

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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BEGOTTEN OF HIS FATHER (Part 3)

The doctrine of the Trinity forms the core of Christianity. Christianity is distinctively Trinitarian. Down through the centuries efforts have been made to modify or change the doctrine under the pretense of improving it, but the end result is always harmful and heretical. The recent efforts of some well-meaning Evangelical theologians to insist that the Son has always been eternally subordinate to the Father (ESS) is a case in point. Warfield noted in his classic study on the Trinity that: “It has been found necessary, nevertheless, from time to time, vigorously to reassert the principle of equalization, over against a tendency unduly to emphasize the elements of subordinationism which still hold a place thus in the traditional language in which the church states its doctrine of the Trinity. In particular, it fell to Calvin, in the interests of the true Deity of Christ – the constant motive of the whole body of Trinitarian thought – to reassert and make good the attribute of self-existence (*autotheotōs*) for the Son. Thus Calvin takes his place, alongside of Tertullian, Athanasius and Augustine, as one of the chief contributors to the exact and vital statement of the Christian doctrine of the Triune God.”¹

A few years ago, the Evangelical community once again found itself in the midst of a heated debate over doctrine. This was not like some of the other debates that have occurred over the last century (the nature and extent of Biblical authority, the cessationist vs. continuationist views of charismatic gifts, the timing of the Rapture, to mention only a few) – this was at the very core of Evangelical theology: the Doctrine of the Trinity. Some very high-profile Evangelical theologians (i.e., Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem) claimed that the Son of God, though equal with the Father, has *always* been eternally in subordination to the Father (hereafter “EFS”).² The debate to date revolves around the following points:

1. Does eternal subordination necessitate an ontological hierarchy in the Trinity or not?
2. Does eternal subordination mean being Biblically faithful or not?
3. Does eternal subordination mean being outside of Nicene orthodoxy or not?
4. Do proponents of EFS/ERAS structure their view of the Trinity based on their complementarian view of men and women or not?
5. Does the Son’s submission to the Father in eternity mean that the Son and Father have two wills, not one?

Douglas Kelly, one of my seminary professors, helpfully explains two of the terms that are at the center of this debate: “Classical theology has drawn certain distinctions regarding the Holy Trinity. The three main ones are: (1) distinction between the ontological and economical Trinity; (2) distinction in modes of existence; and (3) distinction in historico-redemptive work.

“(1) *Distinction between Ontological and Economical Trinity.* The Church of course has always confessed only one Trinity, but it has looked at the same reality in two different ways: ontological and economical.

The ontological aspect refers to the eternal character of the Holy Trinity, antecedent to all creational and redemptive history, and in their ontology or Being, there is absolute and eternal equality. Athanasius, for instance, especially in *Contra Arianos*, frequently employs this sort of distinction to explain passages of the Gospels that seem to attribute inferiority to Christ, as does Hilary in *De Trinitate*. In both of them are following earlier Apologists, not least Irenaeus. The economical aspect has reference to the creational, providential and historico-redemptive work of the Trinity, in which there is a certain historical order and temporary subordination among the Persons in terms of their work in bringing salvation. In this respect, the Father is first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third. Yet in the ultimate sense, this historical order does not mean that there is any antecedent inequality among the Persons of the Triune Being.”³ The first few verses of chapter 1 give a brief summary of the epistle’s main subject: The finality of the absolute Revelation of God in Jesus Christ as in bold contrast to that of the Old Testament Revelation. As Philip Hughes remarks, “The author plunges straight into the exposition of the grand theme, the truth of which he is intent on communicating to his readers.”⁴

- I. **THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE OLD AND NEW REVELATIONS (VV. 1-2)** (contrasted in three aspects).
 - A. **Method:** The Old Revelation was made “in many portions and in many ways,” (incomplete); the New Revelation is made in Him who is His “Son,” and this is completed (cf. John 1:14, 18).
 - B. **Time:** One is “long ago” and the other is “in these last days;” the stress is only on what God has now said once, and once for all, and in One.
 - C. **Messengers:** Those by whom God spoke long ago were “the prophets;” there were many. God’s final Revelation is by the One, His only begotten “son.” In both cases, however, it should be noted that it was God who was speaking. The Greek word *lalesas* is being used in the completed sense (aorist).

- II. **THE SUPREMACY OF THE SON.** The opening verses of Hebrews are like going out on a clear night and beholding the sheer splendor of the stars. Kent Hughes notes, “The cosmic supremacy of Christ dazzles the mind: He is *Inheritor, Creator, Sustainer, Radiator* and *Representor*. These are beautiful, soul-expanding thoughts. But they positively vibrate with glory when we see that they introduce the priestly supremacy of Christ – he is *Purifier* and *Ruler*.”⁵

- III. **THE NATURE AND WORK OF THE SON (v. 3).** “Immediately on speaking of the Son,” comments Griffith-Thomas, “the Epistle bursts out into a description of His glories.”⁶
 - A. **Description of the Son.**
 1. Christ the Heir (v. 2)
 2. Christ the Creator (v. 2)
 3. Christ the Revealer (v. 3)
 4. Christ the Sustainer (v. 3)
 5. Christ the Redeemer (v. 3)
 6. Christ the Ruler (v. 3)

 - B. **The Divine Character of the Son.**
 1. In relation to his Father:
 - (a) Possessor of divine attributes (John 1:4; 10:30; 21:17; 21:17; Eph. 4:10; Col 1:19; 2:9)
 - (b) Eternally existent (John 1:1; 8:58; 12:41; 17:5; 1 Cor. 10:4; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 11:26; 13:8; Jude 5)
 - (c) Equal in dignity (Matt. 28:19; John 5:23; 2 Cor. 13:14; Rev. 22:13; cf. 21:6)
 - (d) Perfect revealer (John 1:18; 14:9; Col. 1:15; Heb. 2:1-3)
 - (e) Embodiment of truth (John 1:9; 14; 6:32; 14:6; Rev. 3:7, 14)

(f) Joint possessor of the kingdom (Eph. 5:5; Rev. 11:15), churches (Rom. 16:16), Spirit (Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19), temple (Rev. 21:22), divine name (Matt. 28:19; cf. Rev. 14:1), and throne (Rev. 22:1, 3)

2. In relation to human beings:

(a) Recipient of praise (Matt. 21:15-16; Eph. 5:19; 1 Tim. 1:12; Rev. 5:8-14)

(b) Recipient of prayer (Acts 1:24; 7:59-60; 9:10-17, 21; 22:16, 19; 1 Cor. 1:2; 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8)

(c) Object of saving faith (John 14:1; Acts 10:43; 16:32; Rom. 10:8-13)

(d) Object of worship (Matt. 14:33; 28:9; 17; John 5:23; 20:28; Phil. 2:10-11; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:8-12)

(e) Joint source of blessing (1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; 1 Thess. 3:11; 2 Thess. 2:16)

(f) Object of doxologies (2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:5b-6; 5:13)⁷

C. ***The Father and the Son.*** Other important questions have to be addressed:

Is there a separation of the divine will? Here's the point many critics of EFS are making: for the Son to submit to the Father's authority, there must be a distinction between the will of the Father and the will of the Son (otherwise submission would make no sense). Which is fine, as long as we're talking about Christ after the incarnation, since Christ has two wills. But if we're talking about Christ before the incarnation, then we're saying the eternal God has two wills, and that is a denial of divine simplicity.

Does the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son imply that Christ only had one will?

This is the flipside of the previous point. Take the Gethsemane prayer: was Jesus saying, "not the will of the Son, but the Will of the Father," or "not my human will, but your (and in fact my) divine will?" If the former, as so EFS advocates have argued, does that lead to the conclusion that Christ had just one will? Historically the church has regarded this belief (Monothelism) as unorthodox.

Does the Eternal Functional Submission of the Son involve denying the Eternal Generation of the Son (EG)?

Some EFS advocates deny Eternal Generation, and some (I would say most, but I can't be certain) affirm it. But the critics of EFS have seen this as another strike against it. As Liam Goligher tweeted recently: "The Trinity, minus eternal generation of the Son, inseparable operations and one divine will, plus eternal subordination, equals what?" (The answer anticipating, rightly or wrongly, is presumably "Arianism.") EFS advocates have argued that, since many of them do not even hold this position, it shouldn't be bundled into the debate."⁸

CONCLUSION: Our good friend Rick Phillips has an excellent summary of our text: "What this passage tells us about Christ reminds us not merely that we must hold to him in faith, but also how to draw near to him in faith. This comes through our understanding of his three offices as prophet and priest and king. Jesus is our King. We need to be ruled and governed, protected and led. Let us therefore bow before him and crown him Lord of all, flying his banner at the gates of our hearts and forsaking all other kingdoms and rulers. Jesus is our Prophet. We need truth; he is the Truth, and he speaks the truth. Let us therefore come to his Word seeking light and forsaking all the false prophets who would lead us astray. Jesus is our Priest. So we should readily come to him for cleansing, for forgiveness, for interceding prayers, and for a full and loving reconciliation with God the Father. Let us therefore confess our great need for his blood and for his ongoing priestly intercession in heaven. Let us lay hold of the cross, forsaking all claim to any merit of our own. In all these ways, through his three offices, let us commit ourselves to Jesus Christ alone, who is able to save us to the uttermost, to the glory of God the Father."⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield: Biblical Doctrines II* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 171.

² Mike Horton, in reviewing one of the books by Kevin Giles that seeks to refute EFS, rightly notes how Bruce Ware and especially Wayne Grudem have in fact structured their view of the Trinity based on their understanding of the relationship between husbands and wives. “Virtually every evangelical who argues theologically for the Son’s eternal subordination in authority is committed to the permanent subordination of women” (226). Astonishingly, Wayne Grudem asserts that this is the heart of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Instead of eternal begottenness, he suggests that “authority and submission between the Father and the Son . . . and the Holy Spirit is the *fundamental* difference between the persons of the Trinity” (*Systematic Theology* [Zondervan, 1995], 250). Without such “subordination . . . we would not have three distinct persons” (Grudem, 251). And in another place: “If we did not have such differences in authority in the relationships among the members of the Trinity, then we would not know any difference at all” (*Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* [Crossway, 2004], 433). The “differing authority” is only part of what distinguishes the persons. “The differences in authority among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the only interpersonal differences that the Bible indicates that exist *eternally* among the members of the Godhead” (Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 433). Thus authority and submission is “the *most fundamental* aspect of interpersonal relationships in the entire universe” (emphasis added: Grudem *Evangelical Feminism*, 429). This is a dangerous view chiefly because it projects an ontological subordinationism onto the life of the Godhead. Although Grudem insists that this is only subordination in terms of roles and authority, he seems unaware of the Arian provenance of this theory.” *Modern Reformation: The Trinity Issue* (vol. 23, Nov-Dec 2014) p. 48, 49.

³ Douglas Kelly, *Systematic Theology I* (Mentor, 2008), p. 547.

⁴ Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on The Epistle to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 35.

⁵ Kent Hughes, *Preaching The Word: Hebrews I* (Crossway, 1993), p. 29.

⁶ W. H. Griffith-Thomas, *Hebrews, A Devotional Commentary* (Zondervan, 1961), p. 22.

⁷ This outline is from M. J. Harris, *Jesus As God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Baker, 1992), p. 316.

⁸ See Andrew Wilson, *Eternal Submission in the Trinity? A Quick Guide to the Debate* (Monday, June 13, 2016).

⁹ Richard Phillips, *Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P&R, 2006), p. 24.