

THE ONE WHO IS SENT AND CAN DO NOTHING ON HIS OWN:  
MUST THE SON OF GOD BE ETERNALLY OBEDIENT?

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Christian theologians have long held that the incarnation and life of Jesus Christ reveal something of the eternal relationships existing within the Godhead between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. However, in recent years, many theologians have specifically identified the obedience demonstrated by Jesus Christ as a key factor in understanding these relationships. Karl Barth, the fountainhead of this idea, argued that the humility and obedience of Christ point to a prior capacity for humility and obedience within the Godhead.<sup>1</sup> As Scott Swain and Michael Allen have noted, this increasingly common trend to understand the obedience of Jesus Christ as indicative of the Son's eternal mode of subsistence within the Godhead is usually accompanied by significant revisions to traditional Trinitarian metaphysics.<sup>2</sup> However, many theologians, including Swain and Allen, believe that such metaphysical revisions are unnecessary, and that it is possible to hold to a form of the eternal obedience of the Son while affirming the Church's historic Trinitarian teaching.

The purpose of this essay is to examine the rationale for this turn to the eternal obedience hypothesis, specifically as it has been presented by theologians eager to operate within the Church's historic Trinitarian and Christological.<sup>3</sup> Swain and Allen's strategy to avoid revising traditional Trinitarian metaphysics while holding to a kind of eternal obedience is to

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<sup>1</sup> See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 192–210.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Allen and Scott Swain, "The Obedience of the Eternal Son," *IJST* 15.2 (2013): 115.

<sup>3</sup> I do not deal, for instance, with kenotic Christologies, even those which purport to operate within the boundaries set by the ecumenical creeds, because even such kenotic theories are explicitly based on redefinition or re-imagining of the meaning of the creeds and classical theological formulation in order to allow space for kenotic theories. See C. Stephen Evans, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2010).

appeal to resources within the theological tradition, specifically in its Thomistic development, to modify Barth's understanding of obedience.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Joseph White follows a similar strategy, offering a Thomistic re-interpretation of Barth's proposal that "permits an interpretation of his theology more consistent with the classical Christological tradition."<sup>5</sup> Rather than follow these theologians to see if the project is *possible*, I am interested in seeing if it is *necessary*. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not to refute the eternal obedience project as a whole, but rather, to examine some of the major arguments for why it is necessary and evaluate them by comparing them to the way some patristic writers answered some of the same questions.

Accordingly, this paper follows a straightforward path. In the first section, I briefly outline two different takes on the eternal obedience doctrine, noting where they differ, and more importantly for the purposes of this paper, where they align. In the following section, I examine some of the central biblical arguments set forth in support of the eternal obedience doctrine, comparing them with the understanding of a selection of patristic authors, especially Augustine. In the third section, I discuss an important theological argument for the doctrine of eternal obedience and argue that it is not definitive in establishing its necessity. In conclusion, I will briefly outline some potential reasons to avoid the eternal obedience position and the benefits of maintaining the classical position that obedience is rendered by the Son through his human nature alone.

### **Two perspectives on Eternal Obedience within traditional Trinitarianism**

It is possible to distinguish two major positions that develop an understanding of the Son's eternal obedience while self-consciously attempting to remain within the bounds of

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<sup>4</sup> Allen and Swain, "The Obedience of the Eternal Son," 117.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Joseph White, *Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 281 It is not clear to me if White *advocates* for such a theological position, or if he is simply acknowledging that it is a possible way of understanding the data if one should feel compelled to follow Barth.

traditional Trinitarian categories. The first of these is known by a variety of acronyms, including ERAS (Eternal Relationship of Authority and Subordination), ESS (Eternal Subordination of the Son), and the one I will use throughout this paper, EFS (Eternal Functional Subordination).

While the Arians of old claimed that the Son's obedience implied a lesser, created nature, EFS theologians avoid this heresy by locating obedience in the relationship between the members of the Godhead. They argue that a relationship of authority and obedience does not entail an essential difference between Father, Son, and Spirit, but is instead a description of how God eternally relates to himself. The subordination is not ontological, as the Arians proposed, but "functional." Bruce Ware, a leading proponent of this view, writes that the relationship between the Father and Son is one "in which an inherent and eternal authority and submission structure exists" and this relationship is the basis for distinguishing between the persons of the Godhead.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Wayne Grudem goes so far as to say denying the difference in authority between the members of the Trinity would leave us in a position where, "we would not know of any differences at all, and it would be unclear whether there are any differences among the persons of the Trinity."<sup>7</sup> Ware and Grudem are not merely contending that Jesus Christ obeys God the Father as a result of his incarnation; such a position is hardly controversial. Instead, EFS proponents argue that an eternal relationship of submission and authority is what we are meant to understand when the Bible describes the relationship between Father and Son, and is the primary way of distinguishing between them.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, they argue that Christ's earthly submission

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce A. Ware, "Christ's Atonement: A Work of the Trinity," in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Dieter Issler (Nashville, Tenn: B&H Academic, 2007), 160.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 433.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g. Michael J. Ovey, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility*, Latimer Studies 83 (London: Latimer Trust, 2016), 2; Bruce A. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?: Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 16; Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 415–29 Grudem in particular evidences much confusion about the doctrine of eternal generation in the cited section, apparently considering it another way of speaking of Eternal Functional Subordination.

is a fitting continuation of the submissive relationship he has to the Father before the incarnation. They feel compelled to make this move because, as Grudem writes, “the testimony of Scripture is clear that the Son consistently, throughout eternity, submits to the authority of the Father.”<sup>9</sup>

The second position has no useful acronyms yet. The theologians here are wary of EFS on the basis that it seems to entail a social trinitarian view of multiple wills within the Godhead and a rejection of eternal generation.<sup>10, 11</sup> Instead of appealing to an inherent hierarchical structure of authority within the Godhead, theologians like Robert Letham, Scott Swain, Michael Allen, and Thomas Joseph White speak of the obedience of the Son as the fitting reflection of his mode of subsistence within the Godhead, as the one who proceeds from the Father through eternal generation. Just as the Son has his eternal being from the Father without beginning, so he relates to the divine will as one who has it *from* the Father.<sup>12</sup> As White explains, this view avoids attributing multiple wills or obedience to God in his divine nature, but “predicates obedience to the pre-incarnate Word uniquely in a figurative sense, as denoting

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<sup>9</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity,” in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 20.

<sup>10</sup> e.g. Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 115; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 399; Kyle Claunch, “God Is the Head of Christ: Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 Ground Gender Complementarity in the Immanent Trinity?,” in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 88.

<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that both Ware and Grudem now explicitly affirm eternal generation, reject any form of social trinitarianism, and affirm the singularity of God’s will. This clearly indicates a desire to operate within the bounds of traditional Trinitarian orthodoxy. However, these affirmations and denials have not yet been accompanied by any significant changes in their overall theological programme or revision of their previous work. Thus, it remains to be seen if EFS as such can be successfully integrated with these affirmations. See Wayne Grudem, “Why a Denial of the Son’s Eternal Submission Threatens Both the Trinity and the Bible” (presented at the Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 15, 2016), <http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ETS-Presentation-on-Trinity-11-15-16.pdf>; Bruce A. Ware, “Knowing the Self-Revealed God Who Is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – Guest Post by Bruce Ware,” *Biblical Reasoning*, July 4, 2016, <https://secundumsripturas.com/2016/07/04/knowing-the-self-revealed-god-who-is-father-son-and-holy-spirit/>.

<sup>12</sup> See for e.g. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 389–404; Robert Letham, “Reply to Kevin Giles,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 80.4 (2008): 339; Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son”; White, *Incarinate Lord*; Thomas Joseph White, “Intra-Trinitarian Obedience and Nicene-Chalcedonian Christology,” *Nova et Vetera* 6.2 (2008): 377–402.

improperly what is in fact the transcendent divine receptivity proper to eternal generation.”<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, I will refer to this as the “analogical obedience” position.

To clearly spell out the difference between the two positions, then: EFS proponents argue that the distinction between Father and Son lies primarily in the fact that they are eternally related to one another in a relationship of authority and submission. The incarnation is a result of, and a continuation of, the Son’s unique role of submission within the Godhead, even as he possesses complete ontological equality with the Father and Spirit. Analogical obedience proponents argue instead that the Son’s obedience is a reflection of his mode of subsistence as the begotten Son from the Father. His obedience is not the result of a subordination of his will to the Father’s, but is instead the economic extension of his eternal generation whereby he executes the will of the Trinity in salvation both prior to and in the incarnation. While there is significant precedence in traditional Christian theology for the assertion that it is fitting for the Son to be incarnate, this position advances the fittingness discussion by advocating that it is fitting for the Son to be *obedient*, and that this obedience precedes his incarnation.

Clearly, then, there are some significant differences between the way these two approaches develop the idea of eternal obedience, and they should not be conflated. What they share in common, however, is an understanding that there are compelling biblical and theological reasons to in some way relate the incarnate obedience of Jesus Christ to a prior relationship of obedience between Father and Son preceding the incarnation. As Swain and Allen put it, the obedience of the eternal Son is “exegetically necessary.”<sup>14</sup> To once again be clear—this paper is not intended to address the question if either EFS or analogical obedience is compatible with traditional Trinitarianism.<sup>15</sup> Instead, my goal in this paper is to call into question some of the

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<sup>13</sup> White, *Incarnate Lord*, 281.

<sup>14</sup> Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 134.

<sup>15</sup> Between the two positions, EFS theologians seem to have the hardest task ahead of them in demonstrating compatibility with traditional trinitarian theology, due in large part to the fact that EFS was developed in large part in debate with contemporary egalitarian theologians, with only passing interaction with the theological

exegetical and theological rationale for developing any doctrine of eternal obedience by pointing to the way certain patristic writers have answered the same questions in ways that do not entail eternal obedience.

### **Biblical arguments for eternal obedience**

Nowhere does Scripture directly attribute obedience to the second person of the Trinity prior to the Incarnation. Instead, eternal obedience theologians rely on what they see as good and necessary inferences from the biblical data. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to engage with every passage offered as proof of the Son's eternal obedience. Instead, I have selected two Biblical ways of describing the Son's relationship to the Father that are central to the eternal obedience case: The "sending" of the Son, and the fact that the "Son can do nothing on his own." Eternal obedience theologians believe that both of these biblical patterns *require* that eternal obedience be predicated of the Son in some way.

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tradition. Critiques of EFS are not hard to come by on this count. For example, Kevin Giles has been an outspoken critic for a number of years, while some recent writings by Glenn Butner Jr. are especially pertinent. While not agreeing on every point, I find myself in general agreement with their criticisms. See D. Glenn Butner Jr., "Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58 (2015): 131–49; D. Glenn Butner Jr., "Against Eternal Submission: Changing the Doctrine of the Trinity Endangers the Doctrine of Salvation and Women," *Priscilla Papers* 31.1 (2017): 15–21; Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2002); Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006);

Within evangelical circles, the controversy over EFS came to a head in the summer of 2016 in the form of an avalanche of blog posts. Unfortunately, the sheer amount of material, along with the fluidity of positions and clarifications, makes it impossible to address here. Indeed, part of my reticence to engage in a full critique of attempts to justify the compatibility of EFS with traditional trinitarian theology is due to the fact that it is not clear if EFS authors would defend what they wrote just a few years ago, or if they would wish to rephrase or clarify their position. Hopefully, the conversation will be continued in less chaotic fashion via journal articles and books.

Booksatagance.com has compiled a helpful "bibliography" of the debate for those who are interested. "The 2016 Trinity Debate: A Bibliography," *Books At a Glance*, July 12, 2016, <http://www.booksatagance.com/blog/2016-trinity-debate-bibliography-okay-teach-complementarianism-based-eternal-subordination/>; Kevin Giles has also written a short book as a sort of post-mortem examination of the 2016 debate. While the title is somewhat over the top and perhaps a little premature, and the content a little self-congratulatory, it is nevertheless an accessible and generally fair guide on the current state of the EFS debate. Kevin Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).

## The sending of the Son

One of the chief biblical arguments used to support the eternal obedience position is that the Father is frequently said to send the Son—and this order is never reversed. Nor can these instances be explained away as simply referring to the Father sending the incarnate Son through his obedient humanity, for the “sending” in multiple passages clearly precedes the incarnation (e.g. John 3:17; 4:34; 10:36; 13:1, 3; 16:28). Because of this, EFS advocates claim that these passages demand the existence of some sort of asymmetrical relationship of authority between Son and Father. In an essay on Father/Son language in the Gospel of John, Christopher Cowan contends that “the sending language implies a subordinate role for Jesus not only during his incarnation but prior to as well.”<sup>16</sup> Bruce Ware frames Christ’s incarnation as an act of obedience: “His very coming to earth was itself in obedience to the Father.”<sup>17</sup> Commenting on John 6:38, he writes that the sending occurs *prior* to the incarnation, and points to this as evidence that, “Jesus’ obedience to the Father occurred prior to the incarnation, and this prior obedience accounts for the very incarnation itself.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, for EFS theologians, the obedience of the Son is exhibited in his submission to “be sent” into the world in accordance with the Father’s will.

From an analogical obedience perspective, Swain and Allen agree that the “sending” of the Son cannot be attributed to Christ acting through his human nature alone because the sending precedes the incarnation. They conclude, “Thus, the manner in which the Son works in obedience to his Father’s commission is not simply indicative of the state in which he assumed the *forma servi* but of his own proper filial relation to the Father, which precedes his assumption

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<sup>16</sup> Christopher W. Cowan, “‘I Always Do What Pleases Him’: The Father and Son in the Gospel of John,” in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 62; cf. 48-50.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 78; cf. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 408.



of the *forma servi*.”<sup>19</sup> A little further, they quote St. Bonaventure, who wrote, “For 'to send' implies authority, and 'to be sent' implies subordination to authority in the order of eternal production within the Godhead.”<sup>20</sup> Swain and Allen conclude in their own words, “In this sense, the obedience of the Son to the Father who sends him constitutes the Son’s *opus proprium* within the undivided *opera Trinitatis ad extra*.”<sup>21</sup> Swain and Allen do not appear to be saying that the Son’s *incarnate* obedience is his “appropriate work” as the one proceeding from the Father. Rather, they argue, “being sent” applies to the pre-incarnate Son and as the *opus proprium* within the undivided work of the Trinity on account of his procession from the Father, this work can be described as obedience.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, a central point for the eternal obedience interpretation is that frequent “sending” and related language of the New Testament compels us to speak of the Son’s pre-incarnate obedience—either as the submission of the Son’s will to the Father’s will, or as a description of

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<sup>19</sup> Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 125.

<sup>20</sup> For the original quote from Bonaventure, see Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, vol. IX, Bonaventure Texts in Translation (Saint Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institutes Publications, 2005), vol. IX, pt. I.5.5 In context, Bonaventure’s quote is much less compelling in support of the eternal obedience position. For, as he makes clear in the same section, “sending” simply reflects the Son’s eternal generation: “For the Father 'sends' the Son when, by making him present to us through knowledge or grace, the Father makes it known that the Son proceeds from him. Now because the Father himself proceeds from no one, he is therefore never said 'to be sent'.” Furthermore, because of the unity of essence and inseparable operations, it is – with careful qualification – appropriate to speak of the Holy Spirit and the Son sending themselves. This indicates that Bonaventure does not see the “command” or “impulse” for the Son’s sending as belonging exclusively to the Father in such a way that the Son could be said to “obey”. On the other hand, seeking to uphold the *taxis* within the Godhead, Bonaventure writes that we must also not confuse the one who ‘sends’ with the ones who are ‘sent.’ This is where the section quoted by Swain and Allen appears. It is clear from the preceding discussion, however, that Bonaventure is not using the words “authority” and “subordination” to refer to a subordination pertaining to either *will* or *intention* so that the Son is responding to the Father in obedience; rather the Son and Spirit are “subordinate” to the “authority” of the Father insofar as they proceed from him and are “from him,” and not vice versa. Bonaventure is not saying that the Son *obeys* the Father (“is sent”) as a fitting *consequence* of his subordinate position within the *taxis*; rather, the fact that he is the one who is sent and not the Father indicates his subordinate position in the ordered relationship of procession. The intention/impulse/will to send, however, belongs to all three persons equally. This is very much in line with Augustine’s interpretation, examined below.

<sup>21</sup> Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 126.

<sup>22</sup> This is further confirmed by the fact they admit that in this way, obedience could also be predicated of the Holy Spirit. Appealing to the filioque clause, however, they argue that this does not require us to speak of a Father and his two Sons. *Ibid.*, 126.n45; cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel*, New studies in biblical theology 24 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 121–24.

the proper mode by which the begotten Son carries out the undivided will of God in the *opera Trinitatis ad extra* prior to the incarnation. To answer this point, there are two possible paths. The first is to agree that “being sent” implies an act of obedience, but to avoid predicating this to the divine nature by limiting the “sending” to the Son of God in hypostatic union with his human nature. However, as we have already seen, this is a difficult proposition to square with the biblical evidence, nor does it help us understand how the Spirit is also said to be sent. The second path is to affirm that the pre-incarnate Son is indeed “sent,” but without the implication that obedience is entailed in this. Augustine takes this path, and his discussion is both thorough and illuminating.

### **Augustine on the sending of the Son**

The language of “sending” was the subject of much discussion in the early church on account of the Arian argument that since the Father sends the Son, the Son is therefore of a different, lesser nature. That is, the Arians argued that the sending of the Son proves that he is obedient.<sup>23</sup> Broadly speaking, on this point, the Arians and eternal obedience theologians agree that the sending of the Son points to his obedience; where they disagree—and this, of course, is no small difference—is if that obedience means the Son is a created being. The Arians argued that obedience necessarily entails ontological inferiority, whereas eternal obedience theologians believe it can be understood to exist in the relationships between ontologically equal persons. Because of this, one cannot apply the arguments of patristic writers against the Arians directly against the eternal obedience position, as if they are the same thing. Nevertheless, the understanding of the Fathers regarding the “sending” language does bear on the present discussion precisely because it understands the “sending” terminology to refer to the source of

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<sup>23</sup> See the Arian Sermon in, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon,” in *Arianism and Other Heresies*, trans. Ronald J. Teske, vol. I/18, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 133–40.

the Son's appearing in the world, instead of within the obedience paradigm assumed by the Arians and accepted in the eternal obedience position.

Augustine's understanding of inseparable operations and eternal processions allows him to speak of the Father and the Son and the Spirit as equally involved in the work of sending, without at the same time conflating the ones who are sent and the one from whom they are sent. In Book II of *The Trinity*, he imagines someone asking how the Father could be said to send the Son if the Son also sends himself. Augustine responds by asking him how it could be that both the Father and Son are said to sanctify the Son?

I trust our friend will answer me, if he has just appreciation, that the Father and Son have but one will and are indivisible in their working. Let him therefore understand the incarnation and the virgin birth in the same way, as indivisibly wrought by one and the same working of Father and Son, not leaving out, of course, the Holy Spirit...<sup>24</sup>

He continues that "it is by the Father and the Son that the Son was sent, because the Son is the Father's Word."<sup>25</sup> Thus, the Son's incarnation—being "sent"—is a work of the Godhead, not just the Father. Augustine writes a little further on, "So it is that the invisible Father, together with the jointly invisible Son, is said to have sent this Son by making him visible."<sup>26</sup> The Spirit's "being sent" in which he is manifested in a number of ways (but not incarnate) is explained along the same lines.<sup>27</sup> Thus, for Augustine, the "sending" of the Son and Spirit is not to be conceived in terms of one person following the instruction/impulse/command of another person to go from one place to another. Because the Son and the Spirit are already everywhere on account of their share in the divine omnipresence, "being sent" instead refers to the appearance of the Son and

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, Second., The Works of Saint Augustine (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2012), II.2.9.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., II.2.10.

Spirit in the work of salvation: the Son in his incarnation, the Spirit in his visible manifestations.<sup>28</sup>

If the whole Godhead is equally involved in the act of sending, why are the Son and Spirit, rather than the Father, sent? The explanation for this lies, once again, in divine unity and eternal processions:

Just as the Father, then, begot and the Son was begotten, so the Father sent and the Son was sent. But just as the begetter and the begotten are one, so are the sender and the sent, because the Father and the Son are one; so the Holy Spirit is one with them, because *these three are one* (1 Jn 5:7) And just as being born means for the Son his being from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to be from him. And just as for the Holy Spirit his being sent means his proceeding from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to proceed from him.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, just as the Son's eternal generation marks him as the one from the Father, so his being sent from the Father in the incarnation marks him as the one who is known to be from the Father.

Thus, while the Son is equally involved in his own sending on account of the single divine will, it is the Son and not the Father who is "sent" because the Son is from the Father, not the Father from the Son. Thus, Augustine explains the sender/sent relationship by maintaining the distinctions between the persons on account of eternal processions, while also maintaining that sending is the indivisible work of Father, Son, and Spirit on account of their shared nature and one will. There is no obedience of the Son to the Father that lies behind the sending of the Son.

Some EFS proponents argue that such a reading of Augustine goes too far. According to Michael Ovey, Augustine denied obedience based on *ontological* subordination, but left the door open to obedience based on non-ontological grounds.<sup>30</sup> John Starke goes a step further and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., II.1.7-8; cf. Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 255.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, IV.5.29.

<sup>30</sup> Ovey believes that Augustine leaves the door open for EFS because Augustine sometimes made the argument that obedience does not have to entail a distinction of natures. Augustine argued that "if a human son is obedient to his human Father, it does not follow that the two of them have different natures." ("Answer to Arian Sermon," VI,6). From this, Ovey concludes that Augustine "leaves open precisely the option that one may have the obedience of the Son without compromising his equality of nature." (*Your Will Be Done*, 74). However, he drastically overstates his case. Augustine is merely granting the Arian premise for the sake of argumentation. That is, he says, even if we grant the Arian premise that the divine Son obeys the Father, this does not prove they have a

argues that Augustine in fact provides a foundation for functional subordination.<sup>31</sup> This is because he, along with many other EFS advocate, anachronistically assumes any implication of an order or “taxis” within the Godhead *must* entail a relationship of authority as EFS theologians understand it. This assumption is not only pervasive in their exegesis of Scripture, but also of historical sources.<sup>32</sup>

However, although Augustine never directly addresses the idea of eternal obedience conceived on non-ontological grounds—a question not raised until some sixteen centuries after his death—there is good reason to believe that he would have rejected it. For instance, in explaining why it is the Son, rather than the Father that was sent to be man, Augustine writes,

we should understand that it was not just the man who the Word became that was sent, but that the Word was sent to become man. For he was not sent in virtue of some disparity of *power* or substance or *anything in him* that was not equal to the Father, but in virtue of the Son being from the Father, not the Father being from the Son.<sup>33</sup>

While Augustine clearly denies ontological subordination by his denial of a difference in substance, he *also* excludes any difference of “power,” and lest there be any doubt, “anything in him.” With a measured anachronism, it seems reasonable that a personal characteristic of filial obedience constitutes an “anything in him” excluded by Augustine. Furthermore, it seems

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different nature. In his “Answer to Maximus” he argues that to prove obedience is not to prove different substances - these are two distinct questions. Even if it is granted that the Son obeys, an inferior nature has not been proven (II.XVIII,1). Augustine does not leave it at that, however, for he goes on to argue that the Son submits to the Father in his human nature only. Thus, Augustine is not leaving the door open to the idea that the Son could obey the Father in his divinity; rather, he is making a two-strand argument. He first demonstrates that the Arian position is not proved even if the Son’s divine obedience is granted, and then proceeds to argue that the Son submits to the Father on account of his humanity alone. Augustine has other reasons to reject the submission of the Son in his divinity to the Father beyond the question of whether or not it compromises the equality of nature. Ovey, *Your Will Be Done*, 73–74; Augustine, “Answer to Maximus the Arian,” in *Arianism and Other Heresies*, trans. Ronald J. Teske, vol. I/18, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), 229–336; Augustine, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon.” *Ibid.*,

<sup>31</sup> John Starke, “Augustine and His Interpreters,” in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 171.

<sup>32</sup> For a particularly stark example of this assumption at work, see Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 415–22. In this section, Grudem attempts to prove that his doctrine of EFS has historical precedence by simply compiling quotes from theologians affirming eternal generation or a *taxis* within the Godhead—even if those theologians, like Calvin and Augustine, elsewhere explicitly affirm that the Son is only obedient in and through his human nature.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, IV.20.27.

unlikely that Augustine, with his constant refrain that the Son is not sent based on any disparity of power or inequality with the Father, would have acquiesced to a “functional” inequality and disparity of authority. Beyond this, whether or not Augustine explicitly excludes eternal obedience is beside the point—for it is clear that he allows one, and only one, explanation: the Son’s eternal procession from the Father. Anything other than this is therefore excluded. At the very least, Augustine’s understanding of the “sending” language in Scripture is coherent without having to resort to the assumption of eternal obedience. Any reading of obedience back into Augustine’s account of the eternal processions is anachronistic and unwarranted.

If it is true that the eternal Son, working inseparably with Father and Holy Spirit, is both sender and the one who is sent, how do we make sense of the consistent statements of the incarnate Jesus, who repeatedly appeals to his “being sent by the Father?” Why doesn’t he also say, “I have sent myself?” John Chrysostom is very helpful on this point. He first notes that the incarnate Son does indeed often affirm his own authority, asking, “And ye who assert that He hath not the same authority and power with Him who begat Him, what can ye say when ye hear him utter words by which He declareth His Authority and Power and Glory equal in respect of the Father?”<sup>34</sup> Why then does the Son also make ‘lowly’ statements like John 8:42: “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not come on My own initiative, but he sent me”? Chrysostom explains that in “passages like these it is necessary not merely to enquire into the meaning of the words, but also to take into account the suspicion of the hearers, and listen to what is being said as being addressed to that suspicion.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, we should not take these statements as abstract statements of Trinitarian theology, but understand what Jesus is intending to accomplish and communicate to his immediate audience. Since the Jews were approaching him as if he were merely a man, Jesus

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<sup>34</sup> John Chrysostom, *Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, vol. 14, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), Hom. XXXIX.2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Hom. XXXIX.4.

“applieth his discourse as if the case were that of a mere man, and suiteth his language to the suspicion of His hearers.”<sup>36</sup> Paraphrasing Jesus’ reasoning, he continues,

Had I not said that I was not sent by the Father, had I not referred to Him the glory of what was done, some of you might perhaps suspected that desiring to gain honor for Myself, I said the thing that is not; but if I impute and refer what is done to another, wherefore and whence can ye have cause to suspect My words?<sup>37</sup>

Rather than simply state his divine prerogatives as he might have done, the incarnate Son emphasizes that he has his origin and work from the Father to emphasize their common purpose and vindicate his claim of true Sonship. He is not acting as a self-centered human being, but is perfectly fulfilling the will of God. He does not propose to fully explicate his eternal relationship with the Father, but is addressing things as they appear to us on earth.

However, it is important to realize that neither Augustine nor Chrysostom is indicating that the Son’s “being sent” by Father is *merely* a rhetorical device, as if the incarnate Son could have just as easily spoke of sending himself but chose not to for strategic reasons. For while both theologians believed that it is correct to understand that the Son is equally involved in the act and decision of his own sending, they also believe in a real distinction between persons so that it truly is the Son who is sent *from* the Father, and not *vice versa*, and that, on account of eternal processions, this order is not simply an arbitrary arrangement. The Son could not say “I have sent myself from myself,” because he is not from himself—he is always *from* the Father. In this way, the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity, yet without eternal obedience.

There remains much more to be said on the theme of Christ’s “being sent.” However, a relationship of authority and obedience in the Godhead is clearly not a presumption that Augustine and other patristic authors were working with. Their understanding of the “sending” language—shaped as it was by the doctrine of inseparable operations and the doctrine of eternal processions—does not require an idea of eternal obedience, and would even seem to preclude it.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Instead, “being sent” refers to the manifestation of the Son and Spirit according to the plan of salvation worked according to the one will, authority, and movement of the one God. Thus, Augustine and Chrysostom offer a compelling alternative to the eternal obedience interpretation.

### **The Son can do nothing of himself**

Closely connected to the idea of being “sent” is the notion that Christ does not do his own will, or that he can do nothing apart from the Father, as in John 5:19, “...The Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing” or 5:30, “I can do nothing on my own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and my judgment is just, because I do not seek my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.” Ovey, along with other EFS writers, sees in this passage a relationship of obedience and submission between the Father and Son. “The Son therefore is depicted as one perfectly integrated into his Father’s will and purpose, as part of that purpose and certainly as its beneficiary, but distinguished by his submission to his Father’s will.”<sup>38</sup> Ovey goes on to deny that this submission and obedience can be attributed to the Son in his human nature alone, for this would not answer the question in vs. 18 that Jesus’ statements in vss. 19-30 are attempting to answer: “Jesus has claimed divine prerogatives in terms of his eternal relationship as Son to the Father and the issue is how *in eternity* he is not a second God in contravention of Deuteronomy 6:4.”<sup>39</sup> The answer to this question, according to Ovey, is that the Son is not a rival divine monarchy, but submits himself to the divine monarchy of the Father.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Ovey sees an eternal obedience as the only way to consistently understand these passages while avoiding Arianism.

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<sup>38</sup> Ovey, *Your Will Be Done*, 84; cf. Cowan, “‘I Always Do What Pleases Him’: The Father and Son in the Gospel of John,” cf. 50-51; Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 408; Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity,” 20-21.

<sup>39</sup> Ovey, *Your Will Be Done*, 85

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83 It should be noted here that while EFS authors like Ware and Grudem have grown increasingly reticent to speak explicitly of multiple wills and subordination, Ovey is unabashed in his affirmation of these ideas in his attempt to preserve the divine monarchy. Unfortunately, Ovey passed away in early 2017.



While certainly disagreeing with Ovey’s understanding of a relationship of authority and submission in the Godhead, Allen and Swain nevertheless agree that the passage cannot be explained by simply attributing the obedience and subordination of will in this passage to the Son in his human nature. They make three observations in support of this argument: The first is to note that *both* the Son and the Spirit are said to do nothing from themselves, so the Spirit is also said to do nothing from himself (John 16:13-15). “Because this language cannot be reduced to the Spirit’s *forma servi* – He has no *forma servi*(!),” they write, “so it should not be reduced to the Son’s *forma servi*.”<sup>41</sup> The second is to note, as we have already see above, that the Son has been “sent” to do the will of the one who sent him, and this implies a relationship of obedience to the will of the Father. The final reason, and the one they find the most persuasive, is that this passage reflects the pattern of receptivity of the eternal Son to the Father that is found throughout the Gospel of John. They conclude,

The fact that the Son does not pursue his own initiative but that of the Father who sends him is not merely a consequence of the human form he assumed in the incarnation. The fact that the Son does not do his own will but the will of the Father who sent him is a consequence of his distinctive *modus agendi*, which follows from his distinctive *modus essendi*.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, Swain and Allen conclude that passages like John 5:19-30 cannot simply refer to Christ in his servant form, and find an appeal to his eternal obedience an appealing alternative. Thus, the eternal obedience position assumes a binary choice – either these passages must be attributed to the Son in his humanity, or they must be interpreted as pointing to the Son’s eternal obedience. We turn to Augustine once again to see another way of understanding these Scriptures.

### **Patristic writers and the Son’s dependence on the Father**

Augustine notes that some passages of scripture are to be understood as teaching the Son and Father’s unity and equality of substance (e.g. Jn 10:30), and that others are to be

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<sup>41</sup> Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 125.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 126.

understood as marking the Son as less than the Father on account of his human form (e.g. Jn 14:28). This leaves other passages like John 5:19 that cannot be adequately accommodated to either understanding. Augustine points to a third way for passages like John 5:19—they indicate that the Son is *neither* less nor equal to the Father, but simply that he is *from* the Father. For Augustine and other patristic writers, the Son’s inability to work apart from the Father simply means that the Father and Son are doing the *same work*, because the Son is from the Father:

So the reason for these statements can only be that the life of the Son is unchanging like the Father’s, and yet is from the Father; and that the work of Father and Son is indivisible, and yet the Son’s working is from the Father just as he himself is from the Father; and the way in which the Son sees the Father is simply by being the Son. For him, being born of the Father, is not something different from seeing the Father; nor is seeing him working something different from his working equally; and the reason he does not work of himself is that he does not (so to put it) be of himself; and the reason he does what he sees the Father doing is that he is from the Father.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that the Son cannot work on his own is not a declaration that he lacks the ability to act on his own initiative, but a declaration that the Father and Son do nothing apart from each other. This also answers the Jews’ question as to why the Son is not a second God alongside the Father—they are the same God, sharing the same will and sharing the same work as a consequence of subsisting in the one divine nature.

John Starke, attempting to demonstrate the compatibility of EFS with Augustine’s doctrine of inseparable operations over against Keith E. Johnson’s interpretation,<sup>44</sup> writes that for Augustine,

the unity in which the persons operate is one of harmony, not unison, since for Augustine each person is irreducibly distinct. Johnson seems to take away any harmony and leaves room only for a “unison of action.” *But as we have seen above, the Father initiates, and the Son obediently responds, since the Son does only what he sees his Father doing, and the power to do it comes from his Father (John 5:19).*<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, II.1.3.

<sup>44</sup> Keith E. Johnson, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective,” *THEM* 36.1 (2011): 7–25.

<sup>45</sup> Starke, “Augustine and His Interpreters,” 168–69 Emphasis added; Swain and Allen also make this same move in John 5:19, when they equate Christ “seeing” what his Father doing as receiving initiative from the Father, or working “at his Father’s behest.” They do not, however, claim that this is Augustine’s interpretation. Allen

In other words, Starke sees in Augustine the idea that the Father and Son are working together, but *not in the same* way—instead, the Father initiates and the Son responds. This initiate/response dynamic is essential to the intelligibility of the eternal obedience position, and thus it is no wonder Starke wishes to see it in Augustine. However, Augustine does not indicate that inseparable operations consists of the eternal Son harmoniously responding to the impulse his Father. It is taken for granted by Starke that this is what Augustine must mean. However, not only does Augustine not articulate the idea that the eternal Son responds to the Father, he denies this very line of thinking.<sup>46</sup> Resuming the quotation from above, note how Augustine interprets John 5:19—the same text Starke cites to support his reading:

He does not do other things *likewise*, like a painter copying pictures he has seen painted by someone else; nor does he do *the same* thing differently, like the body forming letters which the mind has thought; but *Whatever the Father does*, he says, *The same the Son also does likewise* (Jn 5:19). “The same,” he said; and also, “likewise”; thus showing that the working of the Father and of the Son is equal and indivisible, and yet the Son’s working comes from the Father. That is why the Son cannot do anything of himself except what he sees the Father doing.<sup>47</sup>

What is Starke’s representation of the Son responding to the initiative of his Father but “doing *the same thing* differently, like the body forming letters which the mind has thought”? For Starke and other EFS proponents, the Son and Father are distinguished *through* their different way of working out and relating to the one will of God, with the Son’s way of working defined as responding to the Father’s initiative.<sup>48</sup> For Augustine, the indivisible works of God are *equally*

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and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 124; See also Bruce Ware’s somewhat amazing interpretation that for Augustine, “the distinction of Persons is constituted precisely by the differing relations among them, in part manifested by the inherent authority of the Father and inherent submission of the Son.” Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*, 79–80.

<sup>46</sup> “Accordingly, “The Son does what the Father orders” on account of the form of a servant, and the Son does what the Father does on account of the form of God. After all, he does not say, *Whatever the Father orders, these things the Son Does.*” Rather, he says, *Whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in a like manner* (Jn 5:19)” Augustine, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon,” XXII.18.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *The Trinity*, II.1.3.

<sup>48</sup> Swain and Allen try to have it both ways: “The three persons act in union with one another – indivisibly – though this union is a harmony of activity drawing on the active manner proper to each person.” Allen and Swain, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” 134.

carried out by distinct persons who are distinguished *only* by eternal procession – *not* their different way of working. The Son does not work in *a distinct way* proper to his generation, but works *equally* with the Father *because* of his generation, as the distinct one who has his equal work *from* the Father.<sup>49</sup> In other words, the reason the Son has his work from the Father is because he has all things from the Father, *not* because he receives instructions or initiative from the Father as the one who accomplishes the second step in God’s indivisible work.<sup>50</sup> Thus, if these passages are understood as Augustine suggests—as indicating the essential unity of the triune God in his work—then obedience is not needed to understand the biblical language of the Son’s participation in his Father’s work.

This interpretation of these types of passages is not unique to Augustine. Ambrose writes of John 5:19,

And again, that one may not think that there is any difference in the distinction of the works, but may judge that the will, the working, and the power of the Father and Son are the same, Wisdom says concerning the Father: “For whatsoever things He doeth, the Son likewise doeth the same.” So that the action of neither Person is before or after that of the Other, but the same result of one operation. And for this reason the Son says that He can do nothing of Himself, because His operations cannot be separated from that of the Father.<sup>51</sup>

Ambrose goes on to speak of another biblical theme similar to “seeing” – that of the Son “hearing” his Father. Just as when the Son “sees” and can “do nothing apart from the Father,” so also “the hearing is not that of subject obedience, but of eternal Unity.”<sup>52</sup> And, recognizing the same objection Swain and Allen raise against the *forma servi* argument, Ambrose writes that this

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<sup>49</sup> Augustine, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon,” I/18:XV.

<sup>50</sup> cf. Guy Mansini’s appraisal of Aquinas on this point: “Moreover, St. Thomas says, it follows from John 5:19 ... that the divine nature of the Father and Son is numerically one nature. For from ‘likewise’ it follows that the Son operates, not as an instrument, but properly. Each Person does the same work, wholly and entirely, and not as three men rowing a boat, each contributing part of the work.”. Guy Mansini, “Can Humility and Obedience Be Trinitarian Realities?,” in *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: An Unofficial Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2013), 89.

<sup>51</sup> Ambrose, “Of the Holy Spirit,” in *Ambrose: Select Works and Letters*, trans. H. De Romestin, vol. 10, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), II.XII.136; cf. II.X.101, I.XII.131.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 10:II.XII.137.

language also applies to the working of the Holy Spirit: “He speaks not without the Father, for He is the Spirit of God; He hears not from himself, for all things are of God.”<sup>53</sup> Again, it is unity of action that is understood, not a common work accomplished together through an ordered obedience resulting in different ways of working.<sup>54</sup>

### **Biblical Themes: Conclusion**

The patristic pattern of interpretation outlined here allows us to affirm that both the pre-incarnate Son and the Spirit are sent by the Father and that they do nothing on their own, while also affirming with Augustine that, “We do find there [in the holy scriptures] that the Son was obedient according to the form of the servant than which the Father is greater, but not according to the form of God in which the Father and he are one.”<sup>55</sup> Obviously, a biblical interpretation is not true simply because Augustine or Cyril held to it, and the preceding section should not be understood to be arguing this point. However, as we have seen, the eternal obedience understanding of these themes is based on two premises, 1) That “being sent” and “not acting alone” indicate obedience, and 2) These are said of the pre-incarnate eternal Logos, leading to the conclusion, 3) the pre-incarnate Logos is obedient. In modern discussion, it appears that the second premise is most hotly debated, and the one eternal obedience theologians spend the most time defending while largely assuming the first. Yet, the patristic interpretations examined above call into question the validity of the first premise while agreeing with the second. Thus, at the very least, more work needs to be done to demonstrate that the patristic interpretation of these themes are inadequate before they can be said to require eternal obedience.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 10:II.XII.133.

<sup>54</sup> For more patristic examples of this interpretation of John 5:19, see Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and the Epistles to the Hebrews*, 14:Hom. XXXVIII.4; John of Damascus, “Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” in *Hilary of Poitiers, John of Damascus*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond, vol. 9, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), IV.XVIII.

<sup>55</sup> Augustine, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon,” I/18:XXII.16.

### **Theological argument: Must the divine nature be compatible with humility and obedience?**

An important theological argument in favour of the eternal obedience position is that there must be something about the Son that makes it congruous for him to be united to an obedient human nature. Robert Letham explains,

If there is nothing about the Son *as Son* that makes personal union with an obedient human nature appropriate and fitting, then we would be in peril of a Nestorian separation between the Word incarnate, for whom submission to the Father would be inappropriate, and the assumed humanity, which does submit to the Father. Such a separation is ruled out by orthodox Christology.<sup>56</sup>

In other words, submission must be in some sense proper to the divine nature, or else we are left in a position of denying the full integration of the two natures in the one person of the Word.

Letham's concern is not without warrant, for some contemporary theologians do indeed deny that obedience may be attributed to the second person of the Trinity, even in the incarnation.

Linda Belleville provides an example of this when she argues that when Jesus states that he does the will of the Father, it is not God the Son speaking, but Jesus God's human son.<sup>57</sup> To avoid predicating any sort of inequality to the Son in his relationship with the Father, Belleville writes as though the natures of Christ have a measure of independence and separation, so that what can be said of Jesus the Son of God is not necessarily said of the Logos, the second person of the Trinity.

As Letham points out, this is not compatible with the declaration of the Council of Chalcedon, which clearly states that Christ is one person existing in two natures, without confusion and *without separation*. There is one active subject of the incarnation—the eternal Logos—and we must say that it is the Logos who obeys the Father in the incarnation, not merely

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<sup>56</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 394–95.

<sup>57</sup> Linda L. Belleville, “Son’ Christology in the New Testament,” in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?: Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 70. Another very clear instance is when Belleville writes, “If subordination is to be predicated of anything, it needs to be of the human Jesus... Divine attributes are not ones that Jesus as “son” possesses in and of his own right.” Belleville, “Son’ Christology in the New Testament,” 73

the human nature. If this is the case, reasons Letham, then there must eternally be something about the Son that makes his incarnate *obedience* fitting.<sup>58</sup> Following Barth, he argues that God reveals himself in the humiliated, obedient, lowly man, Jesus of Nazareth. “Thus, the humiliation, lowliness and obedience of Christ are essential in our conception of God. Not only can we speak of an obedience in God, but *we have to do so.*”<sup>59</sup> It is vital to see that Letham is not merely saying that the humiliation and obedience of Christ may be predicated to the Son after the incarnation, but rather, the humility and obedience of Christ have antecedents in the nature of God. Letham is not arguing that the Son is hierarchically subordinate to the Father, and especially warns against reading back any human notions of what obedience entails into the Godhead;<sup>60</sup> the eternal obedience and humility of the Son is not a consequence of his subjection to the Father’s will, but rather, the result of the Son’s own free choice to save.<sup>61, 62</sup> Nonetheless, according to Letham, we *must* understand the obedience that the Son expresses as congruent with and expressive of God’s humble and obedient essence to avoid falling into Nestorian expressions of Christology and uphold the idea that the acts of God in the economy of salvation reveal something of his immanent relationships.

However, is attributing obedience and humility to the divine nature the only way to avoid the Nestorian tendency Letham warns of? In short, the answer is “no.” In some ways, the question of the Son’s obedience is related to the larger questions lying behind the Nestorian

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<sup>58</sup> Note that this question is different from the question, “Is it fitting that the Son—rather than the Father or the Spirit—is incarnate?”

<sup>59</sup> Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 397 Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 400–401.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 403.

<sup>62</sup> As Kevin Giles notes, Letham is somewhat hard to locate in the ongoing EFS debate. While the language in the section under discussion would seem to indicate support for the EFS position (and has been interpreted by many EFS theologians as such), Letham is in fact opposed to the EFS position and is a careful guide when it comes to tradition. His deference to Barth at this point strikes me incongruous with the rest of his work. For more discussion of Letham’s position relative to the EFS debate, see Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity*, 41–45.

controversy—how can any human attribute rightly be predicated of the Son of God? Nestorius was motivated by a concern to uphold the equality of the eternal Son with the Father, and thought the only way to do this was to deny that the Son of God suffered. For, he reasoned, if the Son of God suffered and died, then he could not be equally impassible and immortal along with the Father. As a result, he proposed that the two natures of Christ were so closely aligned as to give a common appearance, but were in no way ontologically united.<sup>63</sup> The problem with this, of course, is that the Son of God cannot truly exist as man and thus cannot save humanity.

Responding to Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria carefully explained that the attributes of each nature were not predicated of each other, but rather, to the person of the Son – for, as Thomas Weinandy writes, “the Incarnation is not the compositional union of natures but the person of the Son taking on a new manner or mode of existence.”<sup>64</sup> The divine nature of the Son does not unite to the human nature and become passible; rather, the eternal Logos takes a passible human nature alongside his impassible divine nature. The attributes of each nature are “communicated” or predicated to the person, not each other. The importance of understanding the communication of idioms can be seen in how it bears on the question of the Son’s impassibility. Who is the one who suffers and dies? It is the eternal Son of God. How does he suffer? As a true man. Weinandy further explains, “It is actually the Son of God who lives a comprehensive human life, and so it is the Son who, as man, experiences all facets of this human life, including suffering and death.”<sup>65</sup> And while the question of suffering and obedience are not precisely the same question, the communication of idioms can be applied to both questions. To be clear—obedience does not correspond to passibility; for obedience is not an attribute of nature the way impassibility or immutability are. However, just as suffering or dying is possible for the

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<sup>63</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2000), 177–81.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.



Son via the communication of human attributes in his new manner of existing as a man, so obedience is possible for the Son via the communication of human attributes in his new manner of existing as a man.

Thus, with respect to Letham’s argument, it is not a question of if it is *improper* to attribute obedience to the Son; “improper” connotes that which is not fitting or appropriate, even if it is a possible. If my deployment of the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum* is legitimate, then it is not that it is merely *improper* for the second person of the Trinity to obey the first person; rather, given the unity of substance and will in the divine nature, intra-trinitarian obedience is *impossible*. By way of analogy, it would not simply be *improper* to speak of the second person’s mortality, but, given his subsistence within the immortal divine nature, it is *impossible*. Yet, what was impossible for the Logos when he subsisted only in the divine nature became possible when he took a human nature in which obedience was not only proper, but possible. John of Damascus expresses the principle well when he writes, “The things said, then, that refer to the period before the union will be applicable even after the union: but those that refer to the period after the union will not be applicable at all before the union...”<sup>66</sup> The eternal Son is united with a human nature and so “gains” the ability to suffer, to die—and to obey.

Yet it was not the human nature that was obedient, but the second person of the Godhead, the Son of God, acting through his human nature as a true man. As Augustine writes, “Thus we have the same Christ, a twin-substanced giant, in the one obedient, in the other equal to God, in the one the Son of Man, in the other the Son of God.”<sup>67</sup> So it is indeed fitting and right to speak of the second person of the Trinity who obeys and submits, but this only on account of his union with the human nature within which he subsists and to which obedience and submission are both

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<sup>66</sup> John of Damascus, “Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” 9:IV.XVIII; cf. Augustine, *The Trinity*, I.3.14“... many things are said in the holy books to suggest , or even state openly that the Father is greater than the Son. This has misled people who are careless about examining or keeping in view the whole range of the scriptures, and they have tried to transfer what is said of Christ Jesus as man to that substance which was everlasting before the incarnation and is everlasting still.”

<sup>67</sup> Augustine, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon,” I/18:VIII.

proper and possible. There are many things that are attributable to the Son only on account of his human nature because it is impossible to predicate them to the divine nature—like suffering and mortality. There does not appear to be any to be any obvious reasons to make obedience an exception if the two-nature distinction of Chalcedon is affirmed.

Thus, within a traditional framework that accepts that the suffering and death of the Son in the incarnation does not impinge upon divine impassibility and immutability, there is no need to make a special case for obedience and submission. In short, the Nestorian question of the Son's obedience can be addressed the same way the Nestorian question of the Son's suffering can be answered. The communication of idioms, which explains how the eternal Son can truly suffer and die without attributing passibility or mortality to the divine nature, can also help us understand how the eternal Son can truly obey without having to posit a prior obedience in the divine relations.

### **Whither Eternal Obedience?**

If the analysis of the preceding sections is accurate, what has been demonstrated is, I confess, quite modest: Although theologians holding to the eternal obedience position within traditional Trinitarianism claim that it is a *necessary* conclusion with respect to the three areas examined, this claim has not taken sufficient note of patristic patterns of interpretation to warrant their conclusion. To a lesser degree, it has also been demonstrated that there are difficulties in claiming explicit support for eternal obedience from certain patristic sources. What has not been claimed or demonstrated here is that the any form of eternal obedience is ultimately incompatible with classical Trinitarianism or the biblical evidence.

However, something may be useful, even if it is not necessary. If it is granted that certain ways of conceiving of the Son's eternal obedience might be compatible with classical Trinitarianism, could obedience be a useful way of understanding and describing the eternal relationship of the Father and Son? I offer four brief concluding reflections as possible areas for further discussion: two negative reasons to avoid ascribing obedience to the relationship between

the Father and the Son, and two positive reasons to continue the traditional pattern of ascribing the Son's capacity for obedience to his human nature alone.

**Why use the term “obedience” if submission to another distinct will is not intended?**

Obedience most fundamentally entails the action of a person who submits their own will to that of another. A person acting on their own will is not obedient; fundamentally, obedience seems to require the existence of at least two wills. Such an understanding of obedience might work in a social trinitarian model, such as that seemingly required in kenotic views, but such models are not readily compatible with Chalcedonian Christology without significant modification.<sup>68</sup> The theologians cited in this paper do not propose to significantly modify the traditional understanding of the Trinity; instead, they claim to reject social models of the Trinity and affirm the unity and singularity of the divine will. Rather than modify the creed, then, they must modify what is meant by “obedience” by understanding it as a description of the way the three persons relate to the single divine will. Of course, within the Godhead, there are three distinct persons who do will. But as Guy Mancini argues, “it still holds, even *in divinis* that if there are *differences* as to choice, *differences* as to what is willed and so different and many acts of willing, then there are many intellects and many who understand, many wills and many who will.”<sup>69</sup> If differences are admitted in the working of the three persons, then the unity of will is compromised. If, however, it is affirmed that there is *no difference* in what is willed by the three persons, how can the Son's simultaneous and identical willing with the Father be described in any useful sense as ‘obedience’?

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<sup>68</sup> See, e.g. Thomas R. Thompson and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “Trinity and Kenosis,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2010), 165–89.

<sup>69</sup> Mancini, “Can Humility and Obedience Be Trinitarian Realities?,” 89.

If what is immediately envisioned and usually intended by a phrase must immediately be denied in a particular case, what is the descriptive benefit of invoking such a phrase in the first place? It would be akin to describing a meal as chili, but going on to carefully explain that the dish does not contain chili powder, beef, or beans. Is this chili or merely tomato soup? It seems that when it is applied to the trinitarian relationships, the term “obedience” must be so carefully evacuated of most of its normal meaning as to lose most of its descriptive ability.

**In its nuanced form, eternal obedience does not add any depth to what is already expressed in the doctrine of eternal generation.**

Closely related to the previous point, even if it is possible to have an expurgated version of obedience that does not entail submission of will in the mind of the listener, what can it mean when applied to the eternal relationships? An emphasis on the eternal *taxis* and distinction of the persons? The fact that the Son has his being and will from the Father through eternal generation? These are certainly traditional emphases, but the doctrine of eternal processions has always done the heavy lifting in the tradition for centuries. What does the carefully defined language of eternal obedience positively contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the Father and Son that the doctrine of eternal generation does not already provide without some of the seeming difficulties? In this way, the doctrine of eternal obedience seems like a small boy trying to help his older brother carry a piece of furniture—contributing very little but posing a significant tripping hazard.

**Human obedience emphasizes the importance of the Son’s active obedience as our covenant representative.**

Brandon D. Crowe convincingly argues in his book, *The Last Adam*, that the “Gospel writers consistently use Adam language and imagery for Jesus, and that Jesus’ identity as the

obedient Son of Man is part of this Adamic topos.”<sup>70</sup> Furthermore, “Jesus’s obedience as the last Adam realizes the obedience originally required of the first Adam.”<sup>71</sup> Crowe firmly places the human obedience of the Son as standing in contrast with the disobedience of the first Adam. He notes that this emphasis was extremely common in patristic writing, citing Irenaeus, Athanasius, Cyril of Alexander, Maximus the Confessor, and many others.<sup>72</sup> Augustine, whom Crowe does not reference, also strongly emphasizes this as one of the purposes of the Son’s obedience. Writing against the Arian interpretation of John 6:38, he argued that the Son is precisely the man who does “not do his own will” in order to counteract the disobedience of the first Adam who “did his own will.”<sup>73</sup> In their divinity, the Father and Son share the same will, and so it was necessary for the Son to take a human nature so that he had a will distinct from the Father in which he would “not do his own will.”<sup>74</sup> This emphasis becomes even more developed in the theology of Reformers like John Calvin, who wrote, “For, to wipe out the guilt of the disobedience which had been committed in our flesh, he took that very flesh that in it, for our sake, and in our stead, he might achieve perfect obedience.”<sup>75</sup> The faithful obedience of Christ, for us and in our stead, is a central feature of the Gospel narrative and the culmination of several important covenantal themes.

This context for the Son’s obedience in the biblical narrative is a strong reason to emphasize the utterly human character of that obedience. The obedience the Son demonstrated in

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<sup>70</sup> Brandon D. Crowe, *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 23.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 7–10.

<sup>73</sup> Augustine, “The Arian Sermon and Answer to the Arian Sermon,” I/18:VII.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), IV.XVI.18.

the incarnation is not due to the Father as a consequence of the Son's subordinate position within the Godhead, but is wholly and entirely a vicarious human obedience offered to the Father by the head of the new covenant. It is not an eternal, divine obedience now offered through a human nature, but is an entirely and specifically human obedience offered to God the Father by the incarnate Son *as a true man for humanity*.<sup>76</sup> Understanding the Son's obedience as pertaining to his incarnation alone emphasizes and encourages seeing the covenantal importance of Christ's obedient death *and* life.

**Human obedience upholds Scripture's portrayal of the Incarnation as the ultimate condescension—unfitting and incongruous for a divine person.**

Another benefit of maintaining the traditional emphasis on obedience is that the condescension and self-humility of God in the incarnation is emphasized. Sarah Coakley, calling into question the rationale behind various kenotic Christologies, writes that the Chalcedonian intention is not to conceive of how the two natures are compatible or fitted for union; rather, “we are attempting to conceive of a unique intersection precisely *of* opposites...” The same impulse to make the two natures somehow “fit” together lies behind both kenotic theories and the eternal obedience position. Kenotic theories make the union fit by arguing that the Son divests himself of certain divine attributes in order to take up human attributes and live a fully human life. Eternal obedience theories, on the other hand, argue that there is something in God that makes human attributes fitting to be united with the divine person of the Son. However, especially within the framework of traditional Trinitarian theism, is such a pursuit perhaps unnecessarily preoccupied with untangling a metaphysical mystery Scripture is not overly concerned with?

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<sup>76</sup> Weinandy makes a related point about the suffering of Christ: “Even if one did allow the Son of God to suffer in his divine nature, this would negate the very thing one wanted to preserve and cultivate. For if the Son of God experienced suffering in his divine nature, he would no longer be experiencing human suffering in an authentic and genuine human manner, but instead he would be experiencing ‘human suffering’ in a divine manner which would then be neither genuinely nor authentically human. If the Son of God experienced suffering in his divine nature, then it would be God suffering as God in a man. But the Incarnation, which demands that the Son of God actually exists as a man and not just dwells in a man, equally demands that the Son of God suffers as a man and not just suffers divinely in a man.” Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*, 204.

After all, Philippians 2:6-7 emphasizes the *incongruity* of the incarnation relative to the Son's subsistence in the divine nature, rather than its fittingness. As we have seen, there is a fittingness to the Son's "being sent" correlating to his eternal generation, but this does not compel us to assume that there is a fittingness or an easy congruity to the notion of "God with Us." The mystery and greatness of the incarnation lies in the fact that the Son of God became man and did *as a man* those things that were *not* proper for him. The incarnation is not fitting because the Son was somehow previously suited for the obedience he would render as a man; it is instead unfitting precisely because he to whom obedience should have been rendered became a servant and accomplished that obedience on behalf of sinners.

### **Conclusion**

I have explained that there are different ways of developing a doctrine of eternal obedience while attempting to work within traditional, classical trinitarian definitions. I have also demonstrated, by way of comparison to the writing of patristic writers, that the case for the necessity of the eternal obedience position may not be as strong as might appear at first glance. Finally, I offered four suggestions for why the traditional emphasis on the exclusive human obedience might prove a more fruitful paradigm for considering the Son's obedience over an eternal obedience paradigm. I am under no illusions that this paper presents a comprehensive undermining of the eternal obedience position; there are other grounds upon which such a doctrine might be established. Rather, what I hope the analysis and suggestions in this paper accomplish is a deepening understanding of some of the relevant biblical and theological issues involved, and to identify areas where greater clarity can be achieved.

*On my honour, I have neither given nor received improper assistance in the completion of this assignment*

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