

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission and the Active Obedience of Christ: What's at Stake?

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Traditionally, the church has defined the Trinity in a particular way: one nature, three persons. A **nature** refers to **what** something is, while a **person** refers to **who** someone is. But how do we define three uncreated persons who share the same nature? Historically, we have done so through what is known as “Personal Relations,” as discussed in our [previous article](#).

However, modern voices have proposed a new way to define the persons—by **authority and submission**. This view is commonly referred to as **EFS** (Eternal Functional Subordination) or **ERAS** (Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission – *Note: I will use these two terms interchangeably throughout the article*). Advocates of this position sought to defend traditional gender roles in the church and home—specifically, roles of authority and submission—by rooting them in the relationships within the Trinity. In doing so, they argued that these roles reflect how mankind is made in the image of God. Many thoughtful articles have been written on this issue ([here](#) and [here](#)).

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Some have largely ignored this debate, assuming it pertains to doctrines unrelated to the gospel. However, I contend that Trinitarian errors necessarily lead to Christological errors, which, in turn, have direct implications for the gospel.

Most evangelicals claim to uphold the gospel—but how deep does that commitment go? Among those who affirm the Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission (ERAS), a disturbing inconsistency arises: they cannot, with any coherence, confess ERAS while affirming the doctrine of Christ’s active obedience—a central component of the gospel. This isn’t a minor quibble; it’s a crack at the foundation of what it means to know and worship the God of Scripture. This may sound harsh, but as we’ll see below it is a necessary concern.

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Historically, evangelicalism has stood on the shoulders of giants, uniting under creeds like the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed (325, 381), and Athanasian Creeds, as well as the Chalcedonian Definition (451). These documents articulate the essentials of Christianity. Unfortunately, today, a “lowest common denominator” mentality has crept in—how little can one believe and still squeak by as “orthodox?” Is there any reason to affirm these historic creeds? The kind of mindset that would ask these questions is one that robs the church of its rich theological heritage and compromises its gospel clarity.

In one such example, the controversy surrounding ERAS (Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission)—already a decade old—has exposed how far we’ve strayed. The fact that time-tested trinitarian grammar has been set aside in favor of novel approaches to explaining the Trinity indicates a massive theological drift. Others may wonder, “Why does it even matter? Do we really need all this complicated language about eternal modes of origin, subsistent relations, simplicity, or partitive exegesis? Isn’t it enough to just believe in Jesus?” Such questions reveal a tragic ignorance. There was a time when believers bled and died to preserve a proper understanding of God. Today, many shrug off these “abstract” debates as distractions from the “real” issues.

But make no mistake: the Trinity is not an optional add-on to the gospel—it is the very heart of the gospel. As Jesus declared, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” ([John 17:3](#)).

ERAS, as defined by its modern proponents, jeopardizes this knowledge. Its adherents walk a theological tightrope, their gospel being held together only by a gracious inconsistency. If we care about the salvation we proclaim, we cannot afford to compromise on this essential doctrine.

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Against ERAS, there are three major points of contention that arise from a classical [or Reformed] perspective on the Trinity, Christology, and the gospel: 1) It undermines the authentic humanity of the Son. 2) It cannot properly define Christ's law obedience. And 3) It misinterprets key texts regarding the Son.

In order to understand the relationship between God, Christ, and the Gospel, there are a few introductory doctrines we need to briefly visit.



THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND AUTHENTIC HUMANITY

The virgin birth, as recorded in [Luke 1:35](#), establishes Christ's humanity as truly human, yet miraculously conceived through the direct agency of the Triune God.

Authentic Humanity for Authentic Obedience

Christ's obedience required an authentic human nature. Only as true man could He fulfill the positive demands of God's law and endure its penal consequences. The Son's incarnation, therefore, was not a passive submission but an active assumption of human nature, perfectly uniting the divine and human natures in His person. This ensures that His obedience, both active and passive, is fully efficacious for the salvation of sinners.

The incarnation's theological precision is not an academic exercise but a vital safeguard for the gospel. By affirming the Son's true humanity and the indivisible operations of the Trinity, we uphold the reality that salvation hinges on Christ's obedience as the God-man—obedience made possible only by His authentic humanity.

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The Necessity of Christ's Humanity

[Hebrews 2:14](#) and [17](#) emphasize the importance of Christ's authentic humanity: "He Himself likewise also partook of the same" and "He had to be made like His brethren in all things." As man's kinsman-redeemer, it was necessary that Christ share in the same nature as those He came to save. His humanity, derived from Mary, established both the natural and legal union required for Him to act as the federal head of His people. Without this authentic humanity, Christ could not merit justification or propitiation for sinners.

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In summary, the hypostatic union safeguards the gospel by affirming both Christ's true humanity and His divine identity. Only as the God-man could He mediate between God and man, fulfilling the law's demands, defeating death, and accomplishing salvation. This profound union of natures underscores the necessity of a real, human obedience by the incarnate Son for the redemption of His people.



ERAS AND THE WILL OF THE SON: A THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

Obedience as Divinity Undermines Humanity

If the Son's obedience is understood as an act of His divinity, then the necessity of His humanity in fulfilling the law is undermined. According to the doctrine of the hypostatic union, Christ acts according to both natures—divine and human—based upon what is proper of each nature (Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, 8.7). If Christ obeyed the Father solely as God, then His human nature did not participate in the obedience required under the law, violating the biblical teaching that Christ was “born of a woman, born under the Law” ([Gal. 4:4](#)).

Furthermore, affirming that Christ's obedience occurs in His divinity alone risks the error of conflating the natures or making them interchangeable. Such a position collapses the distinct properties of each nature and contradicts orthodox Christology, which carefully distinguishes between Christ's divine and human actions. As the Confession emphasizes, “Christ, in the work of mediation, acts according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself” (2LBCF 8.7)

An Aspect of Human Nature is Not Assumed

What Kind of Human Doesn't Have a Will?

To suggest that the Son lacked a human will is to deny a fundamental aspect of human nature. Have you ever met a human that does not have a will? Could you even call such a thing an authentic human? Scripture portrays Christ's human will in His submission to the Father, as seen in His prayer at Gethsemane: “Not my will, but Yours be done” ([Luke 22:42](#)). This passage demonstrates the distinct and obedient operation of Christ's human will, fully submitted to the divine will of the Father. Without a human will, Christ would not have been truly human, which directly contradicts the Chalcedonian definition of Christ's two complete natures united in one person.

That Which is Not Assumed is Not Redeemed

Gregory of Nazianzus famously stated,

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“For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole.”¹

This statement underscores the necessity of Christ assuming all aspects of human nature—including a human will—for the sake of redemption. If Christ did not assume a human will, then His obedience would not address the human condition in its entirety. At its most basic level, humanity’s rebellion against God involves the misuse of the human will. Thus, Christ’s obedience must include the proper exercise of a human will to redeem fallen humanity comprehensively. He must possess a human will so that His substitution, on behalf of those with sinful human wills, is complete.

The Necessity of the Incarnation for Obedience and Redemption

If Christ’s obedience is according to His divinity alone, the incarnation becomes superfluous for fulfilling the law’s demands. The purpose of the incarnation was to provide a true human mediator who could bear the law’s requirements and its curse on behalf of humanity ([Gal. 3:13](#)). A solely divine obedience cannot fulfill the law’s demands for human obedience, which require a true human representative under the law.

By locating will in the person rather than the nature, proponents of ERAS not only undermine orthodox Christology but also risk a deficient understanding of the incarnation’s relevance to salvation.

Christ’s role as the federal head of redeemed humanity ([Rom. 5:18–19](#)) necessitates that His obedience to the moral law be truly and fully human. For obedience to fulfill the requirements of God’s law, it must come from a human agent under that law. As Paul writes in [Galatians 4:4](#), Christ was “born of a woman, born under the law.” This establishes His relationship to the moral law as one of obligation, certainly not as God, but as a man standing in the place of humanity. Peter Abelard (1079–1142) once observed, “When God made His Son man, He merely set Him under the law which He had given in common to all man.”² As God, Christ is the legislator, and as man, Christ was legally responsible.

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Letters of Saint Gregory Nazianzen*, “To Cledonius the Priest Against Apollinarius,” *NPNF2*, trans., Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, ed., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 7:440.

² Found in: à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, 1:355.

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The Son's Relationship to the Moral Law as a Human Mediator

Christ's Relationship to the Law as the Second Adam

Paul's contrast between Adam and Christ in [Romans 5:12–21](#) hinges on Christ's role as the Second Adam, who succeeded where the first Adam failed. Adam's failure was a human failure under the moral law, and thus redemption required a human success under the same law. The Son's obedience as a man is necessary to establish the righteousness required for humanity's justification.

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Under ERAS, the focus on the Son's eternal submission risks introducing a hierarchical view of the Trinity that diminishes the distinct and necessary role of Christ's human obedience under the law. By overemphasizing eternal submission, ERAS shifts the theological focus away from Christ's incarnate role as the Second Adam, which is central to the gospel.

Misdefining Human Obedience and the Incarnation's Purpose

The incarnation was not merely about the Son demonstrating submission to the Father; it was about the Son assuming humanity to fulfill the law's demands as a human being. Human obedience to God's law involves the exercise of a human will, informed by human experience, and executed within the constraints of human nature. This is precisely what Christ demonstrated during His earthly life, particularly in His active obedience (e.g., His perfect love for God and neighbor) and passive obedience (e.g., His submission to death on the cross).

BIBLICAL CRITIQUE: MISINTERPRETING TEXTS PERTAINING TO THE SON'S HUMANITY

Misapplication of Key Texts to Christ's Divinity

Many biblical texts that affirm Christ's obedience to God's law are often mistakenly understood as referring to His divinity rather than His humanity by those who ascribe to ERAS. This misinterpretation undermines the soteriological significance of these texts by detaching them from the human obedience necessary for salvation. For example, [Philippians 2:8](#) states that Christ "humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." This obedience, as the context makes clear,

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pertains to Christ's incarnate humility, His taking on the form of a servant ([Phil. 2:7](#)), and His fulfilling the law as a man under its demands ([Gal. 4:4](#)).

To interpret such texts as referring to the Son's divine nature or eternal submission within the Trinity distorts their meaning. Divine obedience is not subject to human requirements under the law. Instead, the Son's obedience in these texts is an act of His incarnate humanity, wherein He fulfills the covenantal obligations necessary for redeeming His people.

When passages like [John 4:34](#) ("My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me") or [Hebrews 10:7](#) ("I have come to do Your will, O God") are framed primarily as divine submission within the Godhead, their soteriological significance is diminished. These verses, rightly understood, highlight the Son's human obedience to the Father's will in the economy of salvation, a necessary condition for His role as the federal head and mediator.

Obedience as Soteriologically Necessary for Humanity

If Christ's obedience is interpreted primarily as a function of His divinity, it ceases to carry the soteriological weight necessary for humanity's redemption. The moral law is not binding on God in His divine essence but is binding on humanity. Thus, for Christ to fulfill the law on behalf of His people, He had to do so as a man.

This is the heart of the gospel: that Christ's obedience and righteousness as a man are imputed to believers for their justification. [Romans 5:19](#) makes this explicit: "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous." This obedience is clearly a reference to Christ's human obedience as the Second Adam. Misinterpreting such texts as divine obedience undermines their direct application to salvation and justification.

Furthermore, [Hebrews 5:8–9](#) states, "Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation." This learning and suffering are exclusive to Christ's human experience; divinity cannot "learn" obedience or suffer. To attribute this obedience to the Son's divine nature strips these verses of their salvific relevance by disconnecting them from Christ's incarnate, lived obedience.

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THE DANGER OF NEGATING THE SOTERIOLOGICAL RELEVANCE OF CHRIST'S HUMANITY

Interpreting texts about Christ's obedience as divine submission within the Trinity also risks undermining the distinct role of Christ's human nature in the work of salvation. It is the obedience of Christ as the God-man—fully God and fully human—that satisfies God's covenantal requirements. Without His perfect human obedience, there is no basis for the imputation of righteousness to believers.

Such misinterpretations often lead to theological distortions, such as a diminished view of imputed righteousness or a misunderstanding of the necessity of the incarnation. If Christ's obedience is seen as an eternal divine act rather than a temporal, incarnate act, His redemptive work is abstracted from its biblical and covenantal context, leading to a theology that fails to account for the depth and breadth of His mediatorial work.

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Misinterpreting texts about Christ's obedience as referring to His divinity rather than His humanity severs their soteriological relevance. Redemption required a human fulfillment of God's requirements, which Christ achieved in His incarnation. To relegate these acts of obedience to divine submission within the Trinity not only misreads the texts but also undermines the gospel itself. A proper understanding of these passages affirms that Christ, as the God-man, fulfilled the law's demands as a human being on behalf of His people, securing their justification and salvation.

The doctrine of ERAS does not merely flirt with error—it strikes at the very heart of Christian theology. The stakes could not be higher: To adopt ERAS is to compromise the doctrine of God, fracture the unity of Christ's person, and distort the gospel itself.

Compromising the Doctrine of God

ERAS undermines the orthodox understanding of the Trinity, introducing a hierarchy of authority and submission that collapses the eternal unity and equality of the divine persons. Scripture and historic confessions affirm that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are coequal in power, glory, and essence, inseparably united in will and action (2LBC, 2.3). Yet ERAS unravels this harmony, subordinating the Son eternally to the Father. This is an attack on the very nature of God. A God divided by hierarchy within Himself—either ontologically or “functionally”—is not the God of the Bible but an idol fashioned

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by human speculation. To accept such a distortion is to forsake the triune God confessed by the church through the centuries.

Fracturing the Unity of Christ

The implications of ERAS for the person of Christ are catastrophic. If the Son obeys according to His divinity, then His humanity is rendered unnecessary or incomplete. This mutilates the hypostatic union, creating a Christ who is neither truly God nor truly man in the way that Scripture testifies. In short, it denies the central tenet of the incarnation: that the Son assumed a complete human nature, including a human will, to fulfill the law and redeem fallen humanity.



Distorting the Gospel

ERAS distorts the soteriological relevance of Christ's life and obedience, misinterpreting key biblical texts as acts of divine submission rather than human fulfillment of the law. This diminishes the significance of Christ's active obedience as a man, which is the very basis for the imputation of righteousness to believers. If Christ's obedience is primarily a function of His divine nature, then His human obedience becomes irrelevant, and the entire gospel collapses. Salvation is rooted in the obedient life, death, and resurrection of Christ as the God-man. To undermine His human obedience is to undermine the entire structure of justification, reconciliation, and redemption.

NO ROOM FOR COMPROMISE

ERAS is not a harmless theological curiosity; it is a Trojan horse carrying heretical implications that threaten the foundations of our faith. The integrity of the Trinity, the person of Christ, and the gospel itself are at stake.

The church must reject ERAS with the same vigor and conviction with which it has opposed Arianism, Nestorianism, and other errors throughout history. To tolerate ERAS is to place ourselves on the precipice of doctrinal ruin, inviting confusion and division into the body of Christ. As stewards of the truth, we can give no quarter to a doctrine that compromises the glory of the Triune God, fractures the person of Christ, and leaves sinners without a sufficient Savior.

ERAS must be named for what it is: a distortion of the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The church must stand firm, reject it unequivocally, and proclaim the truth of God's Word with clarity and boldness. Let us not waver in this task, for the honor of God and the hope of the gospel are at stake.

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