

# The New Evangelical Subordinationism?

*Perspectives on the Equality  
of God the Father and God the Son*

*edited by*

DENNIS W. JOWERS *and* H. WAYNE HOUSE

SPICKWICK Publications • Eugene, Oregon

2012

# 10

## Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father<sup>1</sup>

Wayne Grudem

THERE IS NO QUESTION that, during the time of Jesus' life on earth, he was subject to the authority of God the Father. He said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:7). He also said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4:34). And he said, "I do nothing on my own authority, but speak as the Father taught me" (John 8:28). 227-234

But some evangelicals today claim this was only a *temporal mission* to the authority of the Father, limited to the time of his life or at least to actions connected to the purpose of earning salvation.<sup>2</sup> They argue that prior to his coming to earth, and after he returned to heaven, God the Son was equal in authority to God the Father. Bilezikian writes, 242-251

The frame of reference for every term that is found in Scripture to describe Christ's humiliation pertains to his ministry and not to his eternal state. . . . Because there was no order of subordination within the Trinity prior to the Second Person's incarnation, there will remain no such thing after its completion. If we must talk of subordination it is only a functional or economic subordina-

1. Significant sections of this chapter have been adapted from my earlier publication, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 405-15. However, I have modified nearly every section with additional evidence from Scripture and interaction with the recent criticisms of my earlier position found in Erickson, *Who's Tampering With the Trinity?*

2. See Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 190-91; Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 57; Giles, *Trinity and Subordinationism* and *Jesus and the Father*; Erickson, *Who's Tampering With the Trinity?*

tion that pertains exclusively to Christ's role in relation to human history.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, I will attempt to show that this "temporary submission" view is incorrect. In contrast to that view, I will examine the meaning of the names "Father" and "Son" as well as 31 passages of Scripture that give evidence that God the Father has eternally had a role of leadership, initiation, and primary authority among the members of the Trinity, and that the Son has eternally been subject to the Father's authority. (There are also good reasons to hold that the Holy Spirit has eternally been subject to the authority of the Father and of the Son, but it is not the focus of this essay.)

#### *A Note on Terminology*

I will refer to the position I hold as one that advocates the "eternal submission of the Son to the Father" or the "eternal authority of the Father with respect to the Son." I also understand the phrase the "eternal subordination of the Son to the Father" to represent the same idea. All of these expressions represent the essential point which is in dispute, namely, that Scripture shows that there has been eternally a unique role that belonged to the Father, a role that included activities of initiating, planning, originating, directing, and having primary authority, and that the Son and the Spirit always fully agreed with these directives and, when the appropriate time came, willingly and joyfully carried them out.

Some recent contributors to this topic, in particular J. Scott Horrell and Robert Letham, have argued for a position similar to the one I advocate in this essay, but have decided not to use the word "subordination" to describe the Son's relationship to the Father. Horrell prefers to summarize his position as "the generous preeminence of the Father, the joyous collaboration of the Son, and the ever-serving activity of the Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

As to the term "subordinationism," Horrell states (and I agree) that "Subordinationism of essence constitutes a historical heresy outside of our discussion."<sup>5</sup> But he also notes that there is another view that is clearly not a historical heresy, namely the view that there is "a role of

3. Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 190-91.

4. Horrell, "Social Trinity," 44.

5. *Ibid.*, 72.

eternal obedience of God the Son to God the Father," and also that the Son is *eternally equal* to the Father in his being (or essence) and in all attributes of deity. Horrell notes that that view has sometimes used the term "subordination" (not *subordinationism*) to speak of the relation of the Son to the Father.<sup>6</sup> But Horrell says, "Nevertheless, in a fallen world, the term *subordination* immediately implies hierarchy, top-down authority, power over another, subjugation, repression, and inequality." Therefore, he says, "With Robert Letham, I think it is a term better abandoned when speaking of the divine immanent relations, particularly if understood as excluding the mutual volition of the Son and the Spirit in any activity of the Godhead."<sup>7</sup> Robert Letham writes, "I consistently use the word 'order'. . . . I never use *subordination* or *hierarchy* or their functional equivalents—indeed, I sedulously avoid them."<sup>8</sup>

It does not seem to me that very much is at stake here. This is a minor difference of opinion over the wisdom of using a particular word. It is a difference among authors who agree about the main issue that is in dispute, namely, that there is an eternal difference in the ways that the members of the Trinity relate to one another. In those relationships, Scripture speaks of the Father having a unique role of initiating, planning, directing, sending, and commanding; it speaks of the Son as having a role of joyfully agreeing with, supporting, carrying out, and obeying the Father; and it speaks of the Spirit as acting in joyful obedience to the leadership of both the Father and the Son.

It seems to me that the term "subordination" need not have oppressive connotations, and can be used to mean merely an "ordering under" in terms of authority in the relationship. For example, in the organizational structure of Phoenix Seminary where I teach, I am subordinate to the authority of the seminary board, the president, and the academic dean. But I am no less a human being than they are, and I am no less valuable in God's sight. Therefore I respectfully disagree with Horrell when he says that the term "subordination" immediately implies "subjugation, repression, and inequality."<sup>9</sup> In addition, several respected his-

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 72–73. However, he names no evangelical authors who use "subordination" to refer to the intra-Trinitarian relationships and also exclude the "mutual volition" of the Son and the Spirit, nor am I aware of any who have done so.

8. Letham, *Holy Trinity*, 480.

9. Ibid., 73.

torians of theology have used the term to refer to the orthodox view of the Trinity.<sup>10</sup> However, I recognize the potential for confusing the term with the ancient heresy of subordinationism, and therefore I recognize the importance of specifying that the term should be understood in this discussion as referring to "relational subordination" that accompanies "equality in being or essence."

I am more concerned about the loss of any idea of greater authority belonging to the Father. Horrell's essay is outstanding in so many ways, but it seems to me that his summary definition, which affirms "the generous preeminence of the Father," and "the joyous collaboration of the Son"<sup>11</sup> is too weak for the biblical evidence. It can too easily be understood in a way that avoids any idea of the Son joyously submitting to the authority of the Father. "Preeminence" can easily be understood to mean "more noticed" or "more frequently mentioned," with no nuance of greater authority. "Collaboration" can be understood to mean "cooperation among those of equal rank or authority," with no connotation of submission to authority. And so with this summary, the idea of greater authority for the Father is gone. But in a secular culture in which all authority (even the authority of God himself) is deeply unpopular, I am unwilling to give up the ideas of authority and submission altogether.

What we have in the biblical text (and what Horrell so persuasively demonstrates) is a Father who plans, initiates, sends, commands, and delegates authority to the Son. We have a Son who joyously agrees with, responds to, receives, carries out, and obeys these directives of the Father. Quite simply, we have authority and submission to authority in the relationship of sinless, divine persons.

If the Father-Son relationship as revealed in Scripture looks like authority and submission, and acts like authority and submission, then it is authority and submission. We should not hesitate to call it what it is. It seems to me that, rather than giving in to cultural pressures that seek to portray all authority as oppressive and evil, we should push back and insist that the Bible portrays a Father-Son relationship of authority and submission that is not oppressive but is pure and holy. Therefore in this essay I will primarily refer to my position as one that affirms the submission of the Son to the authority of the Father. I understand Letham

10. See Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 417-22 for quotations.

11. Emphases added.

and Horrell to be affirming essentially the same idea, though preferring different terms.

Finally, because the book by Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering With the Trinity?* (Kregel, 2009), has been the most recent contribution to this debate, and has extensively quoted from advocates of both positions, I will interact at some length with his thoughtful and well-stated objections to my position.

### 1. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION INDICATED BY THE NAMES "FATHER" AND "SON"

Even when we ask about the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, we find ourselves using the names "Father" and "Son." But what do those names signify? All evangelical scholars agree that these names do *not* mean that the Father created the Son or was somehow the source of the Son's existence, for to say that would deny the full deity of the Son, which is affirmed many times in Scripture. John tells us, "the Word was God" and "He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1–2). The Son was not created because "All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:3). Therefore this entire discussion must be carried out within the framework of affirming the full deity of the Son who is equal in all attributes to the Father and to the Holy Spirit.

This means that the names "Father" and "Son" are not "univocal"—that is, when applied to God they do not mean *everything* that the names "father" and "son" mean when applied to human beings. Yet the names "father" and "son" must mean *something* when applied to God. In other words, the names "Father" and "Son" must be *analogous* to *some* human experiences of being a father and being a son when they are applied to the Father and Son in the Trinity.

What then do the names "Father" and "Son" signify? Representatives of the "temporary submission" view say that the names Father and Son *only* show that the Son is *like* the Father. They quote John 5:18, "He was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God." And so 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).<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, Kevin Giles objects that the names "Father" and "Son" "are not used in the NT 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."<sup>13</sup>

But if intimacy and identical authority were all that Jesus wanted to indicate, 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." In a related argument, Erickson also 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."<sup>14</sup>

However, there are several indications that the names "Father" and "Son" applied to the Father and the Son 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 referred to as "Son." When we recall the importance that the Bible attaches to the significance of personal names in describing the nature or character of a person, it becomes clear that nothing in these passages would make the reader think that such verses were merely saying 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, because John

12. *Who's Tampering?* 116.

13. *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 arguing that the Son was created, just like 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.

14. *Who's Tampering?* 221.

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, they 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 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 that the LORD calls "my Son" in verse 7.<sup>15</sup> This Messianic prophecy, cited in the New Testament to refer to Christ (see Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5), shows another pre-New Testament application of the title "Son" to Christ.

But do the names "Father" and "Son" indicate anything more than likeness? What the "temporary submission" advocates deny is that the names *also* indicate an *authority* of the Father with respect to the Son. But all the evidence in Scripture seems to go the other way, for Jesus frequently spoke of his obedience to the Father's will and submission to the Father's authority: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). He also says, "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" (John 6:37-38). And again he says, "I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me . . . I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:28-29). Again and again, Jesus told us that he continually was obedient to the will of his Father and did the will of his Father.

But if the obedience of the Son to the will of the Father was such a prominent aspect of Jesus' teaching, then on what basis can people say that the names "Father" and "Son" do *not* indicate an authority that the Father has with respect to his Son eternally?

15. See Ware, "Christ's Atonement," 161-62. Note also the phrase "Kiss the Son" in Ps 2:12.



This is not like the legitimate case where we must say that the names "Father" and "Son" do not mean that the Father created the Son. In that case, we have many other Scriptures that *contradict* the idea that the Son was ever created (see above). And so the rest of Scripture teaches us that that aspect of a human father-son relationship should not apply to our understanding of a heavenly Father and Son.

But in the case of authority and submission, it is just the opposite. We have abundant evidence in Scripture that the analogy of a human son's obedience to a human father is in fact very appropriately applied to the relationship between the divine Father and Son. Jesus' obedience to his heavenly Father while on earth was in fact teaching us again and again that the idea of the authority of a father and the submission of a son are indeed appropriate to apply to the eternal relationship between the divine Father and Son.

At this point the temporary submission advocates may object that the idea of authority and submission in a father-son relationship only applies to childhood. Once the son becomes an adult, then the father no longer has authority over the son. And therefore the idea of authority does not belong to the eternal names "Father" and "Son" as applied to the members of the Trinity, for surely the analogy that we are to think of is an *adult* father-son relationship, not the relationship of a child to its father.

The problem with this objection is that it fails to take account of the thought patterns of the ancient world, especially the biblical world. In multiple examples in Scripture, an adult human son is still subject to the authority and leadership role of his human father, at least within life of the family.

Even near the end of Jacob's life, his eleven sons who remained in the land of Israel were subject to his authority about going to Egypt to get food or not going (see Gen 42:2-4, 38; 43:2, 11-13; 45:28; 46:28; 49:1-27, 29, 33). When Jacob died, the brothers realized that Joseph was free from Jacob's leadership in the family and they feared that he would suddenly harm them (Genesis 50:15) and so they attempted to prevent this by inventing a command that they claimed Jacob had given before he died (Gen 50:16-17).

In the Old Testament the only examples of adult sons not being subject to the authority of their fathers are viewed with disapproval in the biblical narrative. For example, Eli's sons refused to obey his author-

ity, but the narrator in 1 Samuel tells us that they were "worthless men" and that "they did not know the Lord" (1 Sam 2:12). Even more explicitly, we are told, "They would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the Lord to put them to death" (1 Sam 2:25). Similarly, Absalom's wrongful rebellion against his father David (2 Samuel 15-17) results in Absalom's judgment and death as God gives victory to David's troops (2 Samuel 18). Such narrative examples of rebellious sons would simply reinforce the same point in the minds of biblical readers: a morally upright son would submit to the authority or leadership of his father, and surely the divine Son would be an example of such moral goodness with respect to his relationship to his heavenly Father.

In the New Testament, the same is true with the parable of the tenants, in which the owner of a vineyard sent his son (presumably his adult son) to collect the income that was due from the tenants of the vineyard (Matt 21:37). And in the parable of the prodigal son, even the older brother, who is an adult son, says, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command" (Luke 15:29). In the biblical world, there were no commendable examples of a son not being subject to his father or not deferring to the leadership role that still belonged to the father, even when the son had grown to adulthood.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, what is everywhere true of a father-son relationship in the biblical world, and is not contradicted by any other passages of Scripture, surely should be applied to the relationship between the

16. However, one word of caution is appropriate here. I am not saying that the Bible commands all adult sons to be subject to their own fathers for their entire lifetimes, for that is nowhere commanded in Scripture. Instead, the Bible commands, "Children obey your parents in the Lord" (Eph 6:1), and the word "children" (Greek *teknon*, plural) would have been heard by the Christians in the church at Ephesus as applying only to children up to a certain age, and not to adults. At least by the time a man "shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife" (Gen 2:24), when he establishes a new household, and probably in other circumstances as well, the responsibility of children to obey their parents no longer applies to those who have reached adulthood. But what I am arguing here is that in the biblical world, both the example of Jesus' relationship to his heavenly Father and all of the examples of father-son relationships that are viewed positively in the Biblical narrative combine to show us that the names "Father" and "Son" would surely indicate to every reader in the ancient world a unique leadership role for the father in the relationship. Fathers were without question the leaders in their extended families. And therefore readers in the biblical world would have thought that the divine names "Father" and "Son" signified that the Father had a leadership role with respect to the Son as well.

Father and Son in the Trinity. The names "Father" and "Son" represent an eternal difference in the roles of the Father and the Son. The Father has a leadership and authority role that the Son does not have, and the Son submits to the Father's leadership in a way that the Father does not submit to the Son.

The eternal names "Father" and "Son" therefore give a significant indication of eternal authority and submission among the members of the Trinity.

## 2. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION PRIOR TO CREATION

The "temporary submission" view claims that the Son's submission to the Father was only for the period of his Incarnation. By contrast, Scripture gives us indications of a unique leadership role for the Father long before the Son came to earth:

(1) 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 through Jesus Christ*, according to the purpose of his [the Father's] will.

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 would come in obedience to the Father in order to be our Savior and earn our adoption as God's children.

It does not say "the Father *and* Son chose us." It says the Father chose us in the Son. It does not say, "The Father suggested some people for salvation and the Son agreed on some and disagreed on others." It says 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 reluctantly submitted to the Father's plan. 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 this Eph 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:

- (2) 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 already was 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.

- (3) 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 αἰώνων, 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.

- (4) 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 the 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, predestining for the entire history of salvation belongs to the Father, according to Scripture. There is

no hint of any such authority for the Son with respect to the Father. The Bible speaks of full deity for the Son (John 1:1). It speaks of glory which 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.

(5) Eph 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—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.

(6) 1 Peter 1:19-20: but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. 20 *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 1:2 speaks of "the foreknowledge of God the Father" regarding the situation of Peter's readers as "elect exiles of the dispersion.")

(7) Rev 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 "a 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.

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What do advocates of the "temporary submission" view say about these verses? Millard Erickson summarizes this argument briefly on pages 109–11, and he does not deny that this is what these passages teach.<sup>17</sup> Instead, his method of argument is to bring up several *other verses* (116–21) that he claims support the temporary submission view (what he also calls the "equivalent-authority view"). Then he concludes that (in his judgment) the two sets of verses form a "stalemate." But he 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.

Do the other verses that Erickson brings up actually contradict the idea that the Father has had eternal authority over the Son? The verses that Erickson uses to support the "temporary submission" view are as follows:

*(a) Son of Man More Frequent*

He says that the title "Son of Man" occurs 78 times in the gospels with reference to Jesus, but the title "Son of God" is used of Jesus only 23 times.<sup>18</sup> 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" only 23 times, is that not enough to convince us that he is the "Son of God"? Is Erickson implying that something the New Testament says 78 times should be considered reliable evidence, but not something it says 23 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.

*(b) Order of Names*

His next argument is the "sequential order in which the names of the three persons are mentioned in Scripture."<sup>19</sup> He refers to a tabulation by Kevin Giles, who says that "The Son is mentioned first in sixteen lists, the Spirit first in nine, and the Father first in only six."<sup>20</sup> But once again it is difficult to see how this observation constitutes evidence against the submission of the Son to the Father. I did not claim in my earlier

17. See Erickson, *Who's Tampering?* 109–11.

18. *Ibid.*, 116.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 117.



writings that the order of the names Father, Son, and Spirit in the New Testament indicated anything about relative authority. So now Erickson points out that the names do not indicate anything about relative authority. I agree. But this surely is not evidence against the idea taught in these other seven verses, the idea that the Father had authority over the Son prior to creation.

However, Erickson goes further in this argument. He quotes Kevin Giles who says that the variation in order in the names "suggests that Paul did not believe that three divine single 'persons' are ordered hierarchically."<sup>21</sup> But that argument is hardly persuasive, because it has to assume that the only reason an author would list names in a certain order would be to indicate relative authority. But nothing in these texts would indicate such a reason, and authors can have multiple reasons for the order in which names are listed. Giles' argument is based on an unsupported assumption.

After citing this statement by Giles, then Erickson says that "Gerald Bray and Geoffrey Wainwright have made similar observations" (That is to the idea that the variety and order of names suggests that Paul did not believe in a hierarchical order of the persons). He cites Gerald Bray's book, *The Doctrine of God*, page 146.<sup>22</sup> But Erickson's claim is the opposite of what Bray actually says on that page. After mentioning the "great variety of combinations" in which the names of the persons of the Trinity appear, Bray says this:

It appears that every possible combination except one is represented, but in spite of this, the pattern of personal operation is remarkably stable, God the Father is the person who ordains, establishes, judges and appoints; he is also the person to whom worship is chiefly directed. The Son Jesus Christ appears as the redeemer. . . . the Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier"<sup>23</sup>

Erickson also cites Geoffrey Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962). There is no such book by Geoffrey Wainwright, so apparently he is intending to refer to Arthur W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962). But on the page Erickson refers to (109), there is no mention of the vari-

21. Ibid., quoting Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 110.

22. Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, 146.

23. Ibid., 146-47.

ous names of the Trinity or lists of names in the New Testament (there is a discussion of expectations of the Messiah in Jewish Intertestamental literature such as Psalms of Solomon, Testament of Levi, and the Ethiopic book of Enoch). Therefore neither Bray nor Wainwright supports the view that the varied order of names argues against the authority of the Father with respect to the Son.

(c) *Other Names Are Used*

Erickson's next argument is that the New Testament often uses other names for the 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."<sup>24</sup>

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 the only things that are true in the New Testament the things that are mentioned most frequently? Surely Erickson cannot mean this. But then what is the point of bringing up "the New Testament says other things more frequently" as an argument?

The question we should be asking is not, "What things are taught most frequently 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 that the Father had authority over the Son and the Son submitted to that authority before the world was made. And Erickson so far has given us nothing to contradict that teaching.

(d) *Isa 9:6*

Next, Erickson notes that Isaiah 9:6 calls the Messiah to come "Everlasting Father," and he says that this passage is "at least paradoxical."<sup>25</sup> Once again, it is not clear what Erickson is claiming from this text, for he gives it no discussion. A reasonable explanation is that the term "Father" is not used here in the sense of a Trinitarian title but rather in another Old

24. Ibid., 117.

25. Erickson, *Who's Tampering?* 118.

Testament meaning, that of a "Benevolent Protector." The note to the *ESV Study Bible* explains, "a 'father' here is a benevolent protector (cf. Isa 22:21; Job 29:16), which is the task of the ideal king and is also the way God himself cares for his people (cf. Isa 63:16; 64:8; Ps 103:13). (That is, this is not using the Trinitarian title, "Father" for the Messiah; rather, it is portraying him as a king.)"<sup>26</sup>

(e) Ps 2:7

Next, Erickson lists Ps 2:7, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father" and says this is used "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."<sup>27</sup>

But an alternative explanation for these verses is quite common in the commentaries: at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:11) and again at Jesus' transfiguration (Mark 9:7), and 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 in section 1 above, including the discussion of Psalm 2), and it does not mean that God first became Jesus' Father at the point of his baptism at about age 30 (for he proclaimed that God was his father at age 12, in Luke 2:49), but it simply means that a new aspect of the Father-Son relationship began when Jesus' earthly ministry began.

(f) Matt 25:31-46

Another text that Erickson mentions is the judgment scene in Matthew 25:31-46. This passage says, "When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats." Erickson says, "Here is the Son, in the consummation of this world, exercising the supreme authority over that world, with such signs of authority as angels, a throne, and glory. The Father is nowhere present in this scene. Without detracting from the Father's authority, this

26. *ESV Study Bible*, 1257.

27. Erickson, *Who's Tampering?* 118.

certainly seems to indicate a position of ultimate authority in one of the most important events of all human history."<sup>28</sup>

I agree that the Son exercises judgment in this text. But that does not mean that the Son has authority greater than the Father, nor does it mean that the Son is not subject to the authority of the Father. In fact, it is surprising that Erickson fails to mention other texts that say that the Son has this role of judging because it has been delegated to him by the Father, which implies that the Father still has ultimate authority:

The Father judges no one but *has given all judgment to the Son.*  
(John 5:22)

For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself. And *he has given him authority to execute judgment.* (John 5:26-7)

He is the one *appointed by God* to be judge of the living and of the dead. (Acts 10:42)

He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom *he has appointed*; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. (Acts 17:31)

These texts show that Erickson is incorrect to suggest that the judgment passage in Matthew 25 shows that the Father does not have eternal authority over the Son. It is the Father who gives this authority, and therefore the Father remains in these texts also as the one who has supreme authority.

(g) *Matt 4:1*

The next passage Erickson mentions is Matthew 4:1, "Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness" (see also Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). Erickson says that this text "challenges the idea that the Son has inherent and permanent authority over the Spirit."<sup>29</sup>

I agree that this text shows that Jesus voluntarily submitted to the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit during the time of his temptation in the wilderness. He probably followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit during his entire earthly ministry, for he was living as an example to us (1 Pet 2:21; 1 John 2:6). But that was a unique situation during the

28. Ibid., 118.

29. Ibid., 119.

time of Jesus on earth. In fact, he is not only subject to the leading of the Holy Spirit, but he was also subject to, and obedient to, the authority of his earthly parents while he was growing up as a child in their home. After Jesus' parents found him in the temple when he was 12 years old, "he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them" (Luke 2:51).

But this does not contradict the passages that teach that the Father has eternally had authority over the Son. Even while Jesus was in his temptation in the wilderness, and even while he was growing up as a child, he remained subject to the authority of the Father, for he said, "I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29). Matthew 4:1 does not present an argument against the eternal submission of the Son to the authority of the Father.

(h) *Matt 12:31-32*

Erickson then mentions Matt 12:31-32, where Jesus says, "Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come." Erickson says, "This hardly seems consistent with the idea that the Spirit has a lesser role than the Father and the Son."<sup>30</sup>

But this text does not deny the unique authority of the Father any more than it would deny the authority of the father in a human family if the father decided to overlook some harm done to himself but seek appropriate punishment for anyone who would harm his child. The father still retains the highest authority in such a family and does not confer that authority on the child. Therefore, Matthew 12:31-32 does not contradict the other texts which show a consistent pattern of the eternal submission of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the authority of the Father.

(i) *Phil 2:8*

Erickson then quotes Phil 2:8, "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." Erickson says that this quote "suggests that obedience also was something he acquired that was not present before."<sup>31</sup>

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 120.



But this text does *not* say that Jesus for the first time became obedient *in any sense at all*. It specifically says that he "became obedient to death"; that is, he had not previously been *obedient to the point of death* but now, at the end of his earthly ministry, the point to which Paul is referring, he became obedient to the point of death—"even death on a cross" (Phil 2:8). This does not mean that there was no obedience to the Father before that point, but can be readily understood to speak about obedience unto death as the appropriate outworking of that eternal submission which the Son always showed to the authority of the Father.

(j) Heb 5:8

The last text that Erickson mentions favoring what he calls "temporary functional subordination" is this text: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb 5:8).

Erickson says, "This suggests that obedience was something that he learned."<sup>32</sup> Erickson correctly points out, "It does not, of course, follow that he had never previously learned obedience, for it certainly is theoretically possible to increase one's depth of obedience. . . . what is perhaps most significant for our purposes, however, is the adversative *kaiper*, 'although,' suggesting that obedience was perhaps something unusual or unexpected for a son. This passage, therefore, seems to support the temporary subordination view."<sup>33</sup>

What Erickson misses in this context is what kind of son the author of Hebrews has been discussing for the first four chapters of the book. This Son, for whom it is surprising that he "learned obedience from what he suffered," is the Son whom God "appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb 1:2) he is the Son who is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by his word of power" (Heb 1:3). He is the Son of whom the Father says, "Let all God's angels worship him" (Heb 1:6). He is the Son of whom the Father says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Heb 1:8). He is the Son who is "a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God" (Heb 4:14). It is this eternal, omnipotent, divine Son of God about whom the author

32. Ibid., 121.

33. Ibid.



of Hebrews says, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). This is indeed surprising, but Erickson is incorrect to say the text implies that is surprising for just any son to learn to learn obedience through suffering.

What is the conclusion of these other texts that Erickson brings up as "passages supporting temporary functional subordination"<sup>34</sup>? His conclusion is this: "The result of our examination of the arguments advanced by the two sides has led to something of a stalemate."<sup>35</sup>

But should this really be considered a "stalemate"? Erickson mentioned two texts that, according to his understanding, suggested that the Son's obedience began only with the incarnation. These were Ps 2:7 and Phil 2:8. But both of these have also been commonly understood to refer to a *new kind of obedience* that Jesus entered into as *the God-man*, an "Incarnational" obedience that was consistent with the eternal pattern of obedience that he had shown to his Father for all eternity. Neither of these texts explicitly says that the Son for the first time became obedient. Neither text says that the Son had not previously been obedient to the Father. And at least seven other texts, as well as the frequent use of the names Father and Son, give strong support to this idea.

So is there really a stalemate? Are Erickson's texts strong enough to show in fact that the Son was not obedient to the Father from before the foundation of the world? Erickson has provided no alternative explanation for the seven verses I mentioned above. And, upon examination of the alternative texts he presents, it turns out that he has provided no scriptural evidence that denies that the Son was subject to the Father from before the creation of the world. Far from a stalemate, it seems rather that these seven passages must still be accepted to teach the authority of the Father and the submission of the Son to the Father in the eternal councils of the Trinity.

### 3. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION IN THE PROCESS OF CREATION

Another set of verses is simply ignored by Erickson and other "temporary submission" advocates. Those who advocate a "temporary submission" say that the Son's submission to the leadership of the Father was

34. Ibid., 115.

35. Ibid., 121.

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 the Father is also the one who initiates and leads, and the Son is the one who carries out the will of the Father:

(8) John 1:1: 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.

(9) Heb 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 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.

(10) 1 Cor 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 planning salvation prior to creation, and this is also the pattern in the process of creating the world. As far as I can determine, neither Erickson nor Giles even discusses these creation passages. Yet they directly contradict the "temporary submission" view.

#### 4. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION PRIOR TO CHRIST'S EARTHLY MINISTRY

Another set of texts indicates the Father's authority and the Son's submission prior to the Incarnation. These texts speak of the Father's *send-*

ing the Son and the Son's coming to earth in obedience to the Father. For example:

(11) John 3:16-17: For God so loved the world, that *he gave his only Son*, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not *send his Son* into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

But the Father had to be Father before he sent his Son, or he could not have sent him as Son. The Father *sending* the Son into the world implies an authority that the Father had prior to the Son's humbling himself and becoming a man. This is because to have the authority to send someone means to have a *greater authority* than the one who is sent. He was first "sent" as Son, and then he obeyed and humbled himself and came. By that action he showed that he was subject to the authority of the Father before he came to earth.

Other verses also speak of the Father sending the Son into the world.

(12) Gal 4:4: But when the fullness of time had come, *God sent forth his Son*, born of woman, born under the law.

(13) 1 John 4:9-10: In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that *God sent his only Son into the world*, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

Many other verses teach this, especially in John's gospel. In fact, Erickson himself mentioned 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 concludes, "This is strong evidence of Jesus' consciousness of coming because of the Father's initiative."<sup>36</sup> (I have not counted these verses separately in my overall tally of verses for this article, but this list gives 38 additional passages that affirm this idea.) J. Scott Horrell states that in John's gospel alone

36. Ibid., 111.

there are 22 verses stating that the Son came from the Father and 44 verses stating that the Son was sent by or from the Father.<sup>37</sup>

Kevin Giles objects that these "sending" verses do not imply greater authority for the Father but reflect the Jewish concept of a "messenger" or (Heb.) *shaliach*, in which the person sent has the same authority as the sender himself.<sup>38</sup> However, Giles simply misunderstands the Jewish *shaliach* concept:

(a) It refers to the authority of the messenger *with respect to the recipients of the message*: the messenger carries the authority of the sender (such as the king). The concept is never used to argue that the messenger has the same authority as the king who sent him!

(b) The concept is heavily rooted in many OT verses that speak of God "sending" the prophets to the people (Exod 3:14 God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent [Heb. *shalach*] me to you.'"). Surely this does not mean that Moses is claiming to be equal in authority to the great I AM, to God himself! Nor would any of the prophets claim this. When rightly understood, the Jewish "messenger" concept only strengthens the idea of *greater authority* for the sender than the one who is sent.

Giles also quotes Larry Hurtado who argues that the sending language only means that the Son "perfectly represents God the Father."<sup>39</sup> But if one sends and the other is sent, then one commands and the other obeys. Yes, the Son *represents* the Father, but to be sent by the Father is also to be subject to the Father's authority.

In conclusion, a large number of texts teach that the Father sent the Son into the world, and thus had greater authority than the Son who was sent.

## 5. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION DURING CHRIST'S EARTHLY MINISTRY

While on earth, Jesus often speaks of his submission to the authority of his Father.

37. Horrell, "Social Trinity," 64.

38. Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 119.

39. *Ibid.*, 120.

John 6:38: For I have come down from heaven, *not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*

John 8:28-29: So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that *I do nothing on my own authority*, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him."

John 15:9-10: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as *I have kept my Father's commandments* and abide in his love."

However, I have not numbered these texts in the sequence of verses used as evidence in this chapter, since the "temporary submission" advocates also agree that Jesus was subject to his Father during his earthly ministry. I have put the verses here for the sake of completeness, and because I see them as part of a larger pattern, but I realize that those on the other side of this debate would agree that these verses teach that Jesus was subject to the Father's authority while on earth.

## 6. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION IN CHRIST'S MINISTRY AS GREAT HIGH PRIEST

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.

(14) Heb 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.

(15) Rom 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 (ὅς καὶ ἐντυγχάνει ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν).



The verb that both passages use is significant. To "intercede" (ἐν-τυγχάνω) 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' 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 was on earth. It continues while he is now in heaven.

#### 7. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION IN CHRIST'S POURING OUT THE HOLY SPIRIT AT PENTECOST

After his ascension to heaven, after his earthly ministry was over, after God highly exalted him, he still did not have the authority on his own to pour forth the Holy Spirit in new power on the church. He waited until he *received that authority* from the Father, and then he sent forth the Holy Spirit in his new, more powerful work:

(16) Act 2:32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 33 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.

#### 8. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION IN CHRIST'S RECEIVING REVELATION FROM THE FATHER AND GIVING IT TO THE CHURCH

Jesus did not initiate the book of Revelation on his own, but he was *given* this revelation by the Father and *authorized* by the Father to deliver it to the church.

(17) Revelation 1:1: The revelation of Jesus Christ, *which God gave him* to show to his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.



9. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION IN  
CHRIST'S SITTING AT GOD'S RIGHT HAND—  
A POSITION OF AUTHORITY SECOND  
TO THAT OF THE FATHER HIMSELF

It is remarkable how many times the New Testament speaks of Christ now in heaven sitting at the "right hand" of God the Father:

(18) Acts 2:32 This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. 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. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool'" [quoting Ps 110:1].

(19) Ephesians 1:20: [the Father] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his *right hand* in the heavenly places.

(20) Heb. 1:3: He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the *right hand* of the Majesty on high.

But does sitting at a ruler's right hand indicate a position of secondary authority? Yes, as several passages indicate. The background to this concept is seen in Psalm 110:

Ps 110:1: The LORD says to my Lord, "Sit at my *right hand*, until I make your enemies your footstool."

To sit at the LORD's right hand is not a position of equal authority, for "the LORD" (Yahweh) is still the one commanding, still the one subduing enemies. But it is a position of authority *second only* to the LORD, the king and ruler of the entire universe.

On a human level, this idea of sitting at someone's right hand can be seen in the request of the mother of James and John: "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. And he said to her, 'What do you want?' She said to him, 'Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your *right hand* and one at your left, in your kingdom'" (Matt 20:20-21). She was not asking for them to be *equal* to Jesus in authority, but to be *second only* to Jesus in authority.

This concept is also seen in Psalm 45, spoken of the king:

Ps 45:9: Daughters of kings are among your ladies of honor; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.

The queen was not equal to the king in authority, but was second in authority. Gilbert Bilezikian objects that other verses show the Son sitting *with* the Father on his throne. This is true, as we see in the following verses:

Rev 3:21: The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I also conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Rev 7:17: For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

Rev 12:5: She gave birth to a male child, one who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron, but her child was caught up to God and to his throne.

Rev 22:3: No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him.

Erickson says that these verses provide an "apparent contradiction" to the verses that show Jesus at God's right hand, and he says that Grudem makes no effort to resolve it" (the apparent contradiction).<sup>40</sup> But this is not quite accurate. What I said was this:

But these verses do not contradict the other verses that show Jesus at the right hand of God. Rev 3:21 gives the answer: Just as we will sit *with* Christ on his throne, but he will still have the supreme authority, so Christ sits with the Father on his throne, but the Father still has supreme authority. (Bilezikian does not quote the first half of Rev 3:21, which disproves his argument.) Both facts are true: Jesus sits with the Father on his throne, and Jesus is still at the right hand of the Father and the throne can still be called "his throne." Similarly, Revelation 7, which refers to "the Lamb in the midst of the throne" (v. 17), also can say, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (v. 10).<sup>41</sup>

40. *Who's Tampering?* 114.

41. *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 413.

Erickson might not find this explanation persuasive, but it is an attempt to resolve the tension between the passages. When the Son is at the Father's right hand, he is still reigning "with" the Father on the Father's throne, but he is not in the place of ultimate authority, for he is still at the Father's right hand and still subject to the authority of the Father. My argument was that the parallel with our future reign with Christ makes this clear:

Rev 3:21: The one who conquers, I will grant him to sit *with me on my throne*, as I also conquered and sat down *with my Father* on his throne.

We who conquer will sit "with" Jesus on his throne, but this does not mean that we will ever have authority equal to him. Therefore, when Jesus sits "with" the Father on his throne, Bilezikian and Erickson are wrong to say that this contradicts the many verses that say that Jesus sits at God's right hand, in a position of second authority to the Father.

Several other New Testament verses show Jesus at God's right hand, in this place of second authority over the universe:

(21) Mark 14:62: And Jesus said, "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the *right hand* of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven."

(22) Luke 22:69: But from now on the Son of Man shall be seated at the *right hand* of the power of God.

(23) Rom 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.

(24) Col 3:1: If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the *right hand* of God.

(25) Heb 8:1: Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the *right hand* of the throne of the Majesty in heaven.

(26) Heb 10:12: But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the *right hand* of God.

(27) Heb 12:2: looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,

despising the shame, and is seated at the *right hand* of the throne of God.

(28) 1 Pet 3:22: who has gone into heaven and is at the *right hand* of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

This is a standard New Testament way of speaking of Jesus' heavenly situation, and it indicates ongoing primary authority for the Father, and then secondary authority, but authority over the entire universe, for the Son at his right hand.

#### 10. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION IN GIVING THE SON AUTHORITY TO RULE OVER THE NATIONS

The Father's authority over the Son is seen in how he delegates to the Son authority over the nations:

(29) Rev 2:26: The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as *I myself have received authority from my Father.*

This verse shows the fulfillment of the vision of the heavenly "son of man" in the book of Daniel, a prophecy that was fulfilled by Christ when he received eternal world rule from the Father (here called "the Ancient of Days"):

(30) Dan 7:13-14: I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and *he came to the Ancient of Days* and was presented before him. And *to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom*, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

#### 11. THE FATHER'S AUTHORITY AND THE SON'S SUBMISSION AFTER THE FINAL JUDGMENT AND THEN FOR ALL ETERNITY

(31) 1 Cor 15:24-8: Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every

authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For "God has put all things in subjection under his feet." But when it says, "all things are put in subjection," it is plain that *he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him*. 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.

Here is an indication of what will happen after the final judgment, when all enemies are destroyed and we enter into the eternal state. Just to be sure that there is no misunderstanding, Paul specifies that it was always the Father who always had ultimate authority, for it was the Father who "put all things in subjection" to the Son—all things, that is, but of course *not the Father!* Paul explicitly says, "He is excepted who put all things in subjection under him." The Father has never been subject to the Son. "He is excepted."

And then Paul specifies that once every enemy has been conquered and even death has been destroyed, the submission of the Son to the Father will not cease even at that time, for even 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" (v. 28). The Son has been subject to the authority of the Father since before the foundation of the world, and here Paul specifies that the Son will continue to be subject to the authority of the Father forever.

At this point Kevin Giles objects that this only means there is a switching back and forth of supreme authority between the Father and the Son: "At the resurrection God the Father freely makes God the Son ruler over all, and at the end, God the Son freely gives back this rule to God the Father. . . . this text indicates a changing of roles in different epochs by two omnipotent divine persons."<sup>42</sup>

This is a remarkable claim. It asks us to believe that now at the present time Christ has authority *greater even* than the Father himself. But this is contrary to all the texts about Christ at God's right hand, Christ interceding for us as High Priest, Christ receiving authority from the Father to pour out the Holy Spirit—contrary to *everything the New Testament says* about the relationship between the Father and the Son during the period after Christ's ascension. And it is contrary to the

42. *Jesus and the Father*, 115.

words of this very verse, for Paul explicitly says that the Father is *always* excepted from Christ's authority: "But when it says, 'all things are put in subjection,' it is plain that *he is excepted* [that is, the Father] who put all things in subjection under him" (v. 27). Giles simply ignores the plain statement of this verse about the Father.

Erickson has another objection to this passage. He says that it means that the Son is subject, not to the Father, but to the entire Trinity. Thus he takes "God" in this verse to mean "God the Trinity" or "God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" rather than "God the Father." He says that 1 Cor 15: 24-28 should be understood to mean "that it is Christ, as the God-man, turning authority over to the Triune God including the second person of the Trinity."<sup>43</sup>

Erickson claims that this is Calvin's understanding of the text, and he quotes Calvin's commentary on 1 Cor 15:27. However, the passage in Calvin (which is somewhat obscure) need not be understood in that way, and in any case Calvin never says that Christ turns authority over to "the Triune God."<sup>44</sup>

What then does Paul actually mean when he says, "then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him" (1 Cor 15:28)? The key to understanding this passage is the sentence with which Paul introduces this topic (v. 24). There he does not say that at "the end" Christ ~~does not~~ deliver the kingdom to "God the

43. Erickson, *Who's Tampering?* 249. Erickson also refers to this interpretation on 136-38 and 164-65.

44. In Calvin's commentary on 1 Cor 15:27, he uses the word "God" to mean "God the Father" in this very passage, because Calvin's wording distinguishes "God" from "Christ": "We acknowledge, it is true, God as the Ruler, but it is in the face of the man Christ. But Christ will then restore the kingdom that he has received that we may cleave wholly to God. Nor will he in this way resign the kingdom, but will transfer it in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity, because a way of approach will be opened up, from which our infirmity now keeps us back. Thus then Christ will be subjected to the Father because the veil [*sic*] being then removed, we shall openly behold God reigning in his majesty, and Christ's humanity will then no longer be interposed to keep us back from a closer view of God" (*Commentary*, 32-3).

It seems quite consistent with this passage to think that Calvin means that the kingdom will then be ruled by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, without denying the leadership or authority of the Father as supreme. Calvin is saying that after the final judgment Christ will somehow bring us into a closer relationship with God the Father, whom we shall then contemplate "face to face, reigning in his majesty." Calvin seems to be saying that Christ will do this not so much through his role as fully human mediator but through his role as eternal, divine Son who will bring us into closer fellowship with the Father.



Trinity." Rather, Paul says that this is the time "when he [Christ] delivers the kingdom to *God the Father* after destroying every ruler and every authority in power" (1 Cor 15:24). Erickson's interpretation, which says that Christ delivers the kingdom to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or to the entire Trinity, is contrary to the actual words of verse 24. Christ delivers the kingdom to God the Father.

## 12. ARE ALL THE ACTIONS OF ANY ONE PERSON OF THE TRINITY ACTUALLY THE ACTIONS OF ALL THREE PERSONS?

After Erickson considers several the verses like the 31 passages that I have listed above, and then after he considers several verses that he claims to support the temporary submission view, 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 the principle in 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.<sup>45</sup>

Erickson reaches this conclusion by a survey of several passages in which he sees different persons in the Trinity doing the same or similar action. 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, "Even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it" (John 5:21), and, "No one knows the Father except the Son and those 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."<sup>46</sup>

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 very activity of choosing

45. Erickson, *Who's Tampering?* 137-38.

46. *Ibid.*, 124.

as the Father has directed. For example, two verses before John 5:21, Jesus says, "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but *only what he sees the Father 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" (John 5:19-21). Two 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" (John 5:30).

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

John 6:37-39: *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 shall lose nothing of all that he has given me but raise it up at the last day* (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. And in Matt 11:27, the beginning of the verse (which Erickson does not quote) says, "All things have been handed over to me *by my Father*" (Matt 11:27). Therefore when the Son chooses people for salvation, he is simply following the directives of the Father. He is not acting independently of the authority of the Father. Both Father and Son participate in choosing, but their actions are not identical but distinct. The Father chooses, and he shows the Son who has been chosen, and the Son chooses those who have been given to him by the Father (John 6:37).

But Erickson's larger point is that some of the actions of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are done by more than one person. He shows that both the Father and the Son are involved in sending the Holy Spirit into the world after Pentecost (125). He shows that both the Son and the Father are involved in judging the world (126). Both the Son and the Holy Spirit intercede before the Father (126). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all indwell those who believe in Christ (126-27). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all give gifts (128-30). The Father and Son love the world (130-31). Both the Father and the Son receive prayer (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" (135).

There are two senses in which I would partially agree with what Erickson says: (1) First, 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, 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).

(2) In another sense, each of the members of the Trinity fully agrees with the actions of any member of the Trinity. Thus, when the Father sent the Son into the world, both Father and Son wholly agreed with that action, and so did the Holy Spirit.

However, Erickson seems to be saying something different. He seems to be 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 comes carelessly close to denying 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 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 from heaven and saying those words. In fact, God the Son was being baptized in the person of Jesus (Matt 3:16) and the Holy Spirit was "descending like a dove and coming to rest on him" (Matt 3:16). 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 imply that all three persons of the Trinity are doing any one action. But this is what Erickson seems to be saying.

Of course, Erickson is able to show a number of 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 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 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 where we could say that all three persons do these actions. It would be contrary to these texts to say that the Son sends the Father 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 that Scripture speaks. When Erickson begins to speak in this way, he has strayed into speculation that goes beyond and even contrary to 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 saying that an action of any person of the Trinity is actually an action of "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,"<sup>47</sup> he is coming very close to an ancient heresy called "patripassianism." This was the heresy that said that the Father also suffered for our sins on the cross. The ancient church condemned this heresy because it obliterated the differences among the members of the Trinity.

So Erickson says, first, "It was the Son who died on the cross, but in a very real sense, the Father and the Spirit also suffered."<sup>48</sup> 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."<sup>49</sup>

47. Ibid., 138.

48. Ibid., 135.

49. Ibid.

But as Erickson attempts to escape from patripassianism, he shows 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. But this means that, in order to avoid this ancient heresy, Erickson actually shows that the specific suffering of Christ which he experienced on the cross was an action that he undertook *himself*, not an action that the Father and Spirit carried out in the same way.

And so we must conclude that Erickson is incorrect in saying that an action of any member of the Trinity, such as predestining, sending, or commanding, "should not be taken as applying to the Father alone but to all members of the Trinity." To say this is actually to come very close to obliterating the distinctions among the members of the Trinity. It is coming very close to the ancient heresy of modalism, which said that there was only one person in God who manifested himself in different ways or "modes" of action. And it is certainly not a position that is consistent with hundreds of texts which show unique activities being carried out by one person of the Trinity with respect to another person of the Trinity.

Such a position, therefore, does not nullify the significant force of over 30 passages of Scripture, which show the authority of the Father and the submission of the Son throughout the entire range of the history of redemption in Scripture, from before the creation of the world until after the final judgment.

### 13. CONCLUSION

The submission of the Son to the authority of the Father was not limited to the period of Jesus' life on earth. From the eternal councils of the Trinity before the world began to the eternal state of the new heavens and new earth after the final judgment, Scripture shows a consistent pattern. The Son has always been subject to the authority of the Father:

- In eternity past, as indicated by the eternal names "Father" and "Son."
- In eternity past, as the Father chose us in the Son, predestined us in the Son, and planned the entire history of salvation that would be carried out by his Son. This was the "eternal" purpose of the Father.



- In creation, the Father created through the Son. The Father planned and directed and the Son carried out the will of the Father.
- Prior to the Incarnation, the Son was subject to the Father, for the father "gave" his Son and "sent" his Son into the world.
- During Christ's earthly ministry, for the Son was always obedient to the Father.
- After Christ's ascension into heaven, where he intercedes before the Father on our behalf as our great High Priest.
- After Christ's ascension into heaven, where he received authority from the Father to pour out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost
- After Christ's ascension into heaven, where he received revelation from the Father and gave it to the church
- After Christ's ascension into heaven, where he sat down at the right hand of God the Father, a place of second authority over the universe, where he still reigns today
- After the final judgment, when he will in a new way be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him.

At least 31 verses teach the authority of the Father and the submission of the Son prior to Christ's earthly ministry and after he returned to heaven. And what is remarkable is how consistent the testimony of Scripture is to these relationships.

At this point someone might object, "Yes, I see the subordination of the Son to the Father in these verses and in these actions. But what about the relationship of the Son to the Father *apart from* the names Father and Son, and *apart from* creating the universe, and planning salvation, and the Father sending the Son into the world, and the Son coming and earning salvation, and the Son now reigning at the Father's right hand, and the Father delegating authority to the Son for final judgment, and the Son delivering to the Father the entire kingdom and being subject to the Father at "the end" of all things? What if the *eternal relationship* between the Father and the Son is *different* from all of those things that Scripture reveals to us about the Father and the Son?"

To ask such a question is to ask, with respect to the relationship between the Father and the Son, *whether God might be different from everything that he has revealed to us about himself*. But when we begin to

ask whether God might be different from everything that he has revealed about himself in Scripture, we no longer have theology that is subject to Scripture. It is mere speculation. And it is speculation that leads us to conclusions that are contrary to the entire testimony of Scripture.

J. Scott Horrell wisely says,

Philosophic arguments that a true equality of nature necessitates ultimate equality of social order are neither rationally required nor harmonious with God's self-revelation. Conversely, to insist on equality of eternal roles and order in spite of biblical evidence is methodologically parallel to that of heterodox theologians who reduce God to their own mental paradigms. When philosophic reasoning divorces a theology of the immanent Trinity from the revelation of the economic Trinity, it may have journeyed to where we dare not go.<sup>50</sup>

These relationships between the Father and the Son are never reversed, not once in the entire Bible. The Son does not *predestine* us in the Father. The Son does not create *through* the Father. The Son does not *send* his only Father into the world. The Father does not *come* and obey the Son's will. The Father does not *sit* at the Son's right hand. The Father does not *pray* to the Son or *intercede* for his people before the Son. The Father does not, at "the end" of the age, *subject* himself to the Son. If the "temporary submission" view is correct, we would expect to see at least some variety, some reversal in these relationships. But there is none.

To deny these unidirectional relationships between Father and Son is to fail to speak the way the Scripture speaks about the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. No single text or biblical teaching anywhere in Scripture suggests or teaches that the Father is ever, in any instance, under the authority of the Son or carries out any single action or set of actions in obedience to the Son. Every biblical text on this question shows the Father in the position of preeminence in authority, and the Son always and only carrying out the will of the Father.

Therefore, the consistent testimony of Scripture is that the Father, by virtue of being Father, eternally has authority to plan, initiate, command, and send, authority that the Son and Holy Spirit do not have. The Son, by virtue of being Son, eternally submits, joyfully and with great delight, to the authority of his Father. It is only in a sinful world deeply marred by hostility toward authority, and overly focused on status and

50. "Social Trinity," 70.

power, that we would fail to see that submission to the authority of the Father is one aspect of the great glory of the Son. Both *authority* and *submission to authority* are wonderful parts of the great glory of the Father and the Son, and this will be their glory for all eternity.

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