

Why a denial of the Son's eternal submission threatens both the Trinity and the Bible
Wayne Grudem

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I. Evidence for the Son's submission to the Father prior to Incarnation

A. Submission indicated by the eternal names "Father" and "Son"

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. (Jn. 1:14)

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of *his Son* (Rom. 8:29) – before creation

1. The names Father and Son indicate *both* equality in being *and* differences in relationship
2. Objection: Today in an *adult* f-s relationship - no longer one of authority/submission
answer: in ancient world, father clearly had authority while he lived
3. Conclusion: The *names* Father and Son indicate an *eternal* relationship of authority and submission
4. What is the eternal generation/ begetting of the Son?
 - a. Nicene Creed: And in one Lord Jesus Christ, *the only-begotten (monogenēs) Son of God, begotten (gennēthenta) of the Father before all worlds*, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made (*gennēthenta, ou poiēthenta*), being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made
 - b. Five NT vss. where Christ is called "only begotten" or "only": John 1:14; 1:18; 3:16; 3:18; 1 John 4:9
 - c. Previously, in my Syst. Theol.: monogenēs means "unique, one of a kind"
(Same as most modern Bible translations, BDAG lexicon, 658, D. Moody, JBL (1953))
→ I concluded that "only begotten" in Nicene Creed referred to F-S relationship,
Said: what important: "that we insist on *eternal personal differences* in the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that the Son eternally relates to the Father as a son does to his father" (ST, 1234). [this is clear from names F and S]
If *monogenēs* meant "unique, only," I didn't see any biblical basis for saying more than this.
And I thought that the language of "begetting" was more confusing than helpful.
 - d. More recently: Forthcoming Lee Irons paper on *monogenēs* as "only begotten"
– extensive TLG search – persuasive analysis
 - e. My conclusion on eternal generation: I am now willing to affirm the "eternal generation of the Son," based on John 1:14, 18, etc., as something mysterious, *not* implying creation of the Son ("begotten not made"), and *somehow analogous* to a human father-son relationship.
And: *gennaō* verbs do tend to carry implication of some kind of origin
Therefore: "begotten of the father before all ages, begotten not made" in Nicene Creed, etc.
should not be used as a direct indication of eternal submission of S to F (as I have in past)
But: still provides the ontological basis for eternal submission of S to F-- shows why it is appropriate
Augustine, in *De Trinitate*: "If however the reason why the Son is said to have been sent by the Father is *simply that the one is the Father and the other the Son*, then there is nothing at all to stop us believing that the Son is equal to the Father and consubstantial and co-eternal, and yet that the Son is sent by the Father. *Not because one is greater and the other less, but because one is the Father and the other the Son . . . For he was not sent in virtue of some disparity of power or substance or anything in him that was not equal to the Father, but in virtue of the Son being from the Father, not the Father being from the Son.*" St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, Vol. 5, The Works of St. Augustine (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), IV. 27
What I see is a pattern: S is from the F: Heb 1:3: He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature; 1:3 ὁς ὧν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ
John 1:1-2: S is eternally the Word of the Father; John 5:26: For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.
- I still want to guard zealously against greater ontological power – greater attribute – for Father

B. Authority and submission prior to creation (this is not just during Incarnation – eternal!)

1. Ephesians 1:3-5: he [the Father] *chose us in him* [the Son] *before the foundation of the world*,
Not: F and S chose us. Rather, 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: Romans 8:29 "he predestined to be conformed to the image of his son"; Ephesians 1:9-11; 3:11; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Peter 1:19-20]
-- "everyone whose name has not been written *before the foundation of the world* in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain" (Rev 13:8).

C. Authority and submission in the process of creation (long before Incarnation)

John 1:2-3: He was in the beginning with God. ³ *All things were made through him*, and without him was not any thing made that was made; Hebrews 1:2: 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 process of creating universe, 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. (S did not create through F)

D. Authority and submission when the Father sent the Son

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. + Numerous verses (Gal 4:4 etc)

E. [Skip over:] Submission during Christ's earthly ministry (briefly – all agree)

John 8:28-29 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."

II. Evidence for the Son's submission to the Father after his ascension into heaven

A. Authority and submission in the Son's present ministry as great high priest

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* (Hebrews 7:25-26)

B. Authority and submission in pouring out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost

Acts 2:32-33: *having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit*, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.

C. Authority and submission in receiving revelation from the Father and giving it to the church

Revelation 1:1: The revelation of Jesus Christ, *which God gave him* to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

D. Authority and submission in sitting at the Father's right hand

Ephesians 1:20: [the Father] raised [Christ] from the dead and seated him at his *right hand* in the heavenly places; Heb. 1:3: After making purification for sins, he sat down at the *right hand* of the Majesty on high.

→ Never a position of equal authority, but always a position of secondary authority (at least 11 verses in NT)

E. Authority and submission in exercising final judgment

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

F. Authority and submission for all eternity after the final judgment

1 Corinthians 15:24-28 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.

G. Summary: Scripture shows a consistent pattern. The Son has always been subject to the authority of the Father

H. Not one of these relationships is ever reversed!

Note the complete absence of Scripture showing a reversal of this pattern.

Does this consistent pattern of Scripture mean nothing for our theology?

III. Other theologians who hold to eternal submission of the Son to the Father

1. J I Packer: "Thus ***the obedience of the God-man to the Father*** while He was on earth *was not a new relationship* occasioned by the incarnation, but ***the continuation in time of the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father in heaven.***" *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 54-55.

2. John Frame: "There is no subordination within the divine nature that is shared among the persons: the three are equally God. However, ***there is a subordination of role among the persons***, which constitutes part of the distinctiveness of each. (*The Doctrine of God* (2002), 720; see also his *Systematic Theology* (2013), 500-502).

3. Louis Berkhof : "The only subordination of which we can speak, is ***a subordination in respect to order and relationship*** Generation and procession take place within the Divine Being, and imply a certain ***subordination as to the manner of personal subsistence***, but not subordination as far as the possession of the divine essence is concerned. This ontological Trinity and its inherent order is ***the metaphysical basis of the economical Trinity.***" (*Systematic Theology*, 88-89).

4. Carl F. H. Henry: "***The creeds*** speak of the ***subordination***, distinction and union of the three persons without implying an inferiority of any; since all three persons have a common divine essence they affirm ***the Son's subordination to the Father***, and the Spirit's subordination to the Father and the Son. This subordination pertains to mode of subsistence *and to mode of operations*" (*God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 5, p. 205.)

5. Jonathan Edwards: "Though ***a subordination of the persons of the Trinity in their actings*** be not from any proper natural subjection one to another, and so *must be conceived of as in some respect established by mutual free agreement* . . . *yet this agreement establishing this economy is not to be looked upon as merely arbitrary* .

. . . But there is a natural decency or fitness in that order and economy that is established. ***'Tis fit that the order of the acting of the persons of the Trinity should be agreeable to the order of their subsisting: that as the Father is first in the order of subsisting, so he should be first in the order of acting*** . . . therefore the persons of the Trinity all consent to this order, and establish it by agreement, as they all naturally delight in what is in itself fit, suitable and beautiful. Therefore,

This order [or] economy of the persons of the Trinity with respect to their actions *ad extra* is to be conceived of as **prior to the covenant of redemption**

That the economy of the persons of the Trinity, establishing *that order of their acting that is agreeable to the order of their subsisting*, is **entirely diverse from the covenant of redemption, and prior to it**, not only appears from the nature of things, but appears evidently from the Scripture . . ." 1062. "Economy of the Trinity and Covenant of Redemption," from Jonathan Edwards [1740], *The "Miscellanies"* 833-1152.

6. Sum from history of evang. Protestant theology:

→ No theologian prior to modern evangelical feminism ever said eternal submission of S to F is unorthodox (so far as I know)

No creed says that S is not eternally subject to F (to my knowledge)

IV. Points of clarification

A. Is authority an attribute of God?

→ No, authority (as we understand it here) is a property of *relationship*, not an attribute of one's being (an ontological attribute) (*omnipotence* is an attribute)

Example: Matt. 28:18: "All *authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me. (Matt. 28:18 ESV) -- not a new attribute, not an increase in omnipotence.

Example: during creation, during Incarnation – no loss of deity.

Example: human analogies (faculty members/ academic dean)

B. Does eternal submission of S to F imply three wills in God?

Question: in the Trinity, do the three Persons have three wills or one will?

→ There is one unified will in God, but there are 3 distinctive expressions of that will by F, S, HS

Need to do justice to the way Scripture speaks, as in:

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

Objection: Sixth Ecumenical Council at Constantinople (680-681):

in person of Christ - *wills belong to each nature* and not to the person. (I agree.)

"So we profess, and so we believe that in our one Lord Jesus Christ, our true God, there are two natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, undividedly, *and two natural wills* and two natural operations"

But: This is not talking about persons w/in Trinity

They declared: there can be two wills with one Person (Christ)

They did not deny that there could be 3 distinctive expressions of God's will among the 3 Persons.

C. Should we say that submission is eternal but not necessary to the nature of God?

(belongs to *opera ad extra*, which are voluntary, not *opera ad intra*, which are necessary)

1. Must be cautious here: relationships between 3 Persons in eternity: largely a matter of deep mystery

2. But Scr. – goes only one direction

F chose us in S, etc.

F and S have eternally been F and S

If *monogenēs* means "only begotten" then there is some kind of eternal ordering of subsistence that makes auth/ submission appropriate (Edwards, Berkhof, Augustine)

3. Q: shall we say that God in himself is different from everything that Scripture tells us about how he acts in the world?

→ Better to say that the economic Trinity reveals the ontological Trinity.

→ And I think we must insist that F and S have eternally been F and S -- and that those names consistently in Scripture assume a relationship in which authority belongs to the Father with respect to the Son

V. Opponents of eternal submission of S to F undermine the doctrine of the Trinity by “confounding the persons” in the Trinity

THE ATHANASIAN CREED (4th - 5th century A.D.)

3. We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
4. *Neither confounding the Persons (Neque confundentes¹ personas):* nor dividing the Substance.
5. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Spirit
24. So there is *one Father, not three Fathers:* one Son, not three Sons: one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.

A. Denying that the names “Father” and “Son” imply any relational differences

B. Claiming that every act of any one person is an act of all three persons

Millard Erickson: “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” (*Who’s Tampering?*, pp. 137-138)

“It was the Son who died on the cross, but in a very real sense, the Father and the Spirit also suffered This is not the ancient teaching of patipassianism. This is referring to the other persons’ *sympathetic suffering* and the Son’s *actual suffering* on the cross.” (135)

C. Denying that the Son was eternally Son

VI. Opponents of eternal submission undermine the authority of Scripture

A. Arguing that that something the New Testament teaches less often is not true

B. Making untruthful claims about Scripture

C. Failing to offer any explanation for verses that seem to contradict your position

Kevin Giles -

- minimizes these verses and dismisses them by calling them “isolated texts” and “problematic isolated verses.” (“The Trinity without Tiers,” 271).

This is why, Giles explains, that “simply opening our Bibles cannot settle the debate as to what should be believed about the Trinity.” (272)

Response: → Not opening our Bibles is the best way to go astray!

D. Conclusion:

¹ *Confundo*: to pour, mingle, or mix together; *to confound, confuse, jumble together*, bring into disorder (Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1879), 417).