

*Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons,
Implications for Life*

*One God
in Three
Persons*

Edited by

BRUCE A. WARE & JOHN STARKE

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To our wives

JODI

who is my (Bruce's) faithful companion
in life and ministry

JENA

who supports me (John) in my weaknesses
and encourages me to pray

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Abbreviations

- ANF *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 10 vols. 1885–1887. Reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993.
- ATJ *Ashland Theological Journal*
- BDAG Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3d ed. Chicago, 1999.
- EFE Eternal functional equality
- EFS Eternal functional subordination
- ERAS Eternal relational authority-submission
- JBMW *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*
- JETS *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
- JTS *Journal of Theological Studies*
- NICNT New International Commentary on the New Testament
- NPNF *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1886–1900.
- PG *Patrologia Graeca*. Edited by J. P. Migne et al. Paris, 1857–1866.
- PL *Patrologia Latina*. Edited by J. P. Migne et al. Paris, 1878–1890.
- TDNT *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964–1976.
- TrinJ *Trinity Journal*
- WAF *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*. Edited by Joseph Belcher. 3 vols. 1845. Reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1988.

10 *Abbreviations*

- WJP *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*. Edited by J. T. Rutt. 25 vols. London, 1817–1832.
Reprint, New York: Klaus, 1972.
- WTJ *Westminster Theological Journal*

Preface

The concern of this volume is the doctrine of God and, in particular, a debate among evangelicals concerning how the persons of our Trinitarian God relate to one another. This is not a debate concerning *being* among the persons of the Godhead, nor *status*, but concerning *relation*. The points among orthodox Christians are clear: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are identical in *being* and equal in *status*. But the matter before us concerns *relations* among the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

What often becomes central in the debate is how the Son relates to the Father, not because the Holy Spirit is inconsequential, but because in the New Testament the incarnation of the Son dramatically forces us to ask questions about the relationship of the persons of the Trinity in a way Pentecost does not. Therefore, much of the debate before us answers the question, Does the human obedience of Christ to the Father have a basis in the eternal Son of God, or is it restricted to his humanity and incarnate state?

One side of the debate argues that we must restrict Christ's obedience to the Father to his incarnate state, and to affirm otherwise gets us dangerously close to dissolving the deity of Christ. The other side affirms that, indeed, the human obedience of Christ has a basis in the eternal Son of God, and to affirm otherwise would threaten the integrity of the human and divine nature of the Son or lead to a modalistic error of a "Christ whose proper being remains hidden behind an improper being."¹

The essays in this volume argue for the latter position.

¹Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 398. Letham makes this point from Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1: 198–200.

The Debate in Context

Debates over the nature of God never exist in a vacuum. Theological controversies throughout the church's history have arisen from particular cultural moments. This controversy is no different. While trying to find the source is a bit like peeling back an onion with no center, just layers upon layers, the cultural *moment* was the rise of feminism and an increasingly feminized doctrine of God within Protestant denominations in North America, Europe, and Australia. Feminist theologians like Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Catherine LaCugna, and those sympathetic to feminism like Jürgen Moltmann, along with some evangelicals, labored to eliminate anything appearing to give credence to the Son's submitting to the Father from eternity. They thereby gave ontological reinforcement to a completely egalitarian relationship between male and female.²

In response, conservative evangelicals countered the rise of feminism in the church primarily by arguing for a complementarian structure to gender and the local church, but also by appealing to the Trinity.³ In response to complementarian appeals to the Trinity, a more concerted opposition came from *evangelical* egalitarians,⁴ which has, in turn, produced a response of entire (or large portions of) volumes on both sides aimed entirely at this debate,⁵ along with any number of journal articles and theological society papers.

Since this debate carries with it not only historical questions about the doctrine of God and the Trinity, but also cultural baggage of modern feminism and gender debates, emotive language and heresy charges tend

²See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklesia-logy of Liberation* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Fiorenza, *Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology* (New York: Continuum, 1994); Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM, 1991).

³See John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991); Robert Letham, "The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment," *WTJ* 52 (1991): 65–78.

⁴See Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Trinity," *JETS* 40 (1997): 57–68; Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002).

⁵See Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

to cloud the matter—even trivialize it. However, our cultural moment does not trivialize the question, nor should our emotional impulses from gender debates cloud the matter. What is at stake is larger than our cultural moment since it concerns the nature of God and the doctrine of the Trinity.

Finally, some argue that we should be slow to use or should cease from using Trinitarian arguments to support a particular view of human relations.⁶ Some even find these discussions to be useless and needless speculation. But such conclusions fall short of proper Christian devotion. Take, for example, the call for Christians to follow in the humility of Christ (Phil. 2:1–11). Our call is not just to follow the Christ of the incarnate state who ate and drank with sinners (though indeed it is that), but also to follow the Christ who “was in the form of God” and then took “the form of a servant” (2:6, 7), humbling himself in order for the Father to exalt him (2:9–11). And we are to follow Christ not only into humility, but also into exaltation *from* the Father. Not that *we* will be worshiped, or that every tongue will confess that *we* are Lord; but if you “humble yourselves before the Lord, . . . he will exalt you” (James 4:10). And how will we understand true humility in hopes of true exaltation if we do not adequately understand the Son as the Servant of the Lord (see Isaiah 42) humbling himself in order to be exalted by the Father? For it is not the example of the Father’s humility that we should follow, but the Son’s, and it is not the Son who will exalt us, but the Father.

Is it not obvious, though, that the humility we learn from the Son has strong implications for human relations? And is it not reasonable that Paul may then want husbands and wives to consider the relationship of the Father and Son when considering how they relate to one another (1 Cor. 11:3; see also 15:28)? Is it not pastoral of Paul to present not only the sacrificial and self-giving relationship of Christ and his church, but also the union of love that the Father has with the Son and the Son with the Father to guide Christian marriage, rather than an arbitrary cultural norm, whether a traditional hierarchicalism or modern egalitarianism?

⁶Michael F. Bird, “Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles: A Response to Recent Discussion,” *TrinJ* 29 (2008): 267–83.

Worse, calling for Christians to cease reflecting on the relationship of the Father with the Son is like asking Christians to cease reflecting on heaven. The Son prays to the Father that we might in fact be brought into the relationship of the Father and the Son. Jesus prays “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that *they also may be in us . . .* The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, *I in them and you in me*, that they may become perfectly one” (John 17:21–23). The intra-trinitarian relationship in question is also filled with a kind of love and glory and joy that Christians can look forward to participating in. Not that we will be brought into God’s proper being, but we will be brought into the joy and delight the Father has in the Son and the Son in the Father. So then, the result of all contemplation of God should finally develop into praise, and with praise, joy.

Toward a Comprehensive Approach

Most volumes noted above have labored, in some measure, to approach this debate through matters of biblical interpretation, church history, theological perspective, and philosophy. But no one author can hope to be comprehensive in this matter. Yet that is the aim of this volume with its multiple contributors: to seek to be comprehensive in matters of Scripture, history, theological perspective, and philosophy.

Certainly there will be overlap among chapters, since each discipline is interdependent upon the others. However, our essays on *Scripture* aim to show that modern interpreters who argue that the New Testament authors, more specifically the apostles John and Paul, never intended to communicate an eternal submission of the Son of God to the Father are out of step with not only the meaning of the text, but also its implications for Christian discipleship.

Our essays concerning church history show that while this debate was not the center of many of the early-to-medieval church controversies, it was certainly addressed, and to hold that the Son’s submission to the Father is restricted to the incarnate state puts one at odds with orthodox christologies or forfeits important safeguards against heterodoxy.

Finally, the essays that concern theological and philosophical per-

spectives maintain that when we understand the relationship of the eternal Father and Son as one of authority and submission, we rightly think God's thoughts after him as creatures contemplating his nature.

It is our hope that this volume will bring praise to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, while adorning the church with wisdom and clarity. With this, then, let us persevere toward the reward of knowing God.

O Lord God Almighty,
eternal, immortal, invisible, the mysteries of whose being are
unsearchable:
Accept our praises for the revelation you have given of yourself,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
three persons in one God,
and mercifully grant that in holding fast this faith
we may magnify your glorious name,
for you live and reign, one God, world without end. Amen.⁷

Bruce A. Ware
John Starke

⁷Prayers of Adoration on Trinity Sunday, *The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity

WAYNE GRUDEM

Several evangelical-feminist authors have denied that the Son is eternally subject to the authority of the Father within the Trinity. These authors include Gilbert Bilezikian, Rebecca Groothuis, Kevin Giles, and Millard Erickson.¹ More recently, some additional essays have supported this view, especially essays by Phillip Cary, Linda Belleville, Kevin Giles (again), and Dennis Jowers.²

In reading these arguments, I noticed that they contained important doctrinal deviations either in what was said or in what was implied by the form of argument used. The arguments either deviated from the

¹ See Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 190–91; Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 57; Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 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).

² See the essays in Dennis Jowers and H. Wayne House, eds., *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012): Phillip Cary, “The New Evangelical Subordinationism: Reading Inequality into the Trinity” (1–12); Linda Belleville, “‘Son’ Christology” (59–81); Kevin Giles, “The Trinity without Tiers” (262–87); and Dennis Jowers, “The Inconceivability of Subordination within a Simple God” (375–410).

orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, or rejected the authority of Scripture. The following essay explains those deviations.³

Arguments That Deviate from the Orthodox Doctrine of the Trinity

Denying the Trinity by Denying Any Eternal Distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

Essential to the doctrine of the Trinity, as taught in the Bible, is the idea that there is a distinction between the persons of the Trinity. The Father is not the Son; the Father is not the Holy Spirit; and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. They are three distinct persons. They are equal in deity, so that each person is fully God. And there is only one God. Yet within the one being of God himself, there are three distinct persons.

But several recent evangelical-feminist writers are *unwilling to specify any distinctions between the persons*. This is a significant deviation. For example, rather than agreeing that the names “Father” and “Son” indicate a distinction between the persons, several evangelical feminists argue that these names show *only* that the Son is *like* the Father, not that he is distinct from the Father in any way. Millard Erickson writes, “There is considerable biblical evidence, however, that the primary meaning of the biblical term *Son* as applied to Jesus is likeness rather than subordinate authority. So, for example, the Jews saw Jesus’ self-designation as the Son of God as a claim to deity or equality with God (e.g., John 5:18).”⁴

Similarly, Kevin Giles objects that the names “Father” and “Son” “are not used in the New Testament to suggest that the divine Father always has authority over the Son. They speak rather of an eternal correlated relationship marked by intimacy, unity, equality, and identical authority.”⁵

³I understand my argument in this essay to be supplemental to the basic biblical argument for the eternal submission of the Son to the Father that I made in Wayne Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father,” in Jowers and House, *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, 235–42.

⁴Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 116.

⁵Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 127. Giles also objects that arguing for the Father’s authority by analogy to human father-son relationships is “exactly like” the Arian error of speaking of the Son as “begotten,” and therefore it is the same as arguing that the Son was created, just as human children are begotten by their fathers (66–67). In response: the rest of Scripture prohibits the idea of the Son as a created being. So that aspect of an earthly father-son relationship cannot be true of God. But the rest of Scripture does not prohibit the idea of authority and submission in a father-son relationship. It rather confirms it. The issues are different.

But if “intimacy” and “identical authority” were all that Jesus wanted to indicate by calling himself Son and calling God his Father, he could have spoken of “my friend in heaven” or “my brother in heaven” or even “my twin in heaven.” Those images were ready at hand. But he did not. He spoke of “my Father in heaven.” Emphasizing likeness in deity only, while failing to specify any distinction between the persons of the Trinity, is a failure to affirm any distinction between the three persons, which is one important aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity. This failure alone is a significant doctrinal deviation.

Denying the Trinity by Claiming That an Act of Any One Person Is Actually an Act of All Three Persons

Even more troubling is the tendency of evangelical feminists to claim that any action taken by any person in the Trinity is an action of all three persons in the Trinity. When faced with many biblical texts that show that the Son is always subject to the Father (see list under “Ignoring Verses That Contradict Your Position” below), and not the Father to the Son, Millard Erickson proposes a different solution. He suggests that *an act of any one person in the Trinity is actually an act of all three persons*: Erickson says that “an overall principle can be formulated.” He states it this way:

Although one person of the Trinity may occupy a more prominent part in a given divine action, the action is actually that of the entire Godhead, and the one person is acting on behalf of the three. This means that those passages that speak of the Father predestining, sending, commanding, and so on should not be taken as applying to the Father alone but to all members of the Trinity. Thus they do not count as evidence in support of an eternal supremacy of the Father and an eternal subordination of the Son.⁶

But the way Erickson argues this is to point out that *some* of the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are done by more than one person. For example, he shows that both the Father and the Son are involved in *sending the Holy Spirit* into the world after Pentecost (p. 125).

⁶Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 137–38.

He shows that both the Son and the Father are involved in *judging the world* (p. 126). Both the Son and the Holy Spirit *intercede before the Father* (p. 126). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all *indwell those who believe* in Christ (pp. 126–27). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all *give gifts* (pp. 128–30). The Father and Son *love the world* (pp. 130–31). Both the Father and the Son *receive prayer* (pp. 131–32).

Erickson concludes, “The various works attributed to the different persons of the Trinity are in fact works of the Triune God. One member of the Godhead may in fact do this work on behalf of the three and be mentioned as the one who does that work, but all participate in what is done” (p. 135).

But these verses hardly prove Erickson’s point. Yes, it is true that both the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit into the world. But the Holy Spirit does not send the Holy Spirit into the world. And yes, both the Son and the Holy Spirit intercede before the Father, but the Father does not intercede before the Father.

As for actions that are directed toward people in the world, such as loving the world, judging the world, and indwelling believers, it is true that all three persons are involved in some way. But that does not prove Erickson’s point, because the real issue is the relationship between the Father and the Son within the Trinity. And on that issue the testimony of Scripture is clear that the Son consistently, throughout eternity, submits to the authority of the Father.

This is manifest even in some of the passages that Erickson appeals to. At one point he says that it is not only the Father who predestines some to be saved, but Jesus also elects some to salvation. This is because Jesus said, “The Son gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21), and, “No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt. 11: 27). Erickson concludes, “It appears that Jesus chooses those to whom he reveals the Father.”⁷

It is remarkable that Erickson mentions these texts, because in the very context of both of them, Jesus attributes superior authority to the Father, authority by which he carries out this activity of choosing as the Father has directed. Just before John 5:21, Jesus says, “The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but *only what he sees the Father*

⁷Ibid., 124.

doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing” (vv. 19–20). A few verses later Jesus says, “*I can do nothing on my own*. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (v. 30). Erickson does not mention these verses, which occur in the same context.

And then in the next chapter, Jesus also says that those who come to him are the ones the Father has chosen:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:37–39; see also vv. 44, 65; 8:28)

Therefore the Son only “chooses” in conjunction with what he has been shown of the will of the Father. As for Erickson’s other passage, Matthew 11:27, the beginning of the verse (which Erickson does not quote) says, “All things have been handed over to me *by my Father*.”

Therefore the testimony of Scripture on this matter is consistent. When the Son chooses people for salvation, he is simply following the directives of the Father. He is not acting independently of the Father’s authority. Yes, both Father and Son participate in choosing, yet their actions are not identical but distinct. The Father chooses; the Father shows the Son who has been chosen, and the Son chooses those who have been given to him by the Father (John 6:37).

What is even more troubling about Erickson’s argument is that he seems to deny any difference between the persons of the Trinity. In this section he is arguing against the idea that the Son has eternally been subject to the authority of the Father. Erickson is trying to nullify that by denying that some things done by the Son are not also done by the Father and the Spirit. Erickson wants to make any such discussion impossible.

But in order to make his point, he is apparently saying that the actions of any one person of the Trinity are the actions *not just of the whole being of God, but of every person in the Trinity*. And to say this

is to deny what is taught by literally hundreds of passages of Scripture that speak of different actions carried out by different members of the Trinity.

For example, at the baptism of Jesus at the river Jordan, God the Father was speaking from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). God the *Son* was not speaking from heaven saying those words. Nor was the *Holy Spirit* speaking those words. In fact, God the Son was being baptized in the person of Jesus (v. 16), and the Holy Spirit was “descending like a dove and coming to rest on him” (v. 16). God the *Father* was not being baptized, nor was the *Holy Spirit* being baptized. The *Son* was not descending like a dove, nor was the *Father* descending like a dove. It simply confuses the teaching of Scripture to say (or imply) that all three persons of the Trinity are doing each particular action. But this is what Erickson seems to be saying.

Of course, Erickson is able to show some passages in which more than one member of the Trinity participates in a certain action. Certainly it is true that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all come to live within a believer. Of course it is true that both the Father and the Son are somehow involved in sending the Spirit into the world and in judging the world. But this simply proves that *some* activities are done by more than one person. It does not prove that all activities are done by all the persons at the same time.

More significantly, none of Erickson’s examples of the persons acting together show the one-directional kind of activity between two members of the Trinity where one person initiates the activity and the other person receives the activity. For example, the Father *sends* the Son into the world. But this is not an activity done by all three persons. It would be contrary to the biblical texts to say that the Son sends the Father into the world, or that the Son sends the Son into the world, or that the Holy Spirit sends the Father into the world, or that the whole Trinity sends the whole Trinity into the world. This is simply not the way Scripture speaks, and it is contrary to what Scripture teaches. When Erickson begins to speak in this way, he strays into speculation that seriously conflicts with the teaching of Scripture.

Similarly, God the Son took on human nature and, in the person of

Christ, died for our sins. The Father did not die for our sins. The Holy Spirit did not die for our sins. It was the Father who gave the Son to die for our sins. And it was the Father who put on the Son the penalty that we deserved for our sins.

Erickson is aware that in attributing an action of any person of the Trinity to “the entire Godhead,” so that “those passages that speak of the Father predestining, sending, commanding, and so on should not be taken as applying to the Father alone but to all members of the Trinity,”⁸ he is coming very close to an ancient heresy called “patripassianism.” This heresy said that the Father also suffered for our sins on the cross. The ancient church condemned this view because it obliterated the differences among the members of the Trinity.

So Erickson attempts to guard himself against the same mistake. He says, first, “It was the Son who died on the cross, but in a very real sense, the Father and the Spirit also suffered.”⁹ But then Erickson immediately says, “This is not the ancient teaching of patripassianism. This is referring to the other persons’ sympathetic suffering and the Son’s actual suffering on the cross. Probably most parents have experienced this in seeing the pain of their child and in a very real sense feeling that pain themselves.”¹⁰

But as Erickson attempts to escape from patripassianism, he has to admit that the Son was suffering on the cross in a way that the Father and Spirit were not suffering. It was the Son who bore the penalty for our sins, not the Father and not the Spirit. It was the Son who bore the wrath of God the Father that we deserved against our sins, not the Father and not the Holy Spirit.

If this is true, it means that in order to avoid this ancient heresy, Erickson actually shows that the specific suffering of Christ on the cross was an action that he undertook *himself*, not an action that the Father and Spirit carried out in the same way. What is troubling is that Erickson will not explicitly acknowledge a difference in the actions of the Father and the Son; he only points out a similarity, speaking of sympathetic suffering. What Erickson gives with the right hand he takes back

⁸Ibid., 138.

⁹Ibid., 135.

¹⁰Ibid.

with the left. In the end he still insists that the actions of any one person are the actions of all three persons: “Those passages that speak of the Father predestining, sending, commanding, and so on should not be taken as applying to the Father alone but to all members of the Trinity. Thus they do not count as evidence in support of an eternal supremacy of the Father and an eternal subordination of the Son.”¹¹

To say this is actually to obliterate the differences among the members of the Trinity. Although Erickson disavows patripassianism, he does not escape from but rather affirms the same kind of error with regard to all other actions of any person of the Trinity. And at this point it is hard to distinguish what Erickson says from the ancient heresy of modalism, the view that there is only one person in God who manifests himself in different ways or “modes” of action.

Erickson’s view here is certainly inconsistent with hundreds of texts that show unique activities carried out by the individual persons of the Trinity. So, as with patripassianism, we are back to asking, how does Millard Erickson avoid modalism in his explanation? The answer is not clear. If all three persons do *every action* in the *same way*, then there is no difference at all between the persons. And if there is no difference between the persons, then we no longer have the doctrine of the Trinity. Such a significant doctrinal deviation coming from a widely respected evangelical theologian is very troubling.

At this point someone may object that the *whole being* of God has to be involved in every action of each person of the Trinity. I agree with this, because each person of the Trinity is fully God, and part of the deep mystery of the Trinity is that the very being (or substance) of each person of the Trinity is equal to the whole being of God. So when one person of the Trinity is acting, it is also true, in some sense that we only understand very faintly, that the entire being of God is acting. This is because of what is sometimes called “perichoresis,” the idea that each of the persons of the Trinity is somehow present “in” the other two persons. Jesus said, “the Father is in me and I am in the Father” (John 10:38).

But this truth is not what Erickson means, because he is arguing not that the *whole being of God* is somehow involved in every action, but that the action of any one person is also in the same way *an action of the*

¹¹Ibid., 137–38.

other two persons, so that any action done by one person is also done by the other two persons. This is something Scripture never teaches and the church has never held. And it is something that means we no longer have the doctrine of the Trinity. We have modalism.

Another evangelical-feminist author to go this direction is Sarah Sumner. She at first seems to affirm the orthodox doctrine of the subordination of the Son to the Father,¹² but then modifies it with a novel proposal: “So then, to whom is Christ finally subjected? God. Christ the Son is subject to the triune God of three persons. The Son is subjected to ‘the God and Father.’ And in that sense, the Son is subjected to himself. This is the doctrine of the Trinity.”¹³

But this is *not* the doctrine of the Trinity. To say that “the Son is subjected to himself” is the ancient heresy of modalism.¹⁴ If we are to maintain the doctrine of the Trinity, we may not erase the distinctions between the persons or preclude that one person in the Trinity does something the others do not.

The Bible simply does not speak the way Sumner does. The Father did not send *himself* into the world to become man and die for our sins; he sent the Son. The Father did not *himself* bear the penalty for our sins (which is patripassianism), nor did the Holy Spirit, but the Son did. The Son did not pray to *himself*; he prayed to the Father. The Son sits not at the right hand of *himself* but at the right hand of the Father. And the Son is not subjected to *himself*; he is subjected to the Father. To deny these distinctions is to deny that there are different persons in the Trinity, and thus it is to deny the Trinity.

Sumner’s misunderstanding carries over into a statement about

¹²Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church: Building Consensus on Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 177.

¹³*Ibid.*, 178. Sumner returns to a similar theme later when she appeals to the doctrine of perichoresis or *circumincession* and says, “Circumincession also affirms that the action of one of the persons of the Trinity is also fully the action of the other two persons” (289n10). But she misunderstands this doctrine. The term refers to the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity in one another, and it may be used to affirm that the action of one person is the action of the being of God, but it should never be understood to deny that there are some things that one person of the Trinity does that the other persons do not do. Sumner refers to Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), to support her understanding of perichoresis, but Volf, unlike Sumner, is careful not to blur the distinctness of the persons: “Perichoresis refers to the reciprocal *interiority* of the Trinitarian persons . . . though . . . they do not cease to be distinct persons. . . . Perichoresis is ‘co-inherence in one another without any coalescence or commixture’” (209). (The quotations from Augustine that Sumner gives on p. 178 should not be understood to deny the distinctness of the persons in the Trinity.)

¹⁴Modalism is also called modalistic monarchianism. See Craig A. Blaising, “Monarchianism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 727; also Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 242.

wives' submitting to their husbands: She says, "The paradox of their oneness means that in submitting to her husband (with whom she is one), the wife ends up submitting to herself." She claims this is parallel to "Christ's submission to himself."¹⁵

But Paul says that husbands should love their wives "as their own bodies" (that is, in the same way as they love their own bodies—Eph. 5:28),¹⁶ not because a husband's wife is identical with his own physical body, which would be nonsense.¹⁷ If in submitting to her husband a wife is really just submitting to herself and not to a different person, then her husband has no distinct existence as a person. This also would be nonsense. Would Sumner say that when a wife disagrees with her husband, she should simply give in to him, since this is just giving in to herself?¹⁸ Sumner would not say this, of course, but such an argument would show the same kind of nonsense.

Linda Belleville makes a similar mistake. Regarding the teaching of Philippians 2 that Christ "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (vv. 6–7), Belleville seeks to demonstrate that the Son was acting in a way different from God the Father, or in a way that implies that the Son was being subject to the Father. She says, "The language of God the Son is absent. Instead it is God himself who

¹⁵ Sarah Sumner, *Men and Women in the Church*, 198.

¹⁶ Greek *bōs* here is best understood to tell the manner in which husbands should love their wives. When Paul says in the next sentence, "He who loves his wife loves himself," he does not mean, "He who loves himself loves himself." He means that he who loves his wife will *also* bring good to himself as a result.

¹⁷ Sumner several times wrongly says that the wife *is* the husband's body (*Men and Women in the Church*, 161, 167, 184). She derives this idea by drawing unjustified deductions from the metaphor of the husband's being the "head" of the wife, but Scripture never says "the wife is the body of the husband." If the wife *is* the husband's body, then either he himself has two bodies, or he has no body and his wife is his body, and neither of these ideas can be true. Someone could draw all sorts of weird deductions from the metaphor of the husband as the head of the wife (she has no eyes, she can't see, she can't eat because she has no mouth; he can't walk, she is his feet and must walk for him, and so forth), but none of these are intended by the metaphor, which conveys the idea of authority and leadership but none of these other ideas. (See additional discussion of Sumner's understanding of *kephalē*, "head," in Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* [Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 208–9.)

¹⁸ Another novel theological concept of Sumner's is that "Mary was so human that Jesus got his male humanity from her. . . . Jesus received his humanity from Mary and his divinity from the Holy Spirit" (67). This is surely wrong, because Jesus did not "receive . . . his divinity" from anyone. He has eternally been the fully divine Son of God. Nor should we say that Jesus got his "male humanity" from Mary. If Jesus's human nature had been derived solely from Mary's physical body, he would have been her clone, and therefore he would have been a woman. The doctrine of the virgin birth must be understood in a way consistent with Matt. 1:20, which says, "*That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.*" What was conceived in Mary's womb was a human baby, and it was "from the Holy Spirit," which suggests that half of the genetic material that Jesus received was miraculously created by the Holy Spirit, and half was from Mary.

takes on human form: ‘He who existed in the form of God . . . emptied himself by taking on the form of a servant . . .’ (Phil. 2:6–7).”¹⁹

But in Belleville’s rush to deny that the Son of God is in view in verse 6, she fails to note the subject of the first part of the sentence, which is found in verse 5: “Have this mind among yourselves, *which is yours in Christ Jesus*, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself” (Phil. 2:5–6). It is not the whole Trinity but God the Son who took on a human form and lived among us. In her haste to disallow any eternal difference in authority between the Father and the Son, Belleville is simply confusing the persons of the Trinity.

Similarly, Belleville says:

When Jesus is addressed as “Son of God” in the Gospel narrative, the monotheism of both the Old Testament and of Second Temple Judaism precludes a Trinitarian understanding. . . . Elsewhere in the New Testament, Son of God as a title is rare. . . . This suggests that “Son” was not primary in the early churches’ understanding and certainly not Trinitarian.²⁰

But then what shall we make of Jesus’s own statement, “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19)? Is this not a Trinitarian statement? Belleville gives no explanation.

And what shall we do with John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son”? If “Son” is not a Trinitarian title here, then in what sense can Jesus be called God’s “only Son”? Surely this indicates that Jesus is “Son” in a way that no other human being is son. He is God’s only Son, his unique Son—that is, his eternal, fully divine Son.

Belleville reaches a similarly remarkable conclusion regarding 1 Corinthians 15:28. The verse says, “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.” Belleville says of this verse, “The end result will not however be the subjection of

¹⁹Belleville, “‘Son’ Christology,” 71.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 68.

all things (including God the Son) so that the Father may be ‘all in all’ but that GOD may be such.”²¹

Once again, Belleville fails to pay attention to the context. “God” in this context is clearly not the entire Trinity, but God the Father only. Paul begins this section of verses by saying, “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to *God the Father* after destroying every rule and every authority and power” (1 Cor. 15:24). As very often in the New Testament, the name “God” (Greek: θεός/*theos*) refers not to the entire Trinity but to the Father. This is why Paul says, “The Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him” (1 Cor. 15:28). This means the Son will be subjected to the Father. No other person than the Father can be the referent of “him who put all things in subjection under him.” Therefore in the very next phrase, “that God may be all in all,” the name “God” refers to God the Father, not to the entire Trinity. Belleville again confuses the persons of the Trinity, thereby denying any eternal distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is a significant deviation from the historic doctrine of the Trinity.

Denying the Trinity by Denying That God the Son Was Eternally God the Son

Throughout the entire history of the Christian church, to my knowledge, no significant and doctrinally orthodox church leader or teacher ever denied that God the Son was eternally God the Son, until several modern evangelical feminists attempted to obliterate all differences between the persons of the Trinity.

In fact, no teacher who did not accept the Nicene Creed (AD 325) or the Chalcedonian Creed (AD 451) would have been allowed to continue in a teaching position in any orthodox church. The Nicene Creed confesses belief “in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, *begotten of the Father before all worlds*, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made.” If he was eternally “begotten of the Father,” then he was eternally the Son of God. And he was eternally “the only-begotten Son of God.”²²

²¹Ibid., 66.

²²I realize that there are differences of interpretation in the meaning of the phrase “only begotten” and the phrase “begotten of the Father.” I myself have written about this in some detail (see appendix 6 of my

Similarly the Chalcedonian Creed confesses belief in “one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . *begotten before all ages of the Father* according to the Godhead.” To deny that the Son was eternally Son would be to deny both the Nicene and the Chalcedonian Creeds. But now, contrary to the entire history of the church, evangelical feminists have begun to deny that the Son of God was eternally God the Son. For example, Millard Erickson objects that the names “Father” and “Son” might not be eternal names because, he says, “The references to the names may be those used at the time of writing but may not indicate that the persons actually had those names at the time to which the writing refers.”²³

If Erickson is indeed saying that the Father and Son might not have eternally had those names, his view is hardly consistent with Scripture. Several passages indicate that the names “Father” and “Son” applied to those persons eternally. Before creation, God the Father “predestined” us “to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom. 8:29); and the author of Hebrews says, “In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, *through whom also he created the world*” (Heb. 1:2). These actions of predestining and creating occurred long before Christ came to earth as a man, and in these actions the Son is indeed called “Son.” When we recall the importance that the Bible attaches to personal names in describing someone’s nature or character, it becomes clear that nothing in these passages suggests merely that the person who would *later* be called “Father” predestined us to be conformed to the image of the person who would *later* be called “Son.”

When Jesus came to earth, he didn’t suddenly become Son, but he revealed to us what the glory of the Son was already like. John says, “We have seen his glory, *glory as of the only Son from the Father*” (John 1:14). The best-known verse in the Bible also indicates this: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son . . .” (John 3:16). In order for the Father to *give* the Son, the two had to first be in a Father-Son relationship before the Son came into the world. Therefore, there is good reason to believe that the Father did not suddenly become Father when

Systematic Theology [added in 2000], 1233–34). But what is not controversial is that, whatever the phrase meant, it always meant that the Son was eternally the Son from the Father.

²³Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 221.

he created the world, or when he sent his Son into the world, but that the persons of the Trinity have eternally been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Bruce Ware perceptively argues that in Psalm 2, “the LORD” (God the Father) and “his Anointed” (the Messiah to come) are two distinct persons (see Ps. 2:2), and that “the LORD” declares, “I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill” (v. 6), and that this coming king will rule “the nations” (v. 8) at the direction of God the Father. Who is this coming King and Messiah? He is the one whom the Lord calls “my Son” in verse 7.²⁴ This messianic prophecy, cited in the New Testament to refer to Christ (see Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5), shows another preincarnation application of the title “Son” to Christ.

In another place, Erickson lists Psalm 2:7, “You are my son; today I have become your father” (NIV), and deems this as “in connection with a reference to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 13:33).” He says that these verses “seem to suggest that Sonship had a point of temporal, rather than eternal, beginning.”²⁵

But an alternative explanation for these verses appears often in the commentaries: at Jesus’s baptism (Mark 1:11) and again at Jesus’s transfiguration (Mark 9:7), then again at the resurrection (Acts 13:33), God declared that a new aspect of sonship had begun, one in which Jesus *as the God-man* was now relating to God as his Father. This does not mean that the eternal Son of God was *not* Son prior to this time (see verses under “Denying the Trinity by Denying Any Eternal Distinctions” above, including the discussion of Psalm 2), and it does not mean that God first became Jesus’s Father upon Jesus’s baptism at about age thirty (for he proclaimed that God was his father at age twelve, in Luke 2:49); but it simply means that *a new aspect of the Father-Son relationship began when Jesus’s earthly ministry began*.

A related argument shows Belleville’s determination to deny the New Testament view of Jesus as God’s eternal Son. She says of John’s Gospel, “The Gospel starts, ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). There is no ‘In the beginning was the Son’; it is the Word that became flesh, not

²⁴See Bruce Ware, “Christ’s Atonement: A Work of the Trinity,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 161–62. Note also the phrase “kiss the Son” in Ps. 2:12.

²⁵Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 118.

the Son” (1:14).²⁶ Belleville is curiously oblivious to the fact that in this very passage John proclaims that the “Word” who “became flesh and dwelt among us” was revealed in his glory to be “the only *Son* from the Father,” the eternal, Trinitarian Son of God: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, *glory as of the only Son from the Father*, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Does Belleville actually think that the “Word” who was “in the beginning with God” was someone other than the eternal Son of God? Her appeal to this passage is remarkable. Once again, Belleville’s view deviates sharply from orthodox Trinitarian thinking and orthodox Christian doctrine. Nor is it faithful to the very words of John’s Gospel.

Belleville also says that, at the end of John’s Gospel, “When Thomas makes his profession of faith, it is not to God’s Son or to the Father’s Son but to ‘My Lord and my God’ (John 20:28).” But in saying this, she misses the point of the passage, which John makes explicit two verses later. He wrote his Gospel specifically so that readers who had not seen Jesus with their own eyes, as Thomas had, would have the same kind of faith Thomas had; because Jesus responded to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (v. 29). Immediately after this comes John’s reason for writing his entire Gospel: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, *the Son of God*, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (vv. 30–31). John was not writing so that readers would believe that Jesus is Lord and God but not the Son of God. He was writing so that readers would believe he is all those things.

In another place, Belleville writes: “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself (John 5:26). This ‘son’ is not divine; only God grants life and only God’s creation receives life.”²⁷

It is surprising that Belleville can say that “only God grants life” and miss the fact that just five verses earlier, in the same discourse, Jesus declares, “The Son gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21). Does this not then prove that this “Son” is the divine Son of God? This is the same Son

²⁶Belleville, “‘Son’ Christology,” 75.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 74.

of whom Jesus speaks two verses later when he speaks of the Father's intention "that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father" (v. 23). But if the Father is God and the Son is honored in the same way as the Father, then surely this Son must also be honored as God.

In this same context, Jesus says that an hour is coming "when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live" (John 5:25). How can this be anyone other than the fully divine Son of God, whose voice has power to raise the dead to life? This is the same Son, in the next verse, of whom it is said, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (v. 26). It is troubling that Belleville denies that this Son of God is the eternal, divine Son of God.

In another place, Belleville says, "'Father' is found on the lips of Jesus in Acts 1, but as 'the Father' rather than 'my Father.' The Father's authority is mentioned but not in relationship to Jesus."²⁸ But this is simply not true of the entire context. In the very next chapter Peter explains what happened at Pentecost by saying this, "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and *having received from the Father* the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:33).

All of these egalitarian arguments labor so strenuously to falsify the eternal submission of the Son to the Father that they stray into the serious doctrinal deviation of denying that the Son of God was eternally God the Son. No respected theological leader in the history of the church, before modern evangelical feminism, has made this claim, so far as I know.²⁹ It is something of a surprise to me that writers who deny that the Son has eternally been the Son of God are still accepted as legitimate representatives for orthodox, evangelical Christianity.

Arguments That Reject the Authority of Scripture

Implying That Things the New Testament

Teaches Less Often Are Not True

Millard Erickson says that the title "Son of Man" occurs seventy-eight times in the Gospels with reference to Jesus, but the title "Son of God"

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁹ Of course, the Arians denied that the Son eternally existed, but that was a different kind of argument.

is used of Jesus only twenty-three times.³⁰ It is not clear how this is an argument for the position that Erickson favors, the “temporary submission” view. If the New Testament says that Jesus is the “Son of God” twenty-three times, is that not enough to convince us? Is Erickson implying that something the New Testament says seventy-eight times should qualify as reliable evidence, but not something it says twenty-three times? Surely Erickson cannot mean this, but it is unclear why he brings this up as an argument against the eternal submission of the Son to the Father.

Erickson also argues that the New Testament often uses other names for members of the Trinity. He says, “This is especially true of Paul, who uses the names, God, Lord, and Spirit, even more frequently than the father-son terminology.”³¹

This is the same kind of argument as the argument about the titles “Son of Man” and “Son of God.” The Bible teaches many things about God and uses many different names for God. Is Erickson suggesting that only what is taught by the names “God” and “Lord” is true, and what the New Testament teaches by the names “Father” and “Son” is not true? Are only the most frequent New Testament teachings true? Surely Erickson cannot mean this. But then what is the point of bringing up the greater-frequency argument?

The question before us is not, What things are taught most often in the New Testament? but rather, What does the New Testament teach about the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son? To that question, the New Testament teaches in at least seven places (see list under “Ignoring Verses That Contradict Your Position” below) that the Father had authority over the Son and the Son submitted to that authority *even before the world was made*. And Erickson so far has given us nothing to disprove that teaching.

Linda Belleville takes a similar approach. She says:

Elsewhere in the New Testament [i.e., outside the Gospels], Son of God as a title is rare compared with other titles such as “Lord.” This suggests that “Son” was not primary in the early church’s understanding and certainly not Trinitarian. Paul rarely uses “God’s

³⁰Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 116.

³¹*Ibid.*, 117.

Son” or “Son” of Jesus and not in a father-son relationship. He does speak of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” But it is *God* who sends his son (Rom. 8:32) and *God* who did not spare his own son (Rom. 8:3; Gal. 4:4)—not the Father.³²

But what can the point of Belleville’s argument be? She seems to suggest that the New Testament does not teach that Jesus is the Son of God, because that title is “rare compared with other titles” in the New Testament. But is a title used forty-three times in the New Testament not true? May we disbelieve something the New Testament teaches “only” forty-three times? Or should we disbelieve that Jesus is the Son of God because he is called that only sixteen times in the New Testament Epistles?

And what can Belleville mean by saying that it is “God” who sends his son, “not the Father,” and “God” who did not spare his own son, “not the Father.” By definition, someone who sends *his* son is, of course, the father of that son.

We can hardly say that Paul denies the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity. He speaks of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6; also 2 Cor. 1:3), and “the God and Father of the Lord Jesus” (2 Cor. 11:31; see also Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3). Paul could hardly address Christian churches and speak of “God, the Father of *our son Jesus Christ*,” because Jesus is not our son—he is our Lord. But when Belleville uses Paul’s expression “our Lord Jesus Christ” to minimize the importance of the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity and to imply that Paul’s less frequent reference to Christ as God’s “Son” precludes this idea, it seems that she is again implying that things the New Testament teaches less often are not true. This kind of argument is a rejection of the authority of “all Scripture” as “breathed out by God” (2 Tim. 3:16).

Affirming Things about Scripture That Are Not True

A different kind of rejection of the authority of Scripture occurs when an author affirms something about Scripture that is in fact not true. This is misleading to readers (many of whom will not have the time to

³²Belleville, “‘Son’ Christology,” 68.

check and verify what the author claims about Scripture), and, even more importantly, it also shows a failure to adequately respect what the Scripture actually says.

For instance, Belleville says that “no title or task is applied to God the Father that is not equally applied to God the Son.” But this statement is simply false. The Father frequently is said to “send” the Son into the world, but the Son is nowhere said to send the Father into the world (see John 3:16; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:9–10; and many other verses).³³

In addition, the Father is said to choose us and predestine us for salvation *in his Son* (see Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3–5; 3:9–11; 2 Tim. 1:2, 9–10).

God the Father is always represented as having the task of hearing the prayers of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, but the Son is *never* shown as hearing the prayers of the Father (or of himself! see Matt. 11:25; 26:39; Luke 10:21; John 11:41).

The Father is always pictured as the one who delegates authority to the Son, and this task is never reversed. The Son never delegates authority to the Father (see Acts 2:32; Rev. 1:1; 2:26; and with respect to final judgment, John 5:22, 26–27; Acts 10:42; 17:31).

The Father is always the one who creates through the Son, but the Son does not create through the Father (see John 1:1; 1 Cor. 8:6; Heb. 1:1–2).

Therefore, when Belleville says that “no title or task is applied to God the Father that is not equally applied to God the Son,” she is saying something false about the New Testament.³⁴

Belleville also says, “In the final analysis, Father-Son language is specific to the Johannine materials.”³⁵ But is Father-Son language found only in John’s writings in the New Testament? What about “No one knows the Son except the Father” (Matt. 11:27)? What about “Not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32)? Or this: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father,

³³In fact, Millard Erickson himself mentions a long list of texts in which Jesus speaks of the Father who sent him: Matt. 15:24; Mark 9:37; Luke 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16; John 4:34; 5:23–24, 30, 36–38; 6:29, 38–39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28–29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44–45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21 (Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 111).

³⁴In this same section, Belleville makes a false statement about the modern business world as well. She says, “Businesses today typically have a CEO, a CFO, and a COO. . . . All three are Cs or ‘chiefs’ and thereby equal (albeit different) in authority and responsibility” (“Son’ Christology,” 61). This is simply not true in the modern corporate world, since the CEO has ultimate authority.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 70.

and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Luke 10:22)? Matthew, Mark, and Luke are all outside the writings of John. Or what about Peter’s writing: “For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased’ . . .” (2 Pet. 1:17)? Again, Belleville’s statement is false.

Moreover, Belleville says, “Nowhere in the New Testament is ‘obedience’ predicated of a pre-existing Son of God.”³⁶ But what about the texts where Jesus says that he came to earth in obedience to his Father? If he came to do the Father’s will, he came in obedience to his heavenly Father, an obedience that issued from before he came to earth. “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38; see also Heb. 10:7–9). In saying, “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30), Jesus implies that he obeyed when he was sent. He adds, “I have not come of my own accord. He who sent me is true” (John 7:28).

Belleville goes on to make the rather remarkable claim: “When God is referred to as ‘Father’ it is not as *pater* [Father] of the Son. . . . Indeed, the two are not linked anywhere in Paul.”³⁷ But is it true that God the Father is never seen as the Father of the Son in Paul’s writings? Consider the following: “But when the fullness of time had come, *God sent forth his Son*, born of woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4:4). Does Belleville really ask us to believe that when Paul speaks about God’s sending “*his Son*,” this does not mean that God is the Father of that Son? How can the Son be *his Son* if God is not the Father? Or what about “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all . . .” (Rom. 8:32)? Does Paul really not consider God to be the Father of “his own Son”?

In addition, Paul speaks of “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3). Does Belleville actually want us to think that the apostle does not here consider Jesus to be the Son of God, the same person that he calls “the Son of God” elsewhere (Rom. 1:4; 2 Cor. 1:19; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 4:13)? When Belleville says that God

³⁶Ibid., 72.

³⁷Ibid., 74–75.

the Father and God the Son “are not linked anywhere in Paul,” her statement is again simply false.

Ignoring Verses That Contradict Your Position

Some evangelical feminists argue that the Son was not eternally subject to the authority of the Father, but they simply ignore verses that contradict this view, and they give no alternative explanation for what these verses could mean.

In the following paragraphs, I mention at least seven passages that show that the Father had a leadership role the Son did not have before creation. These verses contradict the “temporary submission” position, the view of evangelical feminists that the Son’s submission to the Father was only during his incarnation. But in several evangelical-feminist arguments that deny the eternal submission of the Son to the Father, there is no treatment of these verses. They are either not mentioned at all or mentioned and then ignored. Consider the following.

THE FATHER CHOOSES US IN THE SON BEFORE CREATION

Ephesians 1:3–5

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he [the Father] *chose us in him* [the Son] *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he [the Father] *predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ*, according to the purpose of his [the Father’s] will.³⁸

This passage speaks of acts of God “before the foundation of the world.” Long before the Son’s incarnation, the Father is the one who *chooses* and *predestines*, and the Son is already designated as the one who will come in obedience to the Father in order to be our Savior and earn our adoption as God’s children.

The passage does not say that “the Father *and Son* chose us.” It says that the Father chose us in the Son. It does not say, “The Father

³⁸This and the next twelve passages are adapted from my essay “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father,” 223–61.

suggested some people for salvation and the Son agreed on some and disagreed on others.” It says that the Father chose us in the Son. This happened before the foundation of the world, and it indicates a unique authority for the Father—an authority to determine the entire history of salvation for all time, for the whole world.

Of course, the Son was in full agreement with the Father regarding this eternal plan of salvation. We should never confuse the idea of the Father’s authority with any thought that the Son disagreed with the Father’s plan or submitted to it reluctantly. Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34). He was the true fulfillment of the words of the psalmist who said,

I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart. (Ps. 40:8)

The Son and the Spirit fully agreed with the plans of the Father. But if we are to be faithful to the meaning of Ephesians 1:3–5, we still must say that in the eternal councils of the Trinity, there was a role of planning, directing, initiating, and choosing that belonged specifically to the Father.

Other verses support this:

Romans 8:29

For those whom he [the Father] foreknew he also *predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son*, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

Before creation the Father had authority to predestine, and the Son was already designated as the one who would come as our Savior, and to whose image we would be conformed. The Son did not predestine us to be conformed to the image of the Father. The roles of Father and Son were distinct, not identical.

2 Timothy 1:9

[God] who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, *which he gave*

us in Christ Jesus before the ages began [πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων, literally “before times eternal”] . . .

“Before the ages began,” before the creation of the world, when there was nothing except God himself, what happened in the eternal councils of the Trinity? The Father planned to save us *through* his Son and *in* his Son. He planned that his Son would be our Savior, and we would be conformed to his image. Long before the incarnation, the Son was subordinate to the planning of the Father.

Ephesians 1:9–11

. . . making known to us the mystery of his [the Father’s] will, according to his purpose, which he [the Father] set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him [the Son], things in heaven and things on earth. In him [the Son] we have obtained an inheritance, *having been predestined according to the purpose of him* [the Father] who works all things according to the counsel of his [the Father’s] will.

The role of planning, purposing, and predestining for the entire history of salvation belongs to the Father, according to Scripture. There is no hint of any such authority of the Son over the Father. The Bible speaks of full deity for the Son (John 1:1). It speaks of glory that the Father gave the Son (John 17:5, 24). But the authority to plan salvation and to decide to send the Son is an authority that Scripture attributes to the Father only.

Ephesians 3:9–11

. . . and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the *eternal purpose* that he [the Father] has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here is the Father’s eternal purpose to include Jews and Gentiles in the church—a purpose to be carried out by the Son. The Father planned this eternally, and his purpose was then realized in the Son’s obedience to this plan.

1 Peter 1:19–20

. . . but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. *He was foreknown before the foundation of the world* but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you.

Here Peter says that Christ was “foreknown” (in this context, this indicates that the Father knew of the Son as the one who would shed his blood, “the precious blood of Christ”) as our Savior before the foundation of the world. The Father from eternity knew that the Son would come to save us. (In addition, 1 Pet. 1:1–2 speaks of “the foreknowledge of God the Father” regarding the situation of Peter’s readers as “elect exiles of the dispersion.”)

Revelation 13:8

And all who dwell on earth will worship it [the beast], everyone whose name has not been written *before the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.

Here we see that before the foundation of the world, which means in the eternal councils of the Trinity, there already was “the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.” It had already been determined within the Trinity that the Son (“the Lamb”) would die for our sins, and it had been determined whose names were in the Book of Life.

Therefore at least seven passages of Scripture indicate that prior to creation, the Son was eternally subject to the planning and authority of the Father with regard to our salvation.

What do advocates of the “temporary submission” view say about these verses? In his brief summary of this argument in *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, Millard Erickson does not deny what these passages teach.³⁹ Instead, his method of argument is to bring up several *other verses*⁴⁰ that he claims support the temporary submission view (what he also calls the “equivalent-authority view”). Then he concludes that the two sets of verses form a “stalemate.” But the verses that Erickson cites to support the equivalent-authority view can readily be understood

³⁹ See Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 109–11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 116–21.

in a way that is consistent with the eternal submission of the Son to the Father (as I have argued elsewhere).⁴¹ Significantly, Erickson never explains how any of these verses that I have just mentioned can mean anything other than the submission of the Son to the Father in the eternal past.

Is Erickson implying that Scripture teaches *both* that the Son was subject to the Father before creation and that the Son was not subject to the Father before creation? That Scripture teaches both “A” and “not A,” affirming contradictory things, so that we are left with a “stale-mate”? Surely that position undermines the authority of Scripture as God’s completely trustworthy Word. But Erickson offers no alternative explanation for these seven passages, nor do the other evangelical-feminist authors that I have mentioned.

THE FATHER CREATES THE WORLD THROUGH THE SON

Another set of verses is simply ignored by Erickson and other temporary submission advocates. These advocates say that the Son’s submission to the leadership of the Father was only for his time on earth, or else it was only with respect to the purpose of becoming a man and earning our salvation.

But this argument fails to account for verses that show this same relationship between the Father and the Son in the creation of the world. This is an activity completely distinct from coming to earth to earn our salvation. Yet in this activity also, the Father is the one who initiates and leads, and the Son is the one who carries out the will of the Father.

John 1:1–3

In the beginning was the Word [here referring to the Son], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made *through* him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.

Hebrews 1:1–2

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by

⁴¹ See Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father,” 235–42.

his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, *through* whom also *he created* the world.

In the process of creating the universe, the role of initiating, of leading, belongs not to all three members of the Trinity equally, but to the Father. The Father created *through* the Son. This cannot be a submission limited to the incarnation, as the temporary submission view holds, for it was in place at the first moment of creation. The Son did not create through the Father, nor would that have been appropriate to the personal differences signified by the names “Father” and “Son.”

1 Corinthians 8:6

Yet for us there is one God, the Father, *from* whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through* whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Here is the same pattern: all things (that is, the entire universe) come “from” the Father (who directs and initiates) and “through” the Son (who carries out the will of the Father). This was the pattern in the planning of salvation prior to creation, and this is also the pattern in the process of creating the world.

As far as I can determine, Erickson does not even discuss these creation passages. Yet they directly contradict the temporary submission view.

THE SON’S SUBMISSION TO THE FATHER CONTINUES
AFTER HIS EARTHLY MINISTRY AND HIS
COMPLETED REDEMPITIVE WORK ON EARTH

The submission of the Son to the Father did not end with his return to heaven. It continued then and it continues still today in his ongoing ministry as Great High Priest.

Hebrews 7:23–26

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through

him, since he always lives *to make intercession for them* [εἰς τὸ ἐντυγχάνειν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν].

For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.

Romans 8:34

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is *interceding* for us [ὃς καὶ ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν].

The verb that both passages use is significant. To “intercede” (ἐντυγχάνω/*entynchanō*) for someone means to bring requests and appeals on behalf of that person *to a higher authority*, such as a governor, king, or emperor (cf. Acts 25:24, which uses the same verb to say that the Jews “petitioned” the Roman ruler Festus). Thus Jesus continually, even today, is our Great High Priest who *brings requests* to the Father, who is greater in authority. Jesus’s high priestly ministry indicates an ongoing submission to the authority of the Father.

This is not a “temporary submission,” only for the time that Jesus is on earth. It continues while he is now in heaven. Similarly, even in the eternal kingdom, Jesus will not have authority to decide who sits at his right hand and at his left, for that will be something that has been determined by God the Father. Jesus says this explicitly:

Matthew 20:23

. . . but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father.

Many more passages than these thirteen could be considered,⁴² but these should be sufficient to show a consistent pattern of teaching in Scripture regarding the eternal submission of the Son to the Father.

EVANGELICAL FEMINISTS’ REFUSALS TO CONSIDER THESE VERSES

Even though I brought up many of these verses in the section on the Trinity in my 2004 book *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*,⁴³

⁴²See my discussion of thirty-one passages in *ibid.*

⁴³Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, chap. 10.

evangelical feminists generally just ignore them in their discussion of the issues. Even in the recent set of essays edited by Jowers and House, *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?* (2012), proponents of temporary submission fail to treat these key verses. They are significant verses that contradict the temporary submission view. To refuse even to consider these significant challenges to their position seems to me to indicate a rejection of the authority of these scriptural passages. Temporary submission advocates give the impression that they will hold to their view despite express biblical testimony to the contrary.

Kevin Giles has another method of ignoring such verses. He minimizes them by calling them “isolated texts” and “problematic isolated verses.”⁴⁴ This is why, Giles explains, “simply opening our Bibles cannot settle the debate as to what should be believed about the Trinity.”⁴⁵

Thus, Giles has a convenient way of dismissing verses that are uncomfortable for his temporary submission viewpoint. Without even quoting them he just says that they must be understood in light of “the overall perspective and primary message of Scripture. This is not found by appeal to one or more texts but by an ongoing reading of the whole of Scripture.”⁴⁶ He is sure, of course, that the “overall perspective” and “primary message” is that the Son is eternally equal to the Father and therefore cannot be subject to the Father’s authority. But this is simply begging the question, assuming the conclusion at the outset of the argument.

Giles’s approach reveals a refusal to submit to the overall authority of Scripture. Accordingly, if a number of verses disagree with your premises, you need not even discuss them. You can just declare them “isolated” (which means they don’t count), irrelevant anomalies that must be interpreted in light of the “primary message” (by which you mean your own position). But this way of neutralizing verses is really a refusal to be subject to the authority of Scripture in one’s theology.

⁴⁴ Giles, “The Trinity without Tiers,” 271.

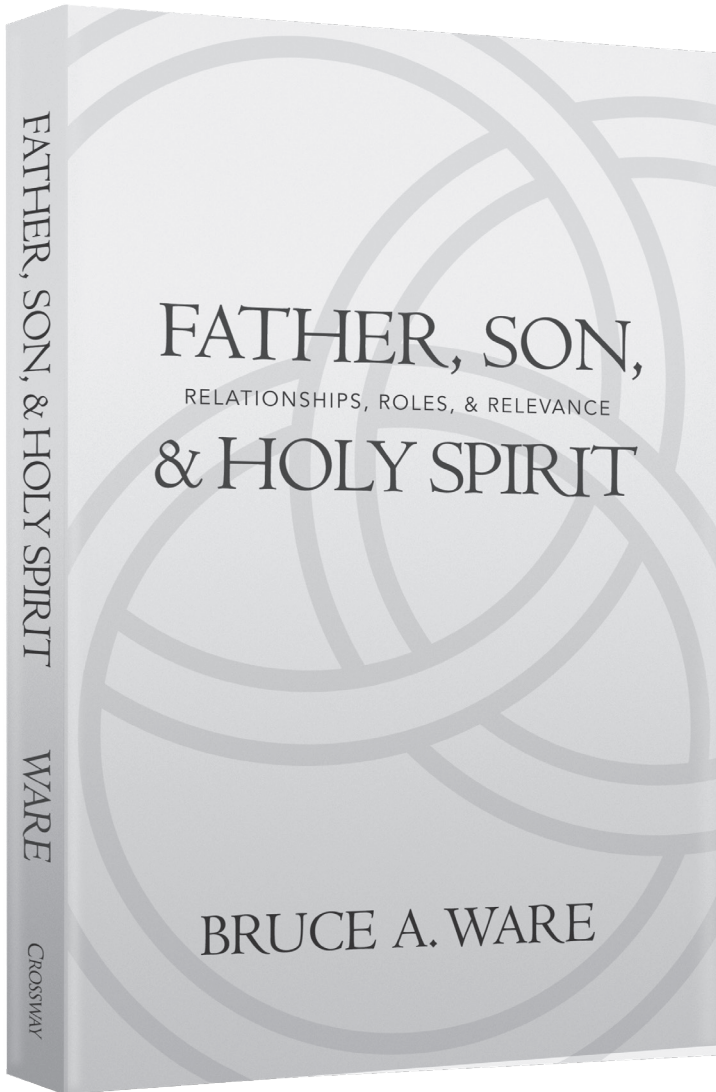
⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 272. I might add that I am not sure what Giles means by “isolated verses.” I have not been able to locate any isolated verses in my Bible. They all seem to occur in contexts that connect them with other verses.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

Conclusion

Recent evangelical-feminist arguments about the Trinity display serious departures from the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and implicitly reject the authority of Scripture. These are troubling and highly significant doctrinal deviations in evangelical feminists' arguments about the Trinity.

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