

“A profoundly insightful book.”

—Sam Storms, Lead Pastor for Preaching and Vision,
Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

How do the three persons of the Trinity relate to each other? Evangelicals continue to wrestle with this complex issue and its implications for our understanding of men’s and women’s roles in both the home and the church.

Challenging feminist theologies that view the Trinity as a model for evangelical egalitarianism, *One God in Three Persons* turns to the Bible, church history, philosophy, and systematic theology to argue for the eternal submission of the Son to the Father. Contributors include:

WAYNE GRUDEM

JOHN STARKE

CHRISTOPHER W. COWAN

MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN

KYLE CLAUNCH

PHILIP R. GONS

JAMES M. HAMILTON JR.

ANDREW DAVID NASELLI

ROBERT LETHAM

K. SCOTT OLIPHINT

MICHAEL J. OVEY

BRUCE A. WARE

BRUCE A. WARE (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is professor of Christian theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has written numerous journal articles, book chapters, book reviews, and books, including *God’s Lesser Glory*; *God’s Greater Glory*; *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*; and *The Man Christ Jesus*.

JOHN STARKE serves as preaching pastor at Apostles Church in New York City. He and his wife, Jena, have four children.

 **CROSSWAY**
www.crossway.org

THEOLOGY
ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-2842-2
ISBN-10: 1-4335-2842-8

9 781433 528422 U.S. \$21.99

One God in Three Persons

WARE & STARKE

◆◆ CROSSWAY

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

One God in Three Persons

Edited by

BRUCE A. WARE & JOHN STARKE

One God in Three Persons

*One God
in Three
Persons*

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

Edited by

BRUCE A. WARE AND JOHN STARKE

 **CROSSWAY**

WHEATON, ILLINOIS

One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life

Copyright © 2015 by Bruce A. Ware and John B. Starke

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Dual Identity, inc.

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Scripture references marked NIV are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture references marked NRSV are from *The New Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Published by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the authors.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-2842-2

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-2845-3

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-2843-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-2844-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

One God in three persons: unity of essence, distinction of persons, implications for life / edited by Bruce A. Ware and John Starke.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4335-2842-2 (tp)

I. Trinity. I. Ware, Bruce A., 1953– II. Starke, John, 1981–

BT111.3.O54 2015

231'.044—dc23 2014034078

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To our wives

JODI

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

JENA

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

Contents

Abbreviations	9
Preface	11
1 Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity WAYNE GRUDEM	17
2 “I Always Do What Pleases Him” <i>The Father and Son in the Gospel of John</i> CHRISTOPHER W. COWAN	47
3 God Is the Head of Christ <i>Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 Ground Gender Complementarity in the Immanent Trinity?</i> KYLE CLAUNCH	65
4 “That God May Be All in All” <i>The Trinity in 1 Corinthians 15</i> JAMES M. HAMILTON JR.	95
5 Eternal Generation in the Church Fathers ROBERT LETHAM	109
6 True Sonship—Where Dignity and Submission Meet <i>A Fourth-Century Discussion</i> MICHAEL J. OVEY	127
7 Augustine and His Interpreters JOHN STARKE	155

8	“To Devote Ourselves to the Blessed Trinity” <i>Eighteenth-Century Particular Baptists, Andrew Fuller, and the Defense of “Trinitarian Communities”</i>	173
	MICHAEL A. G. HAYKIN	
9	An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity	195
	PHILIP R. GONS AND ANDREW DAVID NASELLI	
10	Simplicity, Triunity, and the Incomprehensibility of God	215
	K. SCOTT OLIPHINT	
11	Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of <i>Homoousios</i> ?	237
	<i>A Response to Millard Erickson and Tom McCall</i>	
	BRUCE A. WARE	
	Contributors	249
	General Index	251
	Scripture Index	259

Abbreviations

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

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

Preface

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

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

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

The essays in this volume argue for the latter position.

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

The Debate in Context

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Toward a Comprehensive Approach

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

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

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

Finally, the essays that concern theological and philosophical per-

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

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

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

Bruce A. Ware
John Starke

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

An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity

PHILIP R. GONS AND ANDREW DAVID NASELLI

The notion of hierarchy in the immanent Trinity evokes no small controversy among evangelicals today.¹ Both sides of the debate accuse their opponents of heresy, tampering with the Trinity, and rejecting historic, orthodox Trinitarianism.² But the reason runs deeper than a

¹*Immanent Trinity* refers to what God eternally and necessarily is in himself (*ad intra*) and how he relates to himself. Synonymous terms include *ontological Trinity*, *essential Trinity*, *absolute Trinity*, and *eternal Trinity*. *Economic Trinity* refers to God as he reveals himself in time in relationship to his creation (*ad extra*). Synonymous terms include *revelational Trinity*, *mediatorial Trinity*, *historical Trinity*, and *functional Trinity*. Theologians differ on the degree to which the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity.

²Robert Letham sounded the alarm in “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52 (1990): 65–78 (esp. 67–69, 77–78) by calling attention to evangelical feminism’s “dangerous path” heading toward “abandon[ing] an orthodox view of God” (78). Thomas Schreiner followed with “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 124–39, calling attention to egalitarianism’s “serious misunderstanding of . . . the doctrine of the Trinity” (129). Gilbert Bilezikian responded in “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS* 40 (1997): 57–68, which he originally presented at ETS in 1994, and called the subordination view “theological innovation” (56). Stephen Kovach retorted in “Egalitarians Revamp Doctrine of the Trinity: Bilezikian, Grenz, and the Kroegers Deny Eternal Subordination of the Son,” *Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood News* 2, no. 1 (1996): 1–5. Bruce Ware followed with “Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?,” *JBMW* 6, no. 1 (2001): 4–11. Kevin Giles replied in *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), accusing complementarian Trinitarians of rejecting the traditional view, heading off on their own, and being dangerously close to Arianism. In *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan: 2006), Giles charged complementarians with reinvent-

concern to defend orthodox Trinitarianism. Behind the Trinity debate, complementarians and egalitarians clash about the roles of men and women in the church and the home. What started as an exegetical debate over biblical texts about the relationship between men and women has turned into a theological and philosophical debate about the inner life of the eternal Trinity.

The heart of the gender debate has become the heart of the Trinity debate: can a person (human or divine) be equal in essence and necessarily subordinate in role to another person?³ Complementarians insist that women are necessarily subordinate to men in their roles (in the contexts of marriage and the church) while being equal to men in essence. Egalitarians argue that such a claim defies simple logic.⁴ Complementarians turn to the relationship between the Father and the Son, in which they find an analogy that seems to refute the egalitarians' objection: the Son is eternally and necessarily under the authority of the Father and will apparently remain so even after the Father restores all things (1 Cor. 15:28), yet the Son is equally God and shares with the Father the one divine essence. If in the Trinity full equality and necessary subordination can coexist in complete harmony, why not also in human gender relations?

Like the gender debate, the Trinity debate has gone through various stages. It too began as an exegetical debate, turned into a theological debate, and from there became a historical debate.⁵ Recently some have tried to end the debate on philosophical grounds.⁶ This chapter evaluates the successfulness of this most recent move.

ing the doctrine of the Trinity. In a 2008 Trinity debate over the question "Do relations of authority and submission exist eternally among the Persons of the Godhead?" Tom McCall and Keith Yandell compared the affirmative position to Arianism, and Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem compared the negative position to modalism (<http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/do-relations-of-authority-and-submission-exist-eternally-among-the-persons-of-the-godhead/>). Cf. Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), who essentially sides with the egalitarian Trinitarians.

³*Necessity* is a philosophical term indicating that something could not be different from what it is, that it must be that way in all possible worlds.

⁴E.g., Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "'Equal in Being, Unequal in Role': Exploring the Logic of Woman's Subordination," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 301–33.

⁵Both sides appeal to church history to support their views and argue that their opponents depart from historical Trinitarianism. E.g., Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 21–117; Ware, McCall, and Yandell in the 2008 Trinity debate. Cf. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*, 139–68.

⁶See the 2008 Trinity debate; Thomas McCall and Keith E. Yandell, "On Trinitarian Subordinationism," *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009): 339–58; Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*, 169–93; Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 175–88.

Identifying the Sides

There are two main viewpoints in the current Trinity debate:

1. *Eternal functional subordination* (EFS) holds that the Son is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the Father, not in terms of his deity, but in his role in relationship to the Father.⁷
2. *Eternal functional equality* (EFE) holds that the Father and Son are completely equal in all noncontingent ways: all subordination is voluntary, arbitrary, and temporary.⁸

Both acknowledge a relationship of authority and subordination between the Father and the Son. The differences concern its nature, duration, and application. Three overlapping questions show the divide:

1. *Nature*. Is the Son necessarily or contingently subordinate to the Father?
2. *Duration*. Is this subordination eternal or temporary?
3. *Application*. Does this subordination describe the immanent or economic Trinity?

Table 2 summarizes how the two positions answer these questions.

Table 2. Two positions on the Son's subordination

	<i>Nature</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Application</i>
EFS	necessary	eternal	immanent and economic
EFE	contingent	temporary	economic only

Thesis

This chapter argues that EFE's philosophical arguments against hierarchy in the immanent Trinity do not succeed. While they sound compelling on the surface, they oversimplify complex issues, equivocate nuanced terminology, and gloss over crucial distinctions. Our goal is

⁷Proponents of EFS include Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, D. A. Carson, John Frame, Thomas Schreiner, Andreas Köstenberger, Stephen Kovach, John Piper, and Tim Keller. Roger Olson represents another version of EFS, which avoids the language of authority and submission. Charles Hodge and A. H. Strong may fall into this category. Robert Letham affirms order, which includes relations of authority and submission, but he rejects subordination and hierarchy terminology (*The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004], 480, 484, 489).

⁸Proponents of EFE include Tom McCall, Keith Yandell, Millard Erickson, Kevin Giles, Rebecca Groothuis, and Gilbert Bilzikian.

not to make a case for EFS. Others have already done that.⁹ Rather, we intend to demonstrate that the philosophical arguments against EFS do not stand up to careful scrutiny and fail to prove that hierarchy cannot exist in the immanent Trinity without compromising the Nicene doctrine of *homoousion*.

Proponents of EFE have made numerous attempts to demonstrate that EFS is philosophically indefensible.¹⁰ This article focuses on three of the most common and seemingly devastating.

Argument 1. The Eternal Subordination of the Son to the Father Entails the Denial of Homoousion

ARGUMENT

Tom McCall and Keith Yandell argue that if EFS is true, then the Son possesses a property from eternity that the Father lacks (i.e., being subordinate to the Father). Consequently, the Father and the Son are not of the same essence (*homoousios*), but of different essences (*heteroousioi*), and historic, orthodox Trinitarianism is lost. McCall asserts unambiguously, “Hard EFS entails the denial of the *homoousion*.”¹¹ He argues:

- (1) If Hard EFS is true, then the Son has the property *being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds*.
- (2) If the Son has this property in every possible world, then the Son has this property necessarily. Furthermore, the Son has this property with *de re* rather than *de dicto* necessity.
- (3) If the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*), then the Son has it essentially.
- (4) If Hard EFS is true, then the Son has this property essentially while the Father does not.
- (5) If the Son has this property essentially and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.¹²

⁹E.g., see the essays in this volume by Wayne Grudem, Chris Cowan, and Jim Hamilton.

¹⁰Cf. note 6.

¹¹McCall, *Which Trinity?*, 179. McCall strangely distinguishes between “Soft EFS” and “Hard EFS.” His “Soft EFS” is not EFS at all; rather, it is equivalent to EFE. His “Hard EFS” is EFS as we define it in the previous section.

¹²*Ibid.*, 179–80.

Millard Erickson states the same argument with less philosophical precision,¹³ and others similarly argue that EFS must also entail eternal ontological subordination.¹⁴

RESPONSE

On the surface this argument seems devastating to EFS. If metaphysics requires that eternal differences be necessary differences, and if necessary differences must find their grounding in ontological differences, then we are left with an inescapable ontological difference between the Father and the Son. If the Father and the Son are ontologically different (i.e., different in their being, nature, or essence), then they cannot be *homoousios* (i.e., of the same being, nature, or essence).

At the outset, it is important to understand the ramifications of this argument. If it is indeed sound, not only does it prove that the authority-submission distinction cannot coexist with full equality of essence between the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity, but it also eliminates *any* necessary property distinctions.¹⁵

In the same way, then, the historic doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit, which the majority of the church has embraced in the East and the West since at least the Council of Nicaea in 325 and arguably much earlier,¹⁶ would entail the denial of *homoousion*. We could restate McCall's argument this way:

¹³Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*, 172.

¹⁴Groothuis asserts, "The idea that Christ's subordination is eternal yet merely functional (and thereby compatible with ontological equality) is incongruent. An eternal subordination of Christ would seem logically to entail his ontological subordination" ("Equal in Being, Unequal in Role," 332). Bilezikian claims, "If Christ's subordination is eternal . . . it is also ontological" ("Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping," 64). Adam Omelianchuk argues: "Subordination that extends into eternity cannot be merely functional, but must also be ontological. . . . If the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, then the Father has a divine attribute that the Son does not have. And since eternity is an intrinsic quality of God's existence, it logically follows that what the Son *is* eternally, he *is* in being. If the Son is eternally subordinate in function, then he is eternally subordinate in being" ("The Logic of Equality," *Priscilla Papers* 22, no. 4 [2008]: 27).
¹⁵Yandell seems to recognize this and argues that the Father, Son, and Spirit possess identical properties. There is no property that one person possesses that the others do not also possess. What differentiates the Father, Son, and Spirit is not one or more properties. Rather, it is that they are distinct property bearers and centers of self-consciousness. Yandell does acknowledge the distinction of the existence-entailed properties *being the Father*, *being the Son*, and *being the Spirit* (2008 Trinity debate, 2:20:30–21:30; McCall and Yandell, "On Trinitarian Subordination," 354). However, these do not amount to real differences among the persons. Rather, they merely identify the persons as distinct property bearers (of identical properties). For his definition and discussion of existence-entailed properties, see Keith A. Yandell, "A Defense of Dualism," in *Philosophy of Religion: A Reader and Guide*, ed. William Lane Craig (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 482–83.

¹⁶See the essays in this volume by Robert Letham, John Starke, and Michael Ovey.

1. If the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is true, then the Son has the property *generate* in all time segments in all possible worlds.
2. If the Son has this property in every possible world, then the Son has this property necessarily. Furthermore, the Son has this property with *de re* rather than *de dicto* necessity.
3. If the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*), then the Son has it essentially.
4. If the historic doctrine of the Trinity is true, then the Son has this property essentially while the Father does not.
5. If the Son has this property essentially and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.¹⁷

If this argument is valid, not only does it refute EFS's proposal that the distinction between the Father and the Son is best understood in terms of authority and submission, but it also refutes the view held by the vast majority of the church for at least the last seventeen hundred years, namely, that the Father, Son, and Spirit possess unique personal properties that distinguish them from one another.¹⁸

If what McCall and Yandell argue is true, then the church's best theologians, the very ones who defined and defended *homoousion*, unknowingly denied it and differed only slightly from Arians. The entire history of orthodox Trinitarianism was unknowingly heterodox for the simple reason that its view of the Trinity entails a denial of *homoousion*. That is a weighty charge.¹⁹

¹⁷Strangely, McCall ignores the implications of his argument and even suggests that believing in eternal generation might allow one to escape the force of his argument (*Which Trinity?*, 180–81). However, in a later publication, McCall and Yandell seem aware of this extension, but oddly speak of it only in terms of possibility: "The doctrine of eternal generation . . . perhaps even entails ontological subordinationism" ("On Trinitarian Subordinationism," 350). Why they are not as confident of their argument's force against eternal generation as they are with the authority-submission properties is not clear. Perhaps it is the audacity of the claim and its ramifications.

¹⁸A growing number of theologians reject the historic doctrines of eternal generation and procession (e.g., Loraine Boettner, J. Oliver Buswell, William Lane Craig, Millard Erickson, John Feinberg, Paul Helm, Robert Raymond, Keith Yandell), but most still retain the eternal identity of Father, Son, and Spirit and the eternal distinctions they entail. This argument, if successful, would charge those who maintain any eternal (non-existence-entailing) property distinctions, even if not eternal generation and eternal procession, of implicitly denying *homoousion* as well.

¹⁹It is beyond the scope of this chapter to prove that the church has historically affirmed that the Father, Son, and Spirit each possesses one or more personal properties that make them distinct from one another. But we point to John Calvin as a representative example. Calvin defines *person* this way: "a subsistence in the Divine essence,—a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by *incommunicable properties*." Each subsistence, "though connected with the essence by an indissoluble tie, being incapable of separation, yet has a special mark by which it is distinguished from it." Calvin refers to "the peculiar property of each [that] distinguishes the one from the other" and maintains that "each of the three subsistences while related to the others is distinguished by its own properties" (*Institutes of*

Fortunately, escaping the force of this argument does not require abandoning the historic teaching that the Father, Son, and Spirit each have one or more unique personal properties that the others do not possess. The argument sounds compelling on the surface, but it fails to prove its conclusion.

The terms “essentially” and “essence” in the conclusion of McCall’s argument need clarification. That they share the same root (*esse*) causes confusion. Substituting synonyms for these terms (*fundamentally* for “essentially” and *substance* for “essence”) helps bring clarity. We could restate the conclusion this way: “If the Son has this property *fundamentally* and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different *substance* than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.” In this version the conclusion is not as obvious as it was in the original. Does a fundamental property difference necessarily entail that the Father and the Son are not consubstantial? It depends. The syllogism lacks sufficient information to draw a reliable conclusion.

An eternal function is a necessary function, and a necessary function does indeed find its grounding in one or more essential or fundamental properties. So the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father in terms of his role or function in the Godhead derives from a fundamental difference between him and the Father.

However, the Trinity has more than one referent to which *essential* or *fundamental* may rightly apply. The Trinity is more than essence; the Trinity is one essence *and* three persons, each of which may have fundamental properties. Properties of the essence are just as essential or fundamental to the essence as properties of the persons are to the persons.²⁰ McCall’s argument leaves no room for this fundamental

the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge [Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845], 1.13.6 [emphasis added]). Elsewhere Calvin asserts, “The Father differs in some special property from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit” (1.13.22). Calvin’s view of personal properties is not unique. Rather, at its heart it represents historic Trinitarianism. According to Yandell, McCall, and Erickson, however, it necessarily entails a denial of *homoousion*.

²⁰ Cf. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, A Theology of Lordship (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 720; Bruce A. Ware, “Alleging Heresy Where There Is None,” a review of *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systemic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology*, by Thomas H. McCall, *JBMW* 16, no. 2 (2011): 45–46. John Dahms’s discussion exemplifies this ambiguity (unhelpfully, in our view) when he argues for both “essential subordination” and “essential equality” (“The Subordination of the Son,” *JETS* 37 [1994]: 351–64). Some attribute individual or personal essences to the persons, but to avoid confusion and adhere to the traditional terminology, we reserve *essence* for the one *substantia* or *οὐσία*. Cf. McCall, *Which Trinity?*, 180–81.

difference to be attributed to anything other than the one essence. But this shows merely the invalidity of the syllogism as it is currently stated.

The church has historically distinguished between (1) the one divine essence that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit hold in common and (2) the personal properties that differentiate each person from the others. Where the equivocation enters is that both the essence and the persons have essential or fundamental properties. Consequently, one must prove rather than assume the move from “essentially” to “essence.”

The orthodox tradition has maintained that each person, each property bearer, has two sets of essential or fundamental properties:

1. The properties of the one *substantia* or οὐσία, which he shares equally with the other two persons
2. The properties of his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις, which belong to him alone

Consequently, there are four sets of essential or fundamental properties in the Trinity:

1. The properties of the one *substantia* or οὐσία
2. The properties of the Father’s unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις
3. The properties of the Son’s unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις
4. The properties of the Spirit’s unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις

All of the properties of the one *substantia* or οὐσία belong equally to all three persons. The properties of the three *personas*, *subsistentias*, or ὑποστάσεις belong to only one of the three persons. As Calvin describes them, they are unique incommunicable properties.²¹ Vital to any discussion about properties in the Trinity is identifying whether the property belongs to the one *substantia* or οὐσία or to one of the three *personas*, *subsistentias*, or ὑποστάσεις.

Unfortunately, McCall and Yandell repeatedly gloss over this cru-

²¹See note 19.

cial distinction and ignore the proposal that the authority-submission property distinction belongs to the persons and not the essence.²² It seems that in their view there is only one set of properties,²³ which clearly departs from historic Trinitarianism.²⁴ Unfortunately, they never defend this view or even acknowledge that it departs from historic Trinitarianism.²⁵ Once we remove the ambiguity in the argument and eliminate the equivocation of “essentially” and “essence,” the conclusion becomes tautological. McCall’s argument would be reformulated this way:

1. If Hard EFS is true, then the Son has the property *being functionally subordinate* in all time segments in all possible worlds, not *as God* in the one shared *substantia* or οὐσία but *as Son* in his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις.
2. If the Son has this property in every possible world, then the Son has this property necessarily. Furthermore, the Son has this property with *de re* rather than *de dicto* necessity.
3. If the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*), then the Son has it essentially not *as God* in the one shared *substantia* or οὐσία but *as Son* in his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις.
4. If Hard EFS is true, then the Son has this property essentially, not *as God* in the one shared *substantia* or οὐσία but *as Son* in his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις, while the Father does not have it in his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις.
5. If the Son has this property essentially in his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις and the Father does not have it in his unique *persona*, *subsistentia*, or ὑπόστασις, then the Son is a different person than the Father.

With the ambiguity and equivocation removed, the argument proves

²²This is in spite of Ware’s repeated attempts to make this point in the 2008 Trinity debate.

²³As noted above, in the 2008 Trinity debate, Yandell repeatedly indicates that the three persons have no properties not held in common with the others. What makes the persons distinct is not their properties, but simply that they are unique bearers of properties. At one point, however, he acknowledges that they each have one unique property: *being the Father*, *being the Son*, and *being the Spirit*. For Yandell, however, these amount to existence-entailed properties, not essential properties. *Being the Father* means nothing more than being a distinct property bearer. There is no place for a property that is not a property of the one *substantia* or οὐσία. McCall’s view, while not as clear, seems to be similar.

²⁴See note 19.

²⁵They do, however, admit to rejecting eternal generation and eternal procession. However, that does not entail rejecting any personal properties that differentiate the Father, Son, and Spirit, which we maintain is the historic view of the church.

nothing profound: the Father and the Son are not the same person—one of the basic tenets of Trinitarianism.

John Feinberg articulates this important distinction in a discussion on “each member of the Godhead’s non-incarnational property”:

The church, as we noted, said that the Father is ungenerate and that he begets the Son. The Son’s property is being eternally begotten by the Father, and the Holy Spirit’s property is his procession from the Father (or Father and Son). Given these respective properties, if we are speaking about the sortal noun “deity” or the adjective “divine,” we seem to have a problem, according to Bartel, for we can now write an argument like the following:

God the Son is eternally begotten of the Father *qua* divine.
 God the Father is not eternally begotten of the Father *qua*
 divine;
 Therefore, God the Son is not the same deity as God the
 Father.

If Jesus and the Father are numerically the same God, this argument underscores the problem. As Bartel explains, “just as absolute identity will not tolerate divergence in properties exemplified *simpliciter*, so *being numerically the same f as* will not tolerate divergence in properties exemplified *qua f*.”

This may seem to be an insuperable dilemma, but Bartel thinks not, and I agree. . . . The reason is that *being eternally begotten and eternally proceeding are not properties the Son and Spirit have in virtue of being divine, but in virtue of being distinct subsistences of that divine essence* [emphasis added]. Hence, the premises of the above should read “*qua* subsistence or person,” and the conclusion should say, “Therefore, God the Son is not the same person or subsistence as God the Father.”²⁶

According to EFS, *being in authority over the Son* inheres in what it means for the Father to be Father, not in what it means for the Father to be God; and *being in submission under the Father* inheres in what it means for the Son to be Son, not in what it means for the Son to be

²⁶ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 494–95.

God.²⁷ As such, these are not properties of the one essence, but unique incommunicable properties of the persons that define their intratrinitarian relationships.²⁸

Properties that inhere in the persons and not in the essence do not entail a denial of *homoousion*.²⁹ Consequently, by affirming the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit, the church has not been unknowingly denying *homoousion* since Nicaea. Neither, then, do other properties inherent in the persons, like *authority over* and *submission under*, necessarily entail the denial of *homoousion*.³⁰

For this EFE argument to succeed, its proponents must demonstrate one of the following two propositions:

1. The historic position of properties of the persons as distinct from properties of the one essence is flawed; all properties are properties of the one essence.
2. The authority-submission properties must be properties of the essence rather than the persons.

To our knowledge, they have done neither. Consequently, this argument fails to prove that the properties of authority and submission entail the denial of *homoousion*.

²⁷Cf. Ware, "Alleging Heresy Where There Is None," 42–46: "The property of 'eternal functional subordination' that the Son possesses and the Father does not possess is indeed a personal property. That is, this is a property of the person of the Son, and it is a property that only could exist in relation to another person" (45).

²⁸Erickson, aware of this counterargument, maintains that differentiating between properties of the essence and properties of the persons does not solve the problem "because if these are necessary properties of the persons, then the persons have different essences" (*Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*, 173). Erickson's astounding statement is sloppy and dismissive. It is sloppy because it confuses the properties of the essence with properties of the persons. It is dismissive because it entails a rejection of a key component of at least seventeen hundred years of orthodox Trinitarianism. While the church has affirmed that the three persons possess one or more unique incommunicable properties not proper to the others, Erickson makes it sound as if this view originated with Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem.

McCall comes close to anticipating this counterargument when he says that Ware and Grudem "might want to hold both to a generic divine essence (the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, etc.) and to individual or personal essences that are functional (i.e., the Father's individual essence is made up of properties such as *having authority over*, while the Son's individual essence is made up of such properties as *being subordinate*), but it is not obvious that they can do even this" (*Which Trinity?*, 181; cf. 184, 200). But McCall never gives any reasons that this will not work.

²⁹So Bartel and Feinberg (see above) and Bruce Ware, who made this argument in his counterstatement in the 2008 Trinity debate and then again in "Alleging Heresy Where There Is None," 42–46.

³⁰Of course, we have not proved that the properties *being in authority over* and *being in submission under* are properties of the persons rather than the essence. But we have proved that this argument fails without first establishing that such is not the case.

For an alternate response to the essence of this argument, see Arthur Pohle, *The Divine Trinity: A Dogmatic Treatise*, trans. Arthur Preuss, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1915), 238–40, who resolves the tension with the doctrine of perichoresis (i.e., the interpenetration or mutual indwelling of the three persons).

Argument 2. If Only the Son Could Have Become Incarnate, the Father Could Not Be Omnipotent

ARGUMENT

Another argument against EFS concerns which of the persons of the Trinity could have become incarnate. Was it possible for the Father or the Spirit to take on a human nature and come instead of the Son? McCall maintains that the answer must be yes, that is, unless one is prepared to deny the attribute of omnipotence to both the Father and the Spirit:

If only the Son has the property *possibly being incarnate* (and has it essentially), then the Son again has an essential property that the Father does not have. So once again we are faced with a Son who is not *homoousios* with the Father. In addition, it seems that the Father and Son are not even of the same generic divine essence on this account. For if the defense of Hard EFS goes in this direction, then the Father and Son do not share the property of *omnipotence*: on this account the Father would be limited in his abilities to perform actions that are logically possible (i.e., becoming incarnate), even actions that are possible for a morally perfect being—thus the Father would be less than omnipotent. And if the Father does not have the property or attribute of omnipotence, then surely the Father does not have the whole generic divine essence. Thus the Father and the Son are not *homoousios*—even with respect to a generic divine essence.³¹

McCall reasons that if the Father was incapable of being united to a human nature, then he necessarily lacks something that the Son possesses. And this constitutes, again, a Father and a Son who are not equally divine; the result is a sort of reverse Arianism, in which the Son has more power than the Father. In other words, maintaining that any of the three persons of the Trinity could become incarnate is necessary to preserve *homoousion*. McCall points to Aquinas as a theologian who insisted “that any of the divine persons could have become incarnate”³² and cites Richard Cross that “this view is held by virtually everyone in medieval Christology.”³³

³¹ McCall, *Which Trinity?*, 182.

³² Ibid. McCall references Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa, qq. 1–3.

³³ Ibid. McCall points readers to Richard Cross, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 179.

RESPONSE

Like the first argument, this second argument seems compelling on the surface: if only the Son could have become incarnate, then the Son indeed had an ability that the Father and Spirit lacked, resulting in ontological inequality.

But are proponents of EFS really saying that the Father and the Spirit lack a property that the Son possesses—that it is not even theoretically possible for the Father or the Spirit to be united to a human nature? And do they have in mind a theoretical incarnation or *the* incarnation with all that it entails? It does not seem that the view as stated by its proponents (e.g., Grudem,³⁴ Ware,³⁵ Letham,³⁶ Köstenberger and Swain,³⁷ Reymond,³⁸ Bird and Shillaker³⁹) requires McCall's reading, that is, that the Father and the Spirit lack the property necessary for a theoretical incarnation.⁴⁰ We cannot find anyone who states the view the way McCall represents it. If that is not the view of hierarchical Trinitarians, then what is?

Aquinas's discussion points to the answer. For Aquinas there are two separate issues: (1) what is possible and (2) what is fitting.

First, Aquinas insists:

Whatever the Son can do, so can the Father and the Holy Ghost, otherwise the power of the three Persons would not be one. But the Son was able to become incarnate. Therefore the Father and the

³⁴Grudem maintains that the "roles [of the Father's sending and the Son's obeying] could not have been reversed or the Father would have ceased to be the Father and the Son would have ceased to be the Son" (*Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 250).

³⁵Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 81–82.

³⁶Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 491: "The Father sends the Son, and the Father and the Son send the Spirit. These relations are not reversible."

³⁷Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2008), 126n64: "To the perennial dogmatic question 'Could any person of the Trinity have become incarnate?' John's Gospel says 'No!': that is, *if* the incarnation entails fulfilling the role of 'Servant of Yahweh' at the climax of Israel's history. Only *the Son* could do that."

³⁸Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 341: "We know also that his Sonship implies an order of relational (not essential) subordination to the Father (which is doubtless what dictated the divisions of labor in the eternal Covenant of Redemption) in that it is unthinkable that the Son would have sent the Father to do his will."

³⁹Michael Bird and Robert Shillaker, "Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles: A Response to Recent Discussion," *TrinJ* 29 (2008): 272: "The Son, who by his very nature reflects the image and glory of the Father and who is eternally sent by the Father, was the only member in the God-head uniquely suited to doing what God did in the incarnation."

⁴⁰Ware denied that position in the 2008 Trinity debate. Yet McCall continued to argue against the position his opponents denied holding.

Holy Ghost were able to become incarnate. . . . The Divine power could have united human nature to the Person of the Father or of the Holy Ghost, as It united it to the Person of the Son. And hence we must say that the Father or the Holy Ghost could have assumed flesh even as the Son.⁴¹

McCall thinks that this conflicts with the EFS position, and by itself it might appear to. But that conclusion is not warranted for two reasons: Aquinas's view is more sophisticated than this narrow reading suggests, and the EFS position agrees with Aquinas's conclusions.

Aquinas goes on to address "whether it was more fitting that the person of the Son rather than any other divine person should assume human nature." After a lengthy discussion with numerous reasons, he concludes emphatically that "it was most fitting that the Person of the Son should become incarnate."⁴²

McCall glosses over this important distinction in his discussion and misunderstands the view of his opponents. But Aquinas's conclusion is precisely what EFS proponents affirm: the Son is uniquely fit for the work of the incarnation. All three persons of the Trinity have the *capacity* to be united to a human nature and therefore from a strictly theoretical standpoint *could* have become incarnate. They all equally possess the property of omnipotence. However, to acknowledge this is not inconsistent with maintaining that in all possible worlds in which one of the persons of the Trinity would have become incarnate for the work of the incarnation, the Son *must* be that person.⁴³ This conclusion is the necessary consequence of God's wisdom.⁴⁴

The unique personal properties of the Son make him best suited to be united to human nature and fulfill the role of Mediator. It is a matter of fitness, not ability. We can safely conclude, however, that in all possible worlds that include the biblical incarnation, the Son rather than the Father or the Spirit would have become incarnate because God's

⁴¹ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, q. 3 art 5, ad.

⁴² *Ibid.*, III, q. 3 art 8, ad.

⁴³ Consequently, in a different sense, it was not possible for the Father or the Spirit to become incarnate in any possible world in which the incarnation would exist—not because of a lack of ability in the Father or the Son, but because of the Son's fitness and God's wisdom.

⁴⁴ Geerhardus Vos defines God's wisdom as "that perfection of God by which He uses His knowledge for the attainment of His ends in the way that glorifies Him most" (*Theology Proper*, vol. 1 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, trans. Annemie Godbehere [Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, forthcoming], 18).

nature is such that he always does what is most fitting. The incarnation corresponds to something in the Son, making his incarnation a necessary consequence of divine wisdom.⁴⁵ So while any of the three persons could have become incarnate with reference to capacity or ability, only the Son could have with reference to God's commitment to choosing the most fitting means to accomplish his purposes for the incarnation.

We could state the argument in a syllogism this way:

1. Although all three persons of the Trinity possess the properties necessary to being united with a human nature, it was most fitting for the Son to become incarnate in all possible worlds containing the biblical incarnation.
2. The triune God is eternally, necessarily, and infinitely wise, and it is not possible for him to cease to be wise or to act in a fashion inconsistent with that wisdom.
3. God's wisdom entails his choosing the most fitting means to accomplish his purposes.
4. Therefore, it was not possible for any person but the Son to have become incarnate to accomplish the work of redemption planned for the biblical incarnation.

The view that only the Son would become incarnate to accomplish the work of redemption planned for the incarnation is consistent with the insistence that the Father and the Spirit have the ability to be united with a human nature. Thus, all three persons are *homoousios*, yet one of those persons, based on his personal properties and relationships to the other two, is best suited for the work of redemption in the incarnation.

Argument 3. If the Son's Submission to the Father Indicates an Eternal Relationship of Submission, Then the Son's Submission to the Spirit Does Also

ARGUMENT

To establish their view that the Son is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the Father from all eternity, Grudem and Ware point to the numerous places in Scripture where the Father sends the Son into the

⁴⁵We are not claiming that the incarnation was necessary, but that, given the incarnation, the Son's (and not the Father's or Spirit's) incarnation was necessary.

world. This sending, they say, demonstrates an authority-submission relationship—one that existed prior to the incarnation and, by extension, from all eternity.

McCall and Yandell take issue with the presumption that such sending indicates an eternal and necessary relationship.⁴⁶ Though they consider the premise unproved, McCall and Yandell argue that if we grant the premise, the argument turns into “outright contradiction” or proof of “*mutual* submission within the Trinity.”⁴⁷ They state the argument this way:

1. If one divine person sends another, then the divine person sent is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the divine person who sends (Grudem’s premise);
2. The Son is sent by the Spirit (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1);
3. Therefore, the Son is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the Spirit.⁴⁸

The minor premise is undisputed. If the major premise is true, it proves not only that the Son is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the Father, but also that the Son is likewise subordinate to the Spirit (and the Spirit is likewise subordinate to the Son). The problems are obvious. The argument breaks the order of Father, Son, Spirit and results in a contradiction where the Son and the Spirit are both under each other—whatever that might mean. As McCall and Yandell point out, one could resort to some notion of mutual subordination between the Son and the Spirit (much like the egalitarian interpretation of Eph. 5:21). But it is not clear whether such a move would be successful.

RESPONSE

On the surface this argument seems to pose a problem for EFS. At the very least, it requires reordering the persons of the Trinity so that the Father is first and the Son and the Spirit are equally subordinate to the Father and to each other.⁴⁹ The Father sends the Son and the Spirit; therefore, the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father.

⁴⁶McCall and Yandell, “On Trinitarian Subordinationism,” 344–46.

⁴⁷Ibid., 345.

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹It is unclear if this kind of mutual submission even works.

No one sends the Father; therefore, the Father is not subordinate to anyone. The Son and the Spirit send each other; therefore, the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to each other.

This reordering, even if it were to work, is not necessary. Evaluating the argument more carefully provides a simpler solution. McCall and Yandell gloss over important differences. The argument breaks down based on the differences between the Father's sending the Son and the Spirit's sending the Son. They are fundamentally different.

First, the Father and the Spirit send the Son *at different times*. The Father sends the Son *before the incarnation*. The Spirit sends him *during the incarnation*.

Second, the Father and the Spirit send the Son *to different places*. The Father sends the Son *into the world*. The Spirit sends the Son, who is already in the world, *into the wilderness*.

Third, and most importantly, there is a crucial difference between the one the Father sends and the one the Spirit sends. The Father sends the Son *qua* God, that is, *before he has taken on a human nature*. The Spirit sends Jesus *qua* the God-man, after he has been hypostatically united to his human nature. The Spirit does not send the preincarnate Son. He sends him in view of his taking on a human nature. It was in his role as Mediator, the second Adam, that Jesus was sent by and submitted to the Spirit. As the God-man, Jesus remained hierarchically over the Spirit throughout the incarnation.

Fourth, the sending language differs. The New Testament never describes the Father's sending and the Spirit's sending with the same word.⁵⁰

In light of these qualifications, we would need to revise McCall and Yandell's argument and state it this way:

1. If one divine person sends another *with reference to his divine nature*, then the divine person sent is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the divine person who sends.

⁵⁰The Father's sending the Son into the world is mentioned in the New Testament at least fifty times (with varying degrees of specificity), each time using a form of the word ἀποστείλλω or πέμπω. The only exception is Gal. 4:4, which uses ἐξαποστείλλω. Forty-three instances are in John's writings: his Gospel (40x) and his first letter (3x). The other seven are in Matthew (1x), Mark (1x), Luke (4x), and Galatians (1x). The New Testament mentions the Spirit's sending the Son three times, each a Synoptic account of the Spirit's sending Jesus into the wilderness (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). The texts each use different Greek words: (1) ἀνάγω, to lead or bring up; (2) ἐκβάλλω, to send or bring out or away; and (3) ἄγω, to lead or encourage (in the direction of) (BDAG).

2. The Spirit sends the Son *with reference to his human nature*; he does not send him *with reference to his divine nature*.
3. Therefore, it does not follow that the Son is eternally and necessarily subordinate to the Spirit.⁵¹

We must conclude, then, that this third argument, like the others, fails to prove its conclusion.

Conclusion

These three prominent arguments attempt to demonstrate the philosophical incoherence of EFS. After careful examination, we find them unsuccessful because they lack appropriate nuance, blur crucial distinctions, oversimplify the issues, and misrepresent the opposing position.

At least some versions of EFE eliminate any real property distinctions among the persons of the Trinity. This clearly departs from what the church has believed since at least Nicaea. If that is indeed what EFE proponents wish to do, they should unambiguously acknowledge their departure from historic Trinitarianism. If it is not, they need to abandon their arguments or demonstrate how the arguments do not eliminate all property distinctions.

As we continue to debate these important matters, we think it wise to proceed with caution and heed the words of Calvin:

The Scriptures demonstrate that there is some distinction between the Father and the Word, the Word and the Spirit; but the magnitude of the mystery reminds us of the great reverence and soberness which ought to be employed in discussing it. It seems to me, that nothing can be more admirable than the words of Gregory Nazianzen: “Ου φθάνω το εἶ νοῆσαι, καὶ τοῖς τρισὶ περιλάμπομαι οὐ φθάνω τὰ τρία διελεῖν καὶ εἰς τὸ ἐν ἀναφέρομαι,” (Greg. Nazian. in *Serm. de Sacro Baptis.*) “I cannot think of the unity without being irradiated by the Trinity: I cannot distinguish between the Trinity without being carried up to the unity.” Therefore, let us beware of

⁵¹ McCall and Yandell respond that if we explain the temporary subordination of the Son to the Spirit in light of the Son’s human nature, why should we not also explain the subordination of the Son to the Father in the same light? The answer to this is simple: the Scriptural data demonstrates the order of Father, Son, and Spirit before and after the incarnation, so that the Son’s subordination is consistent with it, while the Son’s subordination to the Spirit is a deviation from it.

imagining such a Trinity of persons as will distract our thoughts, instead of bringing them instantly back to the unity. . . .

It is far safer to rest contented with the relation as taught by [Augustine], than get bewildered in vain speculation by subtle prying into a sublime mystery. . . .

Here, if any where, in considering the hidden mysteries of Scripture, we should speculate soberly and with great moderation, cautiously guarding against allowing either our mind or our tongue to go a step beyond the confines of God's word. . . . We must conceive of him as he has made himself known, and in our inquiries make application to no other quarter than his word. . . . [We must] bring more docility than acumen to the discussion of this question, never to attempt to search after God anywhere but in his sacred word, and never to speak or think of him farther than we have it for our guide. But if the distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit, subsisting in the one Godhead, (certainly a subject of great difficulty,) gives more trouble and annoyance to some intellects than is meet, let us remember that the human mind enters a labyrinth whenever it indulges its curiosity, and thus submit to be guided by the divine oracles, how much soever the mystery may be beyond our reach.⁵²

⁵² *Institutes*, 1.13.17, 19, 21.