


The anti-eternal functional subordination versus the eternal functional subordination

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This article is a follow-up of an article that describes the proponents of the eternal functional subordination (EFS). This evangelical movement was introduced by George Knight in 1977. The EFS refers to the relationship between God the Father and God the Son as an eternal authoritative position held by the Father, while the Son occupies an eternal subordinated position. This is not the position held by the mainline Protestant churches. The proponents of the EFS find the origin of their premise in the Bible as well as the tradition of the early church. Just like the Protestants, they refer to the Creeds and the Councils, as well as the Church Fathers to verify their arguments. Although the differences between the mainline Protestants and the EFS are seemingly insignificant, it can lead to interpretations that are detrimental for the growth of the church. In this article, the main opponents of the EFS are critically discussed in order to lay bare the shortcomings of the EFS and, to a lesser degree, the shortcomings of the anti-EFS proponents. Naturally, the scholars who are opposing the EFS, do not always speak from the same mouth, as each proponent has their own point of view. This emphasises the fact that a constant debate on the holy Trinity is imperative.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The EFS movement proposes the eternal submission of Jesus to the Father – contra the Christian Creeds. Anti-EFS proponents are opposing this movement, indicating the equality between the three Persons of the Trinity on both the ontological and/or immanent and the economic and/or functional side. Practical Theology, Church History and New Testament (NT) disciplines are utilised.

Keywords: eternal functional subordination; anti-eternal functional subordination; trinity; Father-Son relationship; Holy Spirit; begotten; *homoousios*.

To argue that human language can define God is possibly the most serious theological error one can make (Giles 2017:4).

Introduction

Seemingly small differences between Christian denominations more often than not lead to conflict and schism. The issue of the authority of the Father over the Son has induced the foundation of the Eternal Function Subordination (EFS), soon prompting anti-EFS proponents to counter their views in order to provide the church with answers on this delicate matter. Issues arising from this debate produce questions such as:

To whom must we pray: The Father or Jesus, the Son? How must we understand the relationship between God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and why is this important?

This debate acted as the main impetus for the writing of this (as well as the previous) article.

In the authors previous article, *Authority of the Father: Eternal functional subordination – quo vadis?* (Oliver 2021), the author discussed the main views of the EFS, officially started in 1977 by George Knight, a Presbyterian preacher. In this follow-up article, the author critically discusses the views of the main anti-EFS (non-EFS) proponents. In line with the epistemology of (post-)postmodernism, the EFS' doctrine or point of view calls for serious critical and interactive thinking. This debate about the Trinity is held by two sides (EFS and anti-EFS) 'who hold the same basic view of the Bible's authority' (Erickson 2009:15) and who believe that the 'doctrine of the Trinity is our distinctive Christian doctrine of God ... the primary and foundational doctrine of the Christian faith' (Giles 2017:3; cf. Hausted 2017:11). Both sides claim that they are supported by history, specifically the Bible, the Creeds, the Church Fathers and tradition – 'historical orthodoxy and what the church has believed since AD 325' (Giles 2017:4; Holmes 2017:90). With reference to the terminology used during these times, both views are deduced from what they have *read* in these

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documents, as (theological) terms and phrases can ‘easily’ be understood in two ways. The criterion, however, should not be *our* understanding of the terminology used, but the intent and content of these documents within the early church and her tradition, as far as we can determine and understand it.

It is therefore important to state here that this debate will not be progressive when providing subjectively interpreted texts from Scripture or even with references to the Creeds, the Church Fathers, or the tradition (cf. Butner 2019a) – *out of context*. Butner (2019a) supplies three critical principles for the interpretation of a passage in the Bible and he also applies this to the Creeds, Church Fathers and tradition (cf. also Butner 2018:30):

- The denotation of a text is dependent on its ‘grammatical and lexical aids’.
- The text should be read in terms of the context of the narrative or argument.
- There should be ‘canonical or historical parallels’ for the meaning that we attach to the text.

Butner (2019a) adds something worth pondering on for a moment:

If we read the Bible and uncover an interpretation with no historical precedent, we should be quite wary, as we wonder why God would choose to help us see a new meaning in a text that his Spirit-led (yet fallible) church has read for millennia.

Although this is very true, it should not prevent us from *critical thinking*, which could bring us to a better or even different understanding. Take one curious example: The Evangelists, Church Fathers, Creeds, ‘Rule of faith’ [κανὼν τῆς πίστεως] – Butner 2019a) etc. maintained the Trinity to be eternal (cf. Jn 1:3; Athanasian Creed n.d.). Although the Trinity is very visible in the New Testament (NT), the question may be asked if the Old Testament (OT) people of God worshiped him as a Trinity (cf. Snyman 2022). Does the OT not rather rest on the words of the *shema*, stating that *God is one*? Therefore, for more than a millennium, at least from Abraham onwards, God’s people worshiped him as Yahweh, before their descendants learned, with the incarnation of Jesus, that God was ‘in fact’ a Trinity. This is something we can debate about for long, as the answer is not that clear. In the light of Butner’s statement, should we therefore look at the Bible, specifically the NT, from a new perspective? This is what the EFS is doing. They are looking at the Bible from a different point of view. Added to that, they claim that their point of view is supported by the Church Fathers. However, as shown in the previous article, this is in fact how *they* interpret the Church Fathers, and not necessarily what the Church Fathers meant within the context in which they lived. In this case, the three theses of Butner (2018) are very relevant.

As space does not allow the author to discuss all the anti-EFS proponents, only some prominent ones will be reviewed, namely (in alphabetical order) Gilbert Bilezikian, Millard Erickson, Daniel Furey, Kevin Giles, Stephen Holmes, Mark

Mullins and Jeriah Shank. As they are mostly debating against more than one EFS proponent, the latter are more than the former, once again in alphabetical order: Glen Butner, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Wayne Grudem, Iriann Marie Hausted, Scott Horrell, Wayne House, George Knight, Robert Letham, Paul Maxwell, Michael Ovey, Timothy Pawl, Owen Strachan and Bruce Ware.

This is a literature study utilising document analysis in a comparative study between some relevant documentation of the EFS and the anti-EFS proponents.

Background

At the beginning of the 4th century, the church was quite familiar with the concept of God as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit, having learned and inherited it from the Apostles and Church Fathers. However, some of the church’s clergy started to rethink the concept of the Trinity and ended up with theories, which were unacceptable for the church of the day. For this reason, the church held her first Council at Nicaea in 325¹ and decided to construe or construct a doctrine about the Trinity. With this, the church decided against Arius, one of the priests in Alexandria (cf. González 2010:186–191), that Jesus was the true Son of God, ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ [of the same nature and/or substance as the Father, Nicene Creed 325] – that was ontological subordination (McCormick 2016:9). This was in fact against the Semi-Arianism who declared Jesus to be ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ [similar in nature and/or substance], but not identical to the Father (Erickson 2009:16; cf. Mullins 2020:89).² In 451, the Council of Chalcedon announced the official position taken by the church, namely that all the Persons in the Trinity are divine with the same essence or *essentia* [consubstantial], constituting only one God without any ontological hierarchy (cf. Pawl 2020:115; Rios 2020:14).³ In a sense, this concluded a long debate about the Trinity, but it was also the beginning of a new debate that will not be concluded before Jesus’ second coming, about ‘[p]recisely how these three were to be understood in their relation to one another’ (Erickson 2009:16).

Bilezikian (1997:58) points out that the debate is actually narrowed to the relationship between the Father and the Son, as the Holy Spirit is never dealt with extensively (cf. also Erickson 2017:8).⁴ He then adds that the ‘vulnerable point’ left by the Creeds and Councils, is that Jesus’ incarnation brought

1. Currently there is much interest in theology towards the ecumenical councils, especially from an analytical point of view. The journal *TheoLogica* has devoted its entire last 2020 publication, that is volume 4 number 2, to ‘Conciliar Trinitarianism’, comprising 11 articles, of which I will be using some in this article.

2. This view is still held by the Jehovah’s Witnesses today (cf. Erickson 2009:16).

3. Mullins (2020:90) derives that to share the same *essentia*, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have to be ‘extensively and intensively equal to each other, and extensively and intensively superior to all other beings [this is the] minimum homoousios’.

4. Because the Holy Spirit is many times regarded as an ‘add-on’, many scholars do not formulate exactly when referring to him. Bilezikian, an anti-EFS scholar who is very strict on the equality of the three Persons of the Trinity, ‘accidentally’ states: ‘The Father gives everything he has to the Son, the Son gives everything he is to the Father, and the Spirit serves both in everything’ (Bilezikian 1997:67). Is this an EFS of the Holy Spirit? However, Cyril of Alexandria gave the Holy Spirit much scope in *inter alia* his Third Letter to Nestorius par. 14, where he stated: ‘For even though the Spirit exits in His Own Person [hypostasis], and is conceived of by Himself, inasmuch as He is the Spirit and not the Son, yet is He not therefore alien from Him; for He is called the Spirit of truth (Jn 15:26)’ (Union 2021; cf. Early Church Texts n.d.).

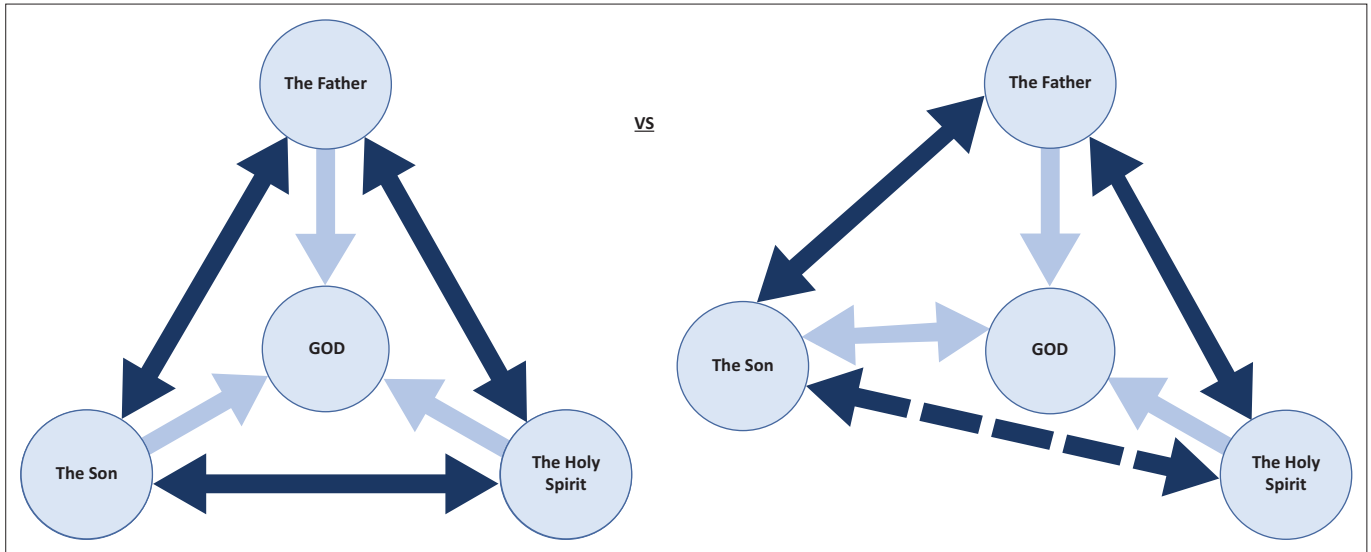


FIGURE 1: Personal archive (cf. Tinkham 2018).

about a ‘radical disruption ... within the Trinity in relation to human history’ (Bilezikian 1997:58). The disruption lies in the fact that Jesus became a human ‘for us men [sic], and for our salvation’ (Nicene Creed 325), which ‘was accomplished at infinite cost for God and that it required an unprecedented and unrepeatable dislocation within the Trinity [as] God in Christ became man’ (Bilezikian 1997:58). Again, this ‘disruption’ only affects the Father and the Son. This is the heart of the new debate as well. This is one point that should be criticised, being applicable for both sides, which is that the role of the Holy Spirit is constantly side-lined. The Holy Spirit is on many occasions incorrectly regarded as an add-on to the ‘actual’ two Persons of the Trinity.

The new debate

The ‘new debate’ that has started on the Trinity, goes back to the last part of the previous century, with the two opposing sides (initially mostly in evangelical circles) who agree on most aspects on the doctrine of the Trinity, like the ‘supreme authority, divine inspiration, and the inerrancy of the Bible [as well as] the full deity of Christ, his bodily resurrection and second coming, and salvation by grace’ (Erickson 2009:17). Both sides believe in the Triune God, consisting of three persons, equal in essence, but they differ on the relative authority of the three persons (cf. Pawl 2020:104). The EFS side argues that the Father is eternally the supreme member with the highest authority, while the Son and the Holy Spirit are eternally subordinate to the Father, without stating much about the specific position of the Holy Spirit (Shank 2020:1–3 of 13 pages). This is portrayed in Figure 1.

With reference to the *ontological* Trinity, there is therefore no difference between the two sides, but when it comes to the *economic* Trinity, they [mainly] differ on this one point of eternal authority of the Father. Erickson (2009:17–18, 2017:9) refers to this (EFS) view⁵ as the gradational/hierarchical,

5.The entire debate of the subordination of women to men is ignored in this article, as that is a debate on its own. I agree with Giles (2017:3) that ‘the doctrine of the Trinity has absolutely nothing to say about the relationship of the sexes’.

complementarian view, while he calls the other side’s view the equivalence and/or egalitarian, complementarian view with an equality in authority (cf. Furey 2020). As the views of the EFS were discussed in the previous article, the focus in this article will be on the views of the anti-EFS proponents.

The anti-EFS position: A selected literature overview

When debating about the Trinity, it is important to start with the Bible. However, the Bible does not use the term ‘Trinity’, nor does it supply its reader with a definition or analogy of the term because when the Bible was written, there was no doctrine of the Trinity available (cf. Holmes 2017:92).⁶ With this as background, we take a look at the scholars who oppose the EFS standpoint. In order to give more structure to the discussion, the views of the main anti-EFS proponents will be dealt with under certain themes. Generally, the view of the EFS is given first, followed by the responses of the anti-EFS scholars. It is inevitable that the different section heads are not fully demarcated and that the themes will overlap to some extent.

Persons and roles of the Trinity

Whereas the EFS and the mainline Protestants agree on the ontological and/or immanent Trinity, they have a different view when it comes to the authority inside the economic and/or functional Trinity. According to the EFS, the Father has the authority, while the Son (including the Holy Spirit) has to comply with it: ‘[T]he Father wills to send, the Son submits and comes, and the Spirit willingly empowers’ (Ware 2007:160).

6.Grudem (an EFS scholar) makes a valid point by stating that ‘no analogy adequately teaches about the Trinity [since] all are misleading in significant ways’ (Grudem 1994:240–241). The closest that we can get to a definition is to say that God is one, whereas the Father is ‘unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, [and that] the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. [There is therefore] a *taxis*, an order, in the eternal divine life’ (Holmes 2017:103; Pawl 2020:105). In the economic Trinity we may distinguish an order with the Father first, followed by the Son and the Holy Spirit, but without any subordination, submission, authority, or division.

Grudem (EFS) refers to the roles of the Persons, arguing that when one Person is active, then the whole being of God is only present to some extent (Grudem 2015:24). Erickson (2017:10) interprets Grudem that there are actions that are allocated to specific Persons, which in fact exclude the other two. Every Person therefore has his own role to fulfil. According to Bilezikian (1997:67), who is also anti-EFS, the Persons in the Trinity do not have separate roles or functions, but they are doing everything together, *although* in every function, another Person takes the lead:

The Father is at the forefront of the work of creation, but both the *Logos*/Son and the Spirit are present and involved with the Father in creation. The Son is at the forefront of the work of redemption, but both the Father and the Spirit are present and involved with the Son in redemption. The Spirit is at the forefront of the work of sanctification, but both the Father and the Son are present and involved with the Spirit in the work of sanctification. (Bilezikian 1997:67)

This is in contrast with what Thomas Aquinas, in his *Summa Theologica* question 28, article 3, objection 1, claimed: *Videtur quòd relationes quae sunt in Deo, realiter ab invicem non distinguuntur. Quae cumque enim uni et eidem sunt eadem, sibi invicem sunt eadem. Sed omnis relation in Deo existens est idem secundum rem cum divinâ essentiâ. Ergo relations secundum rem ab invicem non distinguuntur* (Fathers of the English Dominican Province n.d.; Migne 1862:861). [It would seem that the divine relations are not really distinguished from each other. For things which are identified with the same, are identified with each other. But every relation in God is really the same as the divine essence. Therefore the relations are not really distinguished from each other]. Bilezikian, although anti-EFS, is therefore not totally in line with Aquinas.

Whereas the EFS finds a line of authority within the Trinity, the anti-EFS scholars mostly argue in line with the Creeds that there is no authority of one person over the others inside the Trinity. The viewpoint of the EFS comes close to that of Tertullian. Being an ante-Nicene Church Father, the 'theology' in his treatise *Adversus Praxeam* (AP) seemingly agrees with that of the EFS. We read in AP3 that Tertullian likened God's authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Roman Empire where there was a delegation of authority to both a second and a third person, but that this arrangement did not divide the empire because the delegated authority 'derives from one and reverts again to the one [which means that] the Father is the sole ἀρχή or origin of the Being of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (Evans 2019:9). This is confirmed in AP8 where Tertullian used an oracle, stating: *Protulit enim Deus Sermonem ... sicut radix fruticem, et fons fluvium, et sol radium. Nam et istae species probolae sunt earum substantiarum, ex quibus prodeunt ... Omne quod prodit ex aliquo, secundum sit ejus necesse est de quo prodit, non ideo tamen est separatum* [For God sent forth the Word ... just as the root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river, and the sun the ray. For these are προβολαί, or emanations, of the substances from which they proceed. Everything which proceeds from something else must needs be second to that from which it proceeds, without being on that account separated] (Migne 1844:163;

ed. Schaff 1885a:1349). These words are indicating that Tertullian advocated a hierarchical system within the Trinity. However, as these are ante-Nicene words, not fully in line with the Creeds, it must be read within its context. If we look at AP2, Tertullian claimed that the Godhead is of *unius autem substantiae, et unius status, et unius potestatis* [one substance, and of one condition, and of one power]. Tertullian's *Apology* 21 adds to this: *Hunc ex deo prolatum didicimus, et prolatione generatum, et iccirco filium dei et deum dictum ex unitate substantiae* (He [Jesus] proceeds forth from God, and in that procession He is generated; so that He is the Son of God, and is called God from unity of substance with God –ed. Schaff 1885a:61; Woodham 1843:74). Within the context, Tertullian could therefore be understood in two ways, an EFS way and an anti-EFS way. However, within the corpus of his writings, it looks as if he was more *egalitarian* (anti-EFS).

Supremacy and submission

Grudem (EFS) states that the anti-EFS scholars regard the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as one with the same attributes, being, and essence – therefore with no difference between them eternally, which implies that one should refer to them as person A, person A, person A (Grudem 1994:433). Erickson (2017:10) argues that Grudem (with Ware included) regards 'eternal functional subordination [as] essential to the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity'. He adds that the two scholars imply that to differentiate between the Persons, it is essential to assign different roles to each of them, with a superiority of one Person over the other included. The problem with this premise is that it qualitatively distinguishes the Son from the Father (Erickson 2017:10). The difference between Grudem and Erickson in this case is that the former equates Jesus' ontological equality to the Father with his economical subordination that he experienced while being on earth.

Erickson (2017:9–10) then refers to Grudem and Ware, who argue that the 'Father has an essential attribute that the Son does not have' (i.e. supremacy), while this is the same with the Son (submission). They regard it as part of the economic Trinity. Erickson, however, claims that these essential attributes are part of the essence of a subject. As the two EFS scholars refer to God's one essence, Erickson picks a discrepancy here (cf. Erickson 2017:9–10): The 'view of eternal and necessary subordination of authority logically implies subordination of essence' (Erickson 2017:10). Whereas Grudem and Ware reject that, Erickson 'logically' concludes that there is therefore no subordination of the Son.

Jesus' incarnation: Submission ('Obedience'), subordination⁷ ('Hierarchy') or (self-)humiliation?

Grudem (1991:457) holds that the Son is in eternal functional subordination to the Father. Whereas the EFS regards Jesus'

7. The view on subordination held by the Seventh-day Adventists is not discussed in this article as it is outside the scope of the article (cf. Gibbs 2017). Note is taken of the fact that there are some Adventist theologians who are embracing the EFS thoughts with relation to gender issues within the church (ASTR 2013–2014; Hausted 2017:11, 19 [specifically fn. 40]; Maxwell 2016).

incarnation as an obedient deed done by Jesus in submission, Erickson (2009:18; cf. Hausted 2017:12) argues for a 'temporary functional subordination' of the Son and Holy Spirit, which will go on to the second coming of Jesus.⁸ He refers to the passages in the Bible where Jesus, during his incarnation, asserted that *the Father is greater than I* (Jn 14:28); *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me* (Jn 6:38; cf. 14:31); and *By myself I can do nothing ... for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me* (Jn 5:30), indicating a (total) submission and obedience to the Father. However, Jesus still was fully God, calling God his own Father, *making himself equal with God* (Jn 5:18) and having [a]ll authority in heaven and on earth (Mt 28:18) (cf. also Mullins 2021a).

The view of Bilezikian (1997:65) differs from that of Erickson on this point. He elaborates quite extensively on this, claiming that although Jesus' incarnation constituted a complete humiliation for him, his divine nature was never affected (Bilezikian 1997:58). Against the EFS, he disagrees with the subordination of the Son during his incarnation, stating harshly, 'To extend the subordination of the Son into Christ's pre-existence to a time prior to creation and to the incarnation comes dangerously close to Arianism' (Bilezikian 1997:66; cf. Mullins 2020:88, 2021a). Bilezikian (1997:60) argues that Jesus' *kenosis* did not have any effect on his status or essence. Jesus' humiliation was not an order of the Father, but *he humbled himself* (Phlp 2:8). It was therefore *self-humiliation and not subordination* (contra the different views of both Erickson and the EFS), and it was temporary (against the EFS), not eternal. Furthermore, his humiliation pertained to his mission on earth, with no effect on his eternal being. *In line with* Chafer (1993:316), Bilezikian (1997:62) also regards the terms 'Father' and 'Son' as 'anthropomorphic labels', but (against Chafer)⁹ with no permanent effect on the equality within the Trinity.¹⁰ The Son has therefore only temporarily surrendered his functional equality (Bilezikian 1997:63) while he still remained equal to the Father. After his incarnation, the Son will share the throne with his Father (Rv 3:21; 7:17; 22:3), picturing a total ontological equality between them. Bilezikian admits that Jesus made himself less than the Father to accomplish his mission – he made himself a servant for both the Father and humans (Bilezikian 1997:67). However, he argues that Jesus humiliated himself pertaining to his mission on earth, and not to the Father.

Even when the Son 'made himself a servant' to the Father and humankind, he claimed that *it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work* (Jn 14:10; cf. Bilezikian 1997:67), interestingly without mentioning the Holy Spirit. This brings Bilezikian

8. Almost a decade later, Erickson (2017:8) still has the same opinion. In this regard he refers to the EFS as 'hierarchical complementarian' and to the mainline Protestant churches as 'egalitarian complementarian', defining the difference as follows: 'The two positions do not really differ on whether the first person and the second person perform differing [or] complementary roles, but on whether the complementation is horizontal or vertical' (Erickson 2017:9).

9. Chafer (1993:316) states that these labels refer to an eternal 'functional subordination' within the Trinity, with reference to the creation and redemption.

10. On this point, Erickson (2017:10) asks quite rightly that, if the terms 'Father' and 'Son' are anthropomorphic terms, to what extent are they anthropomorphic?

(1997:68) to the (once again harsh) conclusion that 'any talk about Christ's functional subordination to the Father runs the risk of collapsing into nonsense'. Bilezikian is therefore against the concept of any (temporary) subordination of the Son, while Erickson supports it. Bilezikian believes that there was no subordination: Jesus just humbled himself (Bilezikian 1997:68).

Both these arguments of Bilezikian and Erickson are not fully supported by the Creeds, although they are both anti-EFS. Nowhere in the Creeds do we learn about a temporal submission or a humbling of Jesus. In this regard, they are therefore just as far from the Creeds as the EFS. The Creeds teach us that Jesus came to earth 'for our salvation' (Chalcedonian Creed 451; Nicene Creed 325), and that he was only inferior to the Father regarding his manhood (Athanasian Creed n.d.). In all three the Creeds, Jesus stayed equal to his Father during his incarnation (extensively elaborated on by the Athanasian Creed n.d.).

Jesus' ('Temporal') subordination

Grudem (1991:440) agrees to the ontological equality between the Son and the Father, but on the economical side he claims an eternal state of functional subordination for the Son (cf. Hausted 2017:13, 17). According to Bilezikian, the 'fallacy in this dichotomy [is that] because the attribute of eternity inheres in the divine essence, any reality that is eternal is by necessity ontologically grounded. Eternity is a quality of existence. Therefore, if Christ's subordination is eternal, as both Grudem and Letham [cf. below] claim, it is also ontological' (Bilezikian 1997:64). Letham (EFS) must have detected this 'fallacy' (even before Bilezikian) and therefore he refers to an order in both the economy of redemption and the eternal ontological relation between the Father and the Son (Letham 1990:68). He claims that '[t]his functional hierarchy is indicative of the ontological hierarchy that exists eternally within the Trinity' (Bilezikian 1997:64), marking a definite relation of authority. Letham expresses himself more clearly when he argues that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in unity as one God, yet this unity depicts itself in the form of subsistence (Letham 1990:73). This lies bare the flaw and/or fallacy in the theory of the EFS: On the ontological side, God is a unity, one, equal, but on the functional and/or economic side there is a hierarchy. The Son is therefore at once equal to the Father and subordinate to him. Here Bilezikian (1997:65) argues, based on his theory as discussed above, that he does not take Jesus' temporary subordination to the Father in consideration. He therefore (and incorrectly) claims that '[n]owhere in Scripture ... does the Father exercise "authority" over the Son, nor is the Son said to "obey the Father"'. Verses like John 6:38 and 14:31, already noticed above, are clear witnesses to the contrary – with regard to the earthly Jesus. Here, maybe without exactly knowing what his statement means, Letham claims correctly: 'Such is clear in the incarnate life of our Lord' (Letham 1990:73). Bilezikian (1997:65) refers to these and other verses as 'Christ's self-subjection in relation to the accomplishment of his redemptive ministry'.

Grudem (1994:251) claims that the eternal *role subordination* of the Son was the doctrine of the church as from the Council of Nicaea in 325.¹¹ Giles opposes Grudem, arguing that Knight (1977) was the person who first referred to the ‘role subordination’ of the Son (Giles 2017:6). Many scholars before Knight have already indicated Jesus’ subordination to the Father, but not his role subordination. Giles (2017:6) opts for a threefold way in which the Nicene Creed excluded the eternal subordination of the Son:

- *Relationally* the Father and Son rule together, being one God.
- *Temporally* we find the eternal generation of the Son, while both the Son and the Father are ‘true God from true God’.
- *Ontologically* the Father and Son are *one in being*.

As stated under the previous heading, the Creeds do not advocate a (temporal) subordination of the Son, not even when he was incarnated.

‘Only begotten’ son of God

Most English and Afrikaans translations of the Nicene Creed translate *μονογενής* with [begotten] (Afrikaans: *eniggebore*) – a term that could imply that the Father was first, and then his Son was born, indicating a possible hierarchy or supremacy. It looks obvious that EFS proponents would grab the translation as ‘begotten’ to indicate an eternal submission of the Son. After upholding the full deity of the Son, who was, according to the Nicene Creed (325), eternally ‘begotten of the Father before all worlds’, Grudem (as well as Ware and Strachan) understands the term ‘begotten of the Father’ as referring to an ‘eternal Father-Son relationship in the Trinity that includes no superiority or inferiority of being or essence’ (Grudem 2016; original emphasis), but then also links to it, ‘the eternal authority of the Father and the eternal submission of the Son within their relationship’.

Giles refers to the Nicene Creed as the ‘most authoritative interpretation of what scripture teaches on the Father-Son relationship’ (Giles 2017:4; original emphasis). He (Giles 2017:4) correctly states that *μονογενής* should be translated with ‘only’ or ‘unique’ (constantly translated by the NIV as ‘one and only’ – cf. Jn 1:14, 18 etc.). He also links it to 1 Corinthians 8:6, which is a reference to the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 (emphasis added): [Y]et for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. With this he concludes that ‘Jesus Christ [is] Yahweh, omnipotent God’ (Giles 2017:4). This sounds good, but what he has ignored, is that the prepositions that are translated with ‘through’ in this verse differ with respect to the Father and the Son: *ἐκ* [through and/or out of] the Father, and *διὰ* [through] the Son. The question is, why? This is something that Berkhof has already

picked up in 1953 (Berkhof 1953:88–89), which prompted him to indicate a hierarchy of the Father. However, with the term *μονογενής* in the back of our heads, we may conclude that Paul depicted the Father as the source, who is working through his Son with the creation – no hierarchy, just different roles related to the economic Trinity.

Giles indicates that Jesus’ Sonship is not like that of humans, but that the title ‘Son of God’ indicates his kingly status, ‘NOT [*sic*] his subordinal status’ (Giles 2017:5). He does not recognise the terms ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ as anthropomorphic labels such as Bilezikian (1997:62; cf. Chafer 1993:316). Instead, he has a long argument on the eternal generation of the Son – which he accepts – but indicates that the Son is ‘in no way less than, inferior to, eternally subordinated to, or submissive to the Father’ (Giles 2017:5).

Giles then discusses the verb *γεννάω*,¹² claiming that this can in no way refer to an eternal subordination, which he calls ‘perverse’ (Giles 2017:5). Although the verb indicates an inferiority in itself, Giles rather refers to the eternal generation of the Son, pointing at the Son being equal to the Father. He therefore also regards this verb as part of the anthropomorphic labels discussed above. With reference to the term *ὁμοούσιος* in the phrase *ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ* (used in the Nicene Creed but not in the Bible), Giles argues that it excludes any form of (eternal) subordination to the Father (Giles 2017:6) – they are one in being. The Son is therefore not the one who created (although Jn 1:3 states it so definitely; cf. also Ware 2008:49), but he is the ‘co-creator’ or ‘subordinate creator’ and not the ‘active agent’ as Grudem (1994:266) argues at the hand of Hebrews 1:2. Giles interprets Philippians 2:6–8¹³ as a ‘willing and self-chosen subordination and subjection of the Son for our salvation’ (Giles 2017:6; original emphasis) – in line with Bilezikian. However, *contra* Bilezikian, he refers to Jesus’ ‘subordination and obedience’ during his incarnation, and ‘the self-emptied God, the *kenotic* God’ (Giles 2017:6).

On this point, the debate is still very much alive because both the terms *μονογενής* and *γεννάω* could point to some kind of subordination. This results in scholars who are on the same side, both arguing against the EFS, differing from each other.

The will of God

Eternal functional subordination proponents such as Ovey (2016:110) argue that Jesus submitted to the will of the Father. Ovey regards ‘will’ as a property of a person or *hypostasis*. House (2012:164) puts it in another way, stating that ‘[e]ven though the Father, Son and Spirit share the same will of the divine being, the way in which they express that will cannot

12. The possible ways in which this verb can be translated, are given by Louw and Nida (1988:50), referring, therefore, to parents and a child:

- beget
- give birth
- be born of
- cause to happen

13. Philippians 2:6–8: ([Jesus Christ], who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!).

11. Butner (2019a), however, argues that the EFS proponents (such as Grudem) argue that they are pro-Nicene, just because they are supporting *homoousios*. However, *homoousios* is connected to one Divine will, which is not supported by EFS scholars. The EFS proponents are therefore not only pro-Nicene but also not Arian.

be identical'. Although this in fact portrays the same divine will, House's intention is to indicate that the Father has the authority in this 'shared' will. Horrell (2012:356), however, argues that the Father and the Son are not free to differ from each other, while Letham (2008:344) claims that if the Son did not have a free will, then he would not be able to willingly (freely) submit to the Father.

According to the doctrine of perichoresis – called a 'novel application of perichoresis' by Butner (2015:148) – the Trinity has three wills but they are living in such close harmony that they always have a consensus on everything. It is therefore three different wills acting in complete unity (cf. Erickson 2009:216–217). This is in fact only another way to put the words of Gregory of Nazianzus (and John of Damascus – where the theory of perichoresis originated) who averred that God has only one will (cf. Gifford 2011:18–19). In his *Oratio 30, Theologica 4.12*, Gregory of Nazianzus refers to the (interpreted) words of the Son: Οὐχ ἵνα ποιῶ τὸ θέλημα τὸ ἐμὸν· οὐδὲ γάρ ἐστι τὸ ἐμὸν τοῦ σοῦ κερωρισμένον, ἀλλὰ τὸ κοινὸν ἐμοῦ τε καὶ σοῦ, ὧν ὡς μία θεότης, οὕτω καὶ βούλησις [‘not to do Mine own Will, for there is none of Mine apart from, but that which is common to, Me and Thee; for as We have one Godhead, so We have one Will’] (Migne 1857:120; ed. Schaff 1885b:632; cf. Migne 1853).

Butner, however, accuses the EFS of tritheism (Butner 2015:132). The EFS replaces and/or supplements terms such as 'unbegotten' and 'begotten' with 'authority' and 'submission', ending up in a 'polytheistic homoiousianism', giving the Father and the Son distinct natures, while both of them are still divine. They then add dyothelitism,¹⁴ meaning that Jesus had two distinct wills, namely a divine and a human will. This goes back to the Chalcedonian Christology, which argued that Jesus had two natures but only one *hypostasis* (cf. Chalcedonian Creed 451), and because 'will' is a property of nature, Jesus had two wills. In the term 'submission' (however not found in the Chalcedonian Creed) lies the implication of one will yielding to another, thus two wills.¹⁵ Over against this, are the terms 'unbegotten' and 'begotten', referring to the divine *taxis* of the Trinity and in fact to one will (Butner 2015:133): Butner (2015:149) argues that because the Trinity has only one nature, there can only be one will, referring to the dyothelitism¹⁶ that suggests that a will is a property of nature.

Butner's argument can be traced back to Basil of Caesarea, who stated in his *De Spiritu Sancto* 8.21 that the Father and the Son have an identical will: ... ἀλλὰ τὸ ἡνωμένον τοῦ θελήματος παριστᾷ (... but indicates the unity of the will [between the Father and the Son] – Migne 1857:103; ed. Schaff 1885c:170). Butner therefore regards 'will' as a 'property of nature, which

14. See Butner (2015:133–142) for an elaborated discussion on this term.

15. This viewpoint is also held by some *egalitarians* such as Mullins (2021b). He argues that, according to the Bible, Jesus had two wills. With James 1:13 (*For God cannot be tempted by evil*) in his mind, he argues that Jesus was born as a holy Person (Lk 1:35) – although being a human – with a sinless nature and therefore with a sinless human will other than his divine will (cf. Mullins 2021b).

16. In fact, he has taken the words of dyothelitism and used it against them.

is *singular* in God' (Butner 2019b; original emphasis). Basil used 'substance', 'nature' and 'essence' to refer to the unity of the Trinity, and 'hypostasis' to refer to the diversity¹⁷ – leading to the first Council of Constantinople (381 CE) where the church decided that 'God is one being and three hypostases' (Butner 2019b). Butner correctly interprets it that for Basil, 'substance', 'nature', and 'essence' included 'will' – meaning that it is a property of nature.

Is there really a big difference between the two sides?

With the main thrust of the EFS being the subordination of the Son, there is, however, more to this 'superficial' difference from the mainline Protestant churches. Erickson detects the real 'problem', arguing:

The problem is this: If authority over the Son is an essential, not an accidental, attribute of the Father, and subordination to the Father is an essential, not an accidental, attribute of the Son, then something significant follows. Authority is part of the Father's essence, and subordination is part of the Son's essence, and each attribute is not part of the essence of the other person. That means that the essence of the Son is different from the essence of the Father ... That is equivalent to saying that they are not *homoousios* with one another (Erickson 2009:172).

Erickson adds another concern: Although the differences between the mainline Protestants and the EFS are seemingly small, it can lead to interpretations that are detrimental for the growth of the body of Christ on earth. Think of the question: To whom should we pray? Ware (EFS) believes that we should only pray to the Father because he regards the Father as supreme (Ware 2005:18). Erickson contradicts this by saying that there are passages in the NT where people prayed to Jesus (which are in fact not totally true). His examples are as follows:

- Acts 7:59–60: These were Stephan's last words and could easily be regarded not to be a prayer.
- 2 Corinthians 12:8–9: Here Paul is not very explicit to whom he is praying – it could be to either the Father or the Son. Further, he uses the verb *παρακαλέω* which can be translated with many English terms, but hardly with 'pray'.
- Revelation 22:20: This is more a sigh or a wish than a prayer for Jesus to come soon.

The author thinks he means think he means to say that because the persons in the Trinity are equal (cf. Mullins 2021c), we are allowed to pray to anyone of them.

Another example given by Erickson (2009:21) is about praise and worship. To whom should we praise and worship? Is it only *to* the Father, *through* the Son, and *in* the power of the

17. In Basil's *Dogmatic on John 15:1* and *Homiletic 19* respectively, he stated: (Schaff 1885c:66, 125) '[M]an is not of one substance with Christ, Who is God (for man is not God), but Christ is of one substance with God (for He is God) therefore God is not the head of Christ in the same sense as Christ is the head of man. The natures of the creature and the creative Godhead do not exactly coincide', and 'In the hypostasis of Son understand the Father's Form, that you may hold the exact doctrine of this Image – that you may understand consistently with true religion the words, "I am in the Father and the Father in me"'.¹⁷

Holy Spirit, as Horrell (2007:47-48) and Ware (2005:18) suggest? Then most of the evangelical praise and worship songs should be banned, as they are mostly focused on Jesus. Have the proponents of EFS thought about that?

Although the differences are therefore not big between the two movements, the *consequences* of the views of the EFS are bigger than it looks like on the surface.

Interpreting an interpretation: Where do we end up with this?

When talking about God, we must talk in humility and with great respect. It always reminds me of Jesus, when John approached him and said (Lk 9:49; emphasis added): ‘*Master, we saw someone driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us*’. Without hesitation Jesus rebuked him with these words (Lk 9:50): ‘*Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you*’. In more than one article I have already cautioned that the people whom we many times regard as ‘heretics’, are mostly committed Christians, but with a different (distorted?) view from ours (cf. Oliver & Oliver 2018:3 of 12). Instead of using articulations such as ‘ETS¹⁸ members ... must reject what Dr. Grudem and Dr. Ware teach on the Trinity’ (Giles 2017:6) as if we have spoken the last word about the Trinity, it is best to rather start a worldwide debate about the Trinity and put our diverted views on the table. As devoted Christians, we can learn a lot from each other – especially when our views differ from each other – and be able to reach a far better understanding of each other, but most of all, of the Trinity.

Criticism like that of Giles (above) is referred to as ‘misdirected criticism’ by Erickson (2017:11), although Erickson does not refer to Giles when he notes this, but to Grudem. In that context, Erickson and Grudem are in fact (intentionally?) misunderstanding each other. While Erickson argues that ‘Son of God’ is not the most frequent use in the Bible with reference to Jesus, Grudem asks whether something is only true if it is used most frequently (Grudem 2012:325). Then Erickson falls in the same trap by stating that Grudem overemphasises the term ‘Son of God’, while this is what the argument is actually all about – the Father and the Son!

More harsh criticism from the anti-EFS group of scholars come from Erickson (2009:172) who claims that the theologians who are in favour of the EFS are anti-Nicene – Arian. Giles (2006:306–309) argues in the same vein, but is a little more cautious, stating that this hierarchical view *can lead to Arianism*. Holmes anathematizes the EFS followers by wrongfully averring that there is ‘no possible space for EFS ... in classical trinitarianism’ (Holmes 2017:91). Although the EFS is not absolutely correct, there is definitely a place for them in the Trinitarian debate.

After everything has been said and done, looking at the EFS and the anti-EFS scholars, brought me to the wise words of

18. Evangelical Theological Society.

Giles, referred to at the heading of this article. Still, we keep on arguing about God, believing that *my* view is closest to reality, to the truth. With these kinds of words and phrases, we keep on being, like Paul said, acting like fools (2 Cor 11:1, 21b), just to make our voice heard. Does that mean that we must stop talking about everything in theology, especially the Trinity? That would be a grave mistake – but we should start talking in a constructive way *with* each other and learn *from* each other in order to come closer to the TRUTH (cf. 1 Cor 3:18).

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