

Systematic Theology Chapter 14 (E)  
The Error of Eternal Functional Subordination  
over against the Truth of the Full Equality of the  
Father and Son in Majesty, Glory, and Honor

I. The Distinction between the Economic and Immanent Trinity

There is only one Trinity. But we distinguish between what the three persons do together forever and always and their work in creation and redemption.

**The economic Trinity:** The economic trinity refers to the work of the Trinity in the work of creation and redemption. For example, we say that the Father elects, the Son becomes incarnate, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies us. Each person of the holy trinity has a distinct work in creation and redemption. The word “economic” comes from the Latin word for “work.”

**The immanent Trinity:** the immanent trinity refers to the life and action within the trinity apart from any act of creating the world or redemption. If you want a comparison to understand the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, think of a college graduate with many gifts and talents. The student is good at literature and music and a natural with junior high students. This is the immanent graduate. We can distinguish between the gifts that a college student has and how later on those gifts will be used in a job. Suddenly the college grad snags a teaching job. Now all these gifts and talents are put to a specific work and mission. This is the economic graduate.

When we talk about the immanent Trinity, think of how we distinguish between (1) the gifts you have and (2) how you use your gifts. Perhaps you are a musical person and you dream new compositions. This is the immanent you. The immanent you includes your abilities or talents, apart from you using them in a job. But if you get a job, for example, as a composer for music for a documentary, this is the economic you, you are now working and creating something outside of you.

When we talk about the immanent trinity, we are not so much emphasizing the abilities of the trinity, but the personal relations that the three persons enjoyed within the trinity forever and always. We are talking about how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always loved each other and

fellowshipped with each other. They found great delight in each other. This was all apart from the work that they would do in creation and redemption.

We are not saying that there are two gods or two trinities. There is one God and one trinity. But we distinguish between the personal relations within the trinity forever and always (the immanent trinity) and how the trinity works in creation (the economic trinity). In the same way we have one musical person who has the gifts and the later ability to use these gifts in a job. There are not two musicians. There is one musician.

So the immanent trinity refers to what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did within the trinity forever and ever as they delighted in each other and had sweet fellowship. The economic trinity refers to the work that the three persons did in creating the world and then in redeeming humanity.

## II. The Error of Eternal Function Subordination (EFS) versus the truth that the Father and Son are coequal in majesty, honor, and glory.

**Truth:** Within the economic trinity (the work of the trinity in creation and redemption--outside of themselves) there is a functional subordination of the Son to the Father. The Bible teaches that the incarnate Son of God came to do the will of the Heavenly Father. Jesus says: "I come to do your will."

**Error:** Within the immanent trinity (the eternal mutual relationship between the three persons—apart from the work of creation and redemption) the Son is subordinate to the Father in authority and lesser in glory.

**Truth:** the three persons of the holy trinity are eternally equal in honor and glory. The Athanasian Creed states: "But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal."

- III. Bruce Ware's **Erroneous** Teaching: Bruce Ware was a prominent Baptist professor who taught the error of eternal functional subordination in the immanent trinity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The following statements express this error:
- a. *The Father is "supreme over" the Son.*
    - i. -this statement denies that the Son is coequal in supremacy with the Father. The Athanasian Creed teaches that each person of the holy Trinity is Almighty—that is, supreme in the cosmos: "Similarly, the Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty."
  - b. *The Father "stands above the Son."*
    - i. -this statement denies the truth that the Son is coequal in honor, glory, and supremacy with the Father.
  - c. *The Father alone deserves "ultimate glory" even over the Son who only deserves "penultimate" glory.*
    - i. -this statement denies the truth that the three persons are equal in glory.
  - d. *The Father alone should receive ultimate praise.*
    - i. -this statement denies that the Son is coequal in glory and majesty.
  - e. *The Father alone is "supreme among the persons of the Godhead."*
    - i. -this statement denies that the Son is also almighty.
    - ii. -this statement deprives the Son of His full deity.
  - f. *"The Father stands above the Son, and the Son gladly acknowledges this fact."*
    - i. -this denies that the Father and the Son are equal.
  - g. *The Father's supremacy over the Son is "comprehensive, all-inclusive, and absolute."*
    - i. -this denies the fully equality of the three persons.
  - h. *The Father sometimes acts without the Son, for example, He plans salvation all by Himself.*
    - i. -This denies the every work of each person of the holy trinity is also the work of the whole trinity.

- ii. -this denies the truth that Augustine stated that “Whatever...is said of God is said of the Father, the Son and the Spirit triply, and equivalently of the trinity singly.”
- iii. It denies that in creation and salvation all things are of the Father, by the Son, and through the Holy Spirit.
- i. *The Father can work unilaterally if He chooses—without using the Son and the Spirit. It is an act of generosity that God includes the Son and Spirit in His work.*
  - i. -this denies the full equality of the three persons and denies the truth that each person of the holy trinity is involved in each divine work.
- j. *Bruce Ware implied that each person of the holy trinity had a distinct will.*
  - i. -the truth is that the one true God possesses only 1 divine will.
- k. *Bruce Ware uses this error (of the Son’s Eternal Subordination to the Father) to argue for how wives should submit to their husbands.*
  - i. *But the Bible uses the imagery of the relationship of Christ and the church for marriage. Just as the church submits to Christ, so must the wife to her husband.*

IV. **The truth:** the Son only submits to the Father in the work of the economic trinity.

- a. In the work of the salvation, the Son voluntarily submits to the Father’s will which is that He become incarnate and die for His people.
  - i. The church has affirmed economic subordination between the three persons.
  - ii. “The persons of the Trinity voluntarily subordinate themselves to one another in the roles they perform in respect to creation” (John Frame).
    - 1. The Father sends the Son into the world; the son joyfully obeys the
    - 2. Father’s will.
      - a. The Son only does on earth what the Father gives him to do.
      - b. “When the Spirit enters the world, he does not speak of himself, but only what he hears (presumably from the Father and the Son).” (John Frame)

3. “Biblical Trinitarianism denies ontological subordination (that is, subordination within the immanent trinity), but affirms economic subordination of various kinds.” (John Frame)
- b. **It is true** that the Son is the eternally begotten Son of God, but this does not imply eternal subordination.
    - i. That the Son is the eternally begotten Son of God does mean:
      1. That the Father eternally begets Him (apart from any act of the divine will).
        - a. Bruce Ware erroneously claims that the Son eternally wills with a will distinct from the Father to submit to Him.
          - i. But the Father and the Son do not have distinct wills—they have one will.
          - ii. And the Father’s generation of the Son is not a willed act—it is an eternal and natural act of God the Father.
      2. That the Father begets the Son means that the Son is in the perfect image of the Father (just as your children sort of look like you).
      3. But this does not imply a subordination.
  - c. The Son must first empty Himself and becomes incarnate before He submits to the Father’s will.
    - i. **It is an error** to assume that the Son always needed to be submitting to the Father eternally within the immanent trinity.
    - ii. Rather the Son of God became man and took the form of a servant and obeyed the Father within the economic trinity.
  - d. In the economic trinity, the Son comes to do the will of the Father: “Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book’” (Hebrews 10:7).
  - e. When the Bible records that Jesus (as the Son of God incarnate) obeys the will of His heavenly Father, it is referring to one of two things:
    - i. First, that the Son incarnate (in the economic work of the trinity) submits to the will of the Father.



5. What is the economic trinity?
  
6. What is the ontological trinity?
  
7. What does it mean that there is an ontological equality between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
  
8. Is it ever correct to say that the Son submits to the Father? When?
  
9. Why is it dangerous to teach the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father? What does it imply about the Son?
  
10. What heresy from the past has the same flavor of teaching as EFS and would agree that the Father is greater than the Son?

11. What does Philippians 2:5-11 teach regarding Christ Jesus? What does this imply about how the relationship of the Father to the Son is affected by the incarnation in the economy of salvation? What was the relationship of the Father and the Son before the Son emptied Himself?

12. Hebrews 5:8 teaches...

13. Read Psalm 50:21. What does this verse teach about God?