” to itself. That’s not submission; that’s just decision. If there is to be submission, there needs to be another faculty of will.

And that faculty of will is added through the Son’s incarnation. Since the incarnate Son takes on a human nature alongside and into personal union with His divine nature, He also takes on a human will as part of the machinery of that human nature. Now, this One Person, the God-man, Christ Jesus, subsists in two natures—the hypostatic union. Therefore, He has two faculties of will. Now with the “hardware” needed for submission, He can now subject His human will to the divine will, and say things like, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38), and “Not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). But before His incarnation (in eternity), the Son subsisted only in the single, undivided divine nature, and therefore possessed only the one divine will. He couldn’t subject His will to the Father’s will because it was the very same, identical faculty of will.

D. Alternatives to Orthodoxy

Now, if you reject that line of argumentation and embrace EFS or ERAS, in my estimation there are three alternatives that you must choose from. First, you could embrace **tritheism**. That is, you could rightly conclude that will is a property of nature, but wrongly insist that each divine person has His own faculty of willing. In such a case, the Father, Son, and Spirit would have three distinct natures. This obviously undermines Trinitarianism, and is heresy.

Second, you could embrace **monothelitism**. That is, you could wrongly conclude that will is a property of person and not nature, and in that way you could explain that three wills in the Godhead only means that there are three persons in the Godhead—not three natures, or beings. In this case, you’d avoid tritheism, but you’d be constrained to affirm that Jesus, because He is one person, had only one will. Which will would you grant Him? If He has only a human will in the incarnation, what happened to His divine will that He had by virtue of being a divine person from eternity? Did the divine Son change from having a divine will to having a human will? If He has only a divine will but not a human will, you’ve fatally undermined the genuine humanity of Christ and the Gospel along with it. If He has some sort of amalgam of the two—a divine-human will, or a theanthropic will—then He has a third sort of will that is neither divine nor human, and you get all the problems we just talked about.

A third alternative is: you could rightly embrace both monotheism and dyothelitism, but wrongly insist that **will is a property of person and not nature**. In this case, you’d have to explain, if will is a property of person, and if Christ had two wills, why He is not two persons.

None of these alternatives is acceptable to the teaching of Scripture. Whether in one area or another, the necessary entailments of EFS undermine key biblical doctrines of theology proper,

Trinitarianism, or Christology. If the nature of submission requires multiple faculties of will, and if as a property of nature two wills requires two natures, there can be no eternal relations of authority and submission within the Trinity without positing multiple natures in the Godhead. EFS is not tritheism, but friends: if consistently held it does entail tritheism. By God's grace, most of those who hold to EFS repudiate tritheism by confession. But they cannot do so consistently—at least, not by any definition that would have been recognizable as historic Christian orthodoxy. If classical, biblical Trinitarianism is to be consistently affirmed, EFS must be rejected.

IV. Objections

Now, in the nearly-seven years I've been talking with folks about this, I've heard several **objections** raised against what I've just presented. And I want to respond to **three** of them in the time we have left.

A. Submission is Inherent to Sonship

The **first** objection is that **submission is inherent to sonship**. “Isn't that just what it means to be a son? to submit to a father? And isn't that just what it means to be a father? to exercise authority over your children? Isn't that just what Scripture means by calling the Father 'Father' and the Son 'Son'?”

The answer to those questions is: no. Scripture never gives us any warrant for such a conclusion, and, interestingly, that has not been the answer of historic Christianity throughout the ages. From the post-apostolic period through to the early 18th century, the church—virtually uniformly—taught that calling the divine persons Father, Son, and Spirit spoke not of eternal relations of authority and submission, but of the **eternal relations of origin**, or their **modes of subsistence**. In other words, the Father is called Father because He *eternally begets* the Son. The Son is called Son because He is *eternally begotten*. The Spirit is called Spirit because He is eternally *spirated*—breathed forth—from the Father and the Son.

These eternal, ineffable, internal acts of God within the divine being are precisely what distinguish the persons of the Trinity from one another. The Father, Son, and Spirit subsist in the identical divine nature, and so they are perfectly co-equal with one another. But what distinguishes them, so that they are genuinely three persons, is that the Father is **ingenerate**; He is of none; the Son is **eternally generated**; He is eternally from the Father; and the Spirit **eternally proceeds**; He is eternally from the Father and the Son.

Now, I don't have time to do a full exegetical defense of the doctrine of eternal generation, but it's taught in Psalm 2:7, in John 5:26, and everywhere the Son is called “only begotten”—John

1:14 and 18; John 3:16 and 18; and 1 John 4:9. When Jesus is called the “only begotten Son,” or the “only begotten God,” that’s not a reference to His being begotten in the womb of Mary. It speaks of His being *eternally* begotten from the Father. It refers to that eternal self-differentiating act in the inner life of the Godhead, by which the Father eternally communicates to the Son the entire divine essence. It’s why the Nicene Creed calls the Son “God of God” and “Light of Light”—because “just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son to have *life in Himself*,” John 5:26. That’s why the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds say the Son is “*begotten*, not created.” The doctrine of eternal generation was an indispensable staple in the pro-Nicene case against the Arians. One scholar comments that “eternal generation is a central feature of pro-Nicene theology (both Latin and Greek)” (Johnson, “Trinitarian Agency,” 11; cf. Ayres, *Nicea and Its Legacy*, 236).

Interestingly, it wasn’t until the doctrines of eternal generation and eternal procession began to be dismissed as overly speculative or philosophical, that eternal relations of authority and submission were posited. In other words, once theologians began to deny the personal properties, which were the only means of distinguishing the divine persons from one another, they needed to fill that gap with something. And it was then that some began to teach that what makes the Son the Son is that He submits.

But the point is, the eternal relations of origin are the teaching of Scripture as well as of historic Trinitarianism. And so when the Bible calls the Son “the Son,” it’s not pointing to His eternal submission but His eternal *fromness* from the Father. Just as a father communicates his human nature to his son in ordinary generation, such that his son becomes a distinct person while equally human, so also God the Father eternally communicates to the Son the fullness of the divine essence, so that the Son “becomes” a distinct person while equally God. **Submission is not inherent to sonship.** In fact, John 5:18 says that when Jesus was calling Himself the Son of the Father, He was “making Himself *equal* with God.” So, to be Son is not to submit. To be Son is to be *equal* to the Father, but at the same time to be *from* the Father. Eternal sonship, yes! Eternal submission? No.

B. To Be Sent is to Be Subordinate

A **second** objection is that **being sent implies subordination**. First John 4:14 says, “We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world.” And so if the Father sent the Son, the Father must be exercising authority over the Son and the Son must be responding submissively or obediently to the Father’s command. And since the Father sends the Son into the world, such sending happens before the incarnation, before the Son has a human will.

It's interesting that this same argument that is employed by the pro-EFS side is an argument that the semi-Arians used to argue that the Son is inferior to the Father, since the one who sends must be "greater" than the one who is sent (*Trinity*, 2.7). When you discover that your argument takes virtually the same shape as the heretics of history, that's a red flag.

And Augustine encountered this argument. How did he answer it? Similar to the previous point, Augustine and the pro-Nicene tradition argued that being sent was not indicative of submission or subordination, but *fromness*. They appealed to eternal generation once again. Augustine writes, "Not because one is greater and the other less"—or, we could say, Not because one is *authoritative* and the other *submissive*—"but because one is the Father and the other the Son; one is the begetter, the other begotten; the first is the one *from* whom the sent one is; the other is the one who is *from* the sender" (*Trinity*, 4.27). That is to say, the eternal divine processions ground and direct and shape the temporal divine missions. In other words, the Son is sent from the Father in time because, by virtue of eternal generation, the Son is *from* the Father from all eternity.

But Augustine doesn't leave it there. He also goes on to argue that **being sent does not imply submission** by virtue of another fundamental axiom of pro-Nicene Trinitarianism: the doctrine of **inseparable operations**. This is the teaching that, because (a) the three persons of the Trinity each act according to the identical principle of action—namely, the divine nature—and because (b) that divine nature can never be divided, therefore (c) neither can the divine works be divided. Every external act that God performs is worked by all three persons of the Trinity.

John Owen puts it like this. He says, the persons of the Trinity are "**undivided** in their operations, acting all by the same will, the same wisdom, the same power. Every person, therefore, is the author of every work of God, and the divine nature is the same undivided principle of all divine operations" (*Works*, 3:93). That's not to say that the three persons of the Trinity can't be distinguished from one another in their working; Scripture often appropriates divine works to one person of the Trinity, as is fitting with their personal properties. (Because the Father is from none, the Son is from the Father, and the Spirit is from the Father and the Son, we say that every divine act has its origin *from* the Father, is accomplished *through* the Son, and is perfected *in* the Spirit.) But the point is, as one scholar puts it, that "when a biblical text mentions [the work of] one divine person, this should not be seen as excluding the others" (Johnson, "Trinitarian Agency," 14n37; cf. Augustine, *Trinity*, 1.19).

You say, "What do you mean?" Well, who created the world? First Corinthians 8:6 says it is "the Father...from whom are all things." But Colossians 1:16 says, "By Him," that is, the Son, "all things were created." John 1:3: "All things have come into being through" the Word. And Job 33:4 says, "The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life." So, the Father created the world, the Son created the world, and the Spirit created the world. But

there aren't three worlds! There's only one creation! There are three who create, but there is only one act of creation. That is because the three persons work inseparably.

Or consider: who raised Christ from the dead? You say, "The Father! Acts 17:31: He's "furnished proof to all men by raising [Christ] from the dead." But wait a minute. Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," John 2:19. And "He was speaking of the temple of His body." John 10:17–18: "I lay down My life so that I may take it again. . . . I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again." The Son raised the Son from the dead! But then Romans 8:11 speaks of "the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead. . ." The Father raised the Son, the Son raised the Son, and the Spirit raised the Son! But there weren't three resurrections! There are three who resurrect, but only one inseparable act of resurrection.

You say, "What's the point?" The point is: when Scripture says that the Father sent the Son into the world, we are not to imagine that the Son Himself (or the Spirit) is excluded from that act of sending. And Augustine illustrates that brilliantly. He says, "In what manner did God send his Son? Did he tell him to come, giving him an order he complied with by coming, or did he ask him to, or did he merely suggest it? Well, whichever way it was done, it was certainly done *by word*. But God's word *is* his Son. So when the Father sent him by word, what happened was that he was sent by the *Father* and his *Word*. Hence it is by the Father *and* the Son that the Son was sent, because the Son *is* the Father's Word" (*Trinity*, 2.9, emphases added). That is a brilliant illustration of inseparable operations! We can't imagine that the Father is authoritatively commanding the Son by virtue of an authority that the Son Himself does not share. The Son Himself *is* the very Word of the Father.

And so the way Augustine and the Nicene Fathers answered this objection was to say: "Sending isn't an exercise of authority. It's simply the Father acting inseparably in redemption according to His internal personal property—His eternal relation of origin as the eternal begetter of the Son. The One who begets the Son eternally sends the Son in time. The One who is from the Father eternally is sent from the Father in time.

C. Incarnate Submission is To Be Read Back into Eternity

In the **third** place, objections are advanced on the basis of several texts which describe the incarnate Son as submitting to the Father. John 5:19: "The Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing." John 6:38: "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." John 14:28: Jesus says, "The Father is greater than I." John 14:31: "I do exactly as the Father commanded Me."

But none of these passages prove what's claimed, because nobody disagrees that the incarnate Son submits to, is subject to, and obeys the Father. Having assumed a human nature, He submits to the Father by virtue of the human will that He took on. But before the incarnation, before the Son had a human will distinct from the will of the Father, such submission was impossible. There is a very big difference between having a human nature and not having a human nature. And the Son wasn't eternally incarnate.

First Corinthians 15:28 is another text that gets pressed into service, because it speaks of a time in eternity future when "the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him," namely the Father. But we have no problem with *everlasting* functional subordination, because the incarnation is everlasting. Jesus remains fully and truly human. The Apostle Paul can write in AD 60, as the Son sits enthroned in heaven, Colossians 2:9, that "in Him all the fullness of Deity *dwells*"—present tense—"in *bodily form*." The Son may be everlastingly subjected to the Father, according to His human nature, because He is everlastingly incarnate. But *everlasting* functional subordination is no argument for *eternal* functional subordination, because, though He will be incarnate for eternity future, the Son was not incarnate from eternity past.

One more: First Corinthians 11:3. Paul says, "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and *God is the head of Christ*." You can see where they're going here. But the problem is, they're reading that last phrase as if it said, "And the *Father* is the head of the *Son*"—as if headship (and the corresponding submission) were inherent to fatherhood and sonship. Paul says that God is the head of *Christ*. He uses the title of Messiah, the Anointed One of God, which can only describe the Son as He is the Son of David, the Seed of Abraham, the Seed of the Woman—the Man Christ Jesus, the only mediator between God and men: the One who is both God and man. To say that God is the head of Christ is simply to say that the incarnate Son is subject to God the Father by virtue of His humanity—which, again, no one objects to.

So, when all of these texts are interpreted in their contexts, and in light of the consubstantiality of the Father and the eternal Son as well as in light of the incarnation of the eternal Son, none of them constrain the student of Scripture to posit eternal relations of authority and submission in the Godhead.

Conclusion

We're out of time. And a little exhausted. "Does it really matter? These things are so mysterious and so nuanced and sliced so fine." Yes, it really matters. Because this is who our God is! We exist to know God! And He has revealed Himself as three-in-One. And therefore, whenever there is a threat to that Triunity, the people of God must rise and refute that error according to biblical

truth. The doctrine of the eternal functional subordination of the Son is one such error. It's not as if everyone who is uncertain or confused about this is not a Christian; not at all. These are difficult matters. But it's also not as if it's a matter of no consequence—just another point of minutia where we can agree to disagree. We must come to a common confession here. As the Athanasian Creed puts it: "In this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity."