

The Doctrine of the Trinity

EFS Redux: Aiming for Closure on the Trinity Debate

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It's hard to believe that two and a half years have passed since the discussion concerning the eternal functional subordination of the Son took the evangelical blogosphere by storm in the Summer of 2016. Perhaps still more difficult to believe is that, with the veritable [mountain of blog posts and articles](#) written since then, I still get asked about this issue at least every other week.

The [first post I wrote](#) on the topic was my attempt to summarize the issues at play. I was just trying to get a handle on what was and was not being argued, and definitely felt like I needed to understand more before I came down on one side or the other. A few days later, I wrote [a follow-up post](#) pushing for clarity on some specific questions in the debate. And even though it had only been a few days, I could discern that I was leaning in the non-EFS direction—which is to say, the direction of classic Trinitarian orthodoxy—but I was still ambivalent about it.

In the months (and now two and a half years) that followed, though, I've landed firmly. And so I thought I'd write a post summarizing my position on the issue. I've become convinced that there can be no eternal relations of authority and submission *ad intra*, within the life of the Trinity from eternity, because (1) submission is the subjection of one will to another and therefore it requires multiple faculties of will; because (2) will is a property of nature, not person, and thus two wills require two natures; and (3) there is only one nature in the Godhead. There can be no submission or subjection within the Godhead *ad intra* without there being a distinction of nature. The reason the incarnate Son can submit to the Father (which, of course, everyone grants is the case) is because He has added a *human* nature (and thus a human will) to His divine nature, which He possesses in perpetuity (Col 2:9; cf. 1 Cor 15:28). Before He assumed a human nature in the incarnation, there is no subjection of the Son's will to the Father. God is one God; each person of the Trinity fully subsists in the single, simple, undivided divine essence. Submission *ad intra* threatens the essential oneness of God.

That position depends on the truthfulness of the key premises in the previous paragraph: namely, that submission requires two faculties of will, and that will is a faculty that is properly predicated of a *nature* (of which there is only one in the Godhead), not

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a *person* (of which there are three in the Godhead). How can we go about proving the validity of these two premises?

THE NATURE OF SUBMISSION

This debate consists in the discussion of eternal functional *subordination* (EFS), or eternal relations of authority and *submission* (ERAS), and so we have to be clear on what subordination and submission *mean*. Submission seems to be the more acceptable term even from the EFS guys, so I'll focus on that.

In the first place then, it seems virtually tautological to say that submission entails the subjection of one will to another. That's just what submission is. When we speak of submission, we ordinarily mean to convey the idea of the subjection of one will to another. If that's too anecdotal for you, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines submission as "the action of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another person." BDAG's entries for *hupotagē* (submissiveness, subjection) and *hupotassō* (to submit) are consistent with this.

It is rather inescapable. For me to submit to someone is to subject my will to their will. And therefore, submission requires multiple faculties of will. If someone has submitted (Ha!) a compelling argument for why that's not the case, I haven't seen it.

WILL IS A PROPERTY OF NATURE, NOT PERSON

"OK, so submission requires multiple wills. Why does that matter?" Well, since (a) will is a property of nature, not person, and since (b) there is only one nature in the Godhead, there can only be one faculty of willing in the Godhead, which makes submission impossible. "But how do we know that will is a property of a nature and not a person? If will is a property of person, then each person of the Trinity can have His own will, and submission makes total sense."

The way we can discern whether will is a property of nature or person is to consider the person of the incarnate Christ. Jesus is one person in whom subsists two natures, a divine nature and a human nature. He is not two persons, as the Nestorians taught, nor does He have just one nature (whether wholly divine, wholly human, or some amalgam of the two), as the monophysites and Eutychians taught. He is, as Chalcedon has put it:

"one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten; acknowledged in two natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being

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preserved, and both concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He were parted or divided into Two Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ."

Now, if will were a metaphysical faculty properly predicated of a person and not a nature, we would expect Christ, who is one person, to have only one will. If will were a metaphysical faculty properly predicated of a nature and not a person, we would expect that Christ, who has two natures, to have two wills. So which is it? Does the incarnate Christ have one will or two?

This question was first hashed out in earnest in the events leading up to the Third Council of Constantinople in 680 and 681. It has been dubbed "the monothelite controversy." Those who taught that Christ only had one divine will were called monothelites (from *mono-*, one, and *thelēma*, will), and those who taught that He had two wills—one divine and one human—were called dyothelites (from *duo-*, two, and *thelēma*, will).

At the Council, the dyothelite case was presented most memorably by Maximus the Confessor. In aiming to prove that Christ had both a divine and a human will, he appealed to the fourth-century Cappadocian Father, Gregory Nazianzen's well-known Trinitarian maxim: "That which is not assumed is not healed." That is to say, whatever aspect of humanity that Christ failed to assume to Himself, He did not heal in His substitutionary saving work. Such an unassumed aspect of humanity would therefore be unredeemed and unredeemable. If Christ was to heal the human will (along with the rest of human nature), he must have assumed a human will in His incarnation.



Maximus the Confessor

Besides this, if Christ did not assume a human will in His incarnation (as the monothelites contended), not only is our depraved will unsaveable, but it's difficult to argue convincingly that Christ was/is genuinely human. Genuine humans have human wills! Monothelism isn't just an arcane dispute about a meaningless point of doctrine; it undermines the genuine humanity of Christ altogether. This was the conclusion of the Council. Monothelism was condemned as heresy and dyothelism was established as the orthodox teaching of the Church.

Now, if Christ assumed a human will—which He must have done for the sake of our salvation—then He had two wills, both divine and human. And since, as we said, Christ

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is one person with two natures, both divine and human, it's fitting to conclude that will is a metaphysical faculty properly predicated of a *nature* and not a *person*. Christ's two wills match up with His two natures, and do not match up with His being a single person. If will were a property of *person* and not *nature*, since Christ had two wills we'd have expected Christ to be two *persons*, which of course He is not. Christ had two faculties of willing: one divine and one human.



Now, besides all *that*, I'd argue that most of us already implicitly know that will is a property of nature and not person. When we engage in the debate over the bondage and freedom of the will and issues of man's depravity, we explain the reality that apart from regenerating grace man's will is free to make choices but not to choose rightly. He's not an automaton unable to choose between alternatives, but he is depraved, unable to choose righteousness. He has a will, but his will is bound to act in accordance with his... what? With his *nature*. See? Even without the monothelite controversy we know that will is a property of nature.

ONE NATURE, ONE WILL

So, since the Godhead is three persons fully subsisting in the single undivided divine nature, and since will is a predicate of nature and not person, there are not three faculties of will in the Godhead by virtue of the three persons. Instead, there is one faculty of will in the Godhead by virtue of the one nature. Consubstantial persons—that is, persons who share an identical nature, and thus an identical faculty of will—cannot submit to one another. The single divine will cannot be “subjected” or “subordinated” to itself. If there is to be submission, there needs to be another faculty of will.

And that faculty of will is added through the Son's incarnation. The incarnate Son, since He takes on a human nature in addition to His divine nature, also takes on a human will as a predicate of His human nature. Now, this One Person, Christ, subsists in two natures—the hypostatic union. Therefore, He has two faculties of will. Now with the “hardware” needed for submission—i.e., a human will—He can now subject His human will to the divine will, and say things like, “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38), and “Not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). But before His incarnation (in eternity), the Son subsisted only in the single, undivided divine nature, and therefore possessed only the one divine will. He couldn't subject His will to the Father's will because it was the very same, identical faculty of will.

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ALTERNATIVES TO ORTHODOXY

Now, if you reject this line of argumentation and embrace EFS, there are three alternatives that you must choose from.

First, you could wrongly embrace **tritheimism**. That is, you could rightly conclude that will is a property of nature, but wrongly insist that each divine person has His own faculty of willing, and therefore that the Father, Son, and Spirit have three distinct natures. This is obviously not an attractive position.

Second, you could wrongly embrace **monothelitism**. That is, you could wrongly conclude that will is a property of person and not nature, and thus explain that three wills in the Godhead only means that there are three *persons* in the Godhead and not three natures, or beings. But in this case you'd have to deny that Christ, who is *one* person with *two* natures, had a genuinely human will, which is fatal to the genuine humanity of Christ and therefore fatal to the Gospel itself.

Third, you could rightly embrace both monotheism and dyothelitism, but wrongly insist that **will is a property of person and not nature**. In this case, you'd have to explain, if will is a property of person, and if Christ had two wills, why He is not two persons.

None of these alternatives is acceptable to the teaching of Scripture. Whether in one area or another, the necessary entailments of EFS undermine key biblical doctrines of theology proper, Trinitarianism, or Christology.

If the nature of submission requires multiple faculties of will, and if as a property of nature two wills requires two natures, there can be no eternal relations of authority and submission within the Trinity without positing multiple natures in the Godhead. Therefore, EFS must be rejected if biblical Trinitarian orthodoxy is to be consistently affirmed.

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