

Review of “The Son who Learned Obedience” by D. Glenn Butner Jr.

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Book: D. Glenn Butner Jr., *The Son who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018)

Introduction

2016 is a year of infamy for the American Evangelical and Reformed churches, as a controversy erupted over the doctrine of the eternal submission of the Son (ESS).¹ The ensuing firestorm produced more heat than light, with the veil being removed from the squabbling of the theologians, seen to be no different from the frequently demonized “online discernment ministries” when it comes to insults, rancor, and sowing discord among the brethren. It can be said after this controversy that many supposed reputable Reformed ministers and theologians have lost their moral authority when it comes to speech on the Internet, including people like Carl Trueman, whose article slanders everyone who holds to ESS in any form as proto-Arians at best.² Critics of ESS then and now have frequently asserted that ESS is a form of the heresy of Arianism, or a functional denial of *homoousios* by asserting that the Son is somehow less divine through subordination to the Father, as even a more recent book edited by Michael Bird and Scott Harrower has done.³

With charges of soul-destroying heresy being publicly and openly leveled against theologians like Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware, it is important that this doctrine be defined clearly so that it can be thoroughly examined. However, if the supposed “pro-Nicene” side routinely misrepresent ESS as held by its proponents, how can there be any proper discussion of the topic at hand?

Within this state of impasse, a book entitled *The Son who Learned Obedience* was written by D. Glenn Butner, Jr. The book was published in 2018, a year earlier than the edited book by Michael Bird and Scott Harrower. Yet, as I began to read the book, I find it superior to Bird’s and Harrower’s book in every way. But before evaluating the book, an overview of the book will first be given.

¹ ESS is sometimes stated as ERAS (Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission) or EFS (Eternal Functional Submission or Subordinationism). For an early report of the ESS controversy, see Alastair Roberts, “The Eternal Subordination of the Son Controversy: The Debate so Far,” *Reformation 21* (blog), June 16, 2016, accessed December 22, 2020, <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-eternal-subordination-of-t.php>

² Carl Trueman, “Fahrenheit 381,” *Reformation 21* (blog), June 7, 2016, accessed December, 2020, <https://www.reformation21.org/mos/postcards-from-palookaville/fahrenheit-381#.V13bbvkrLIX>. To my knowledge, Trueman has to date never repented of this slander.

³ Michael F. Bird and Scott Harrower, eds., *Trinity without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019)

In the introduction to his book, Butner gave an overview of the 2016 civil war. Chapter 1 puts forward what EFS advocates believe, and directs us to how Butner is orienting his response to EFS, namely by focusing on the will of God and the doctrine of inseparable operations [of the Trinity]. Following this chapter, he takes an excurses to deal with certain objections to inseparable operations. Chapter 2 deals with the will as it relates to the incarnate Christ, focusing on the monothelite/ dyothelite controversy in the late stage of the early church. Chapter 3 looks at the supposed implications of EFS's concept of will on the doctrine of salvation or soteriology. Chapter 4 addresses what EFS does to the attributes of God. In chapter 5, Butner addresses specific texts of Scripture, with the goal of showing that texts that seem to support EFS do not necessarily do so, following which he concludes his case against EFS.

As someone who has seen many misrepresentations of ESS over the years, it is refreshing to read Butner's book, a book which actually listens to what ESS proponents are actually saying and attempts to engage them. The shift in focus to the issue of the will of God is a welcome advance in what could be a more constructive dialogue on the issue.

Butner's case in brief

In his rejection of ESS, Butner recenters the debate to focus on the will of God. According to classical theism, there is one God and therefore one divine nature and one divine will. Will is a property of nature (p. 5), and therefore God being one has only one will. If God has only one will, then the three persons of the Godhead share a common divine will. Whereas for ESS to be non-Arian, it must hold that will is a personal property (p. 26), and therefore each person of the Trinity must have his own will, creating three wills. Therefore, it can be said that the Father commands and the Son submits (p. 39), as they would have distinct wills.

Holding to will being a personal property would violate the doctrine of inseparable operations of the Trinity, expressed in the somewhat modern dictum *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* ("The external works of the Trinity are undivided") (p. 31). The unity of the Godhead is in question here. But even more than that is the question posed by whether Jesus has a human and/or divine will. If Jesus is "only a divine person who is the Son, this would mean there is no human will, and Christ would not be fully human" (p. 86). ESS would give rise to Monothelitism and undermine the full humanity of Christ, according to Butner. A Savior who is less than human, in a submission that is neither contingent nor voluntary, attacks the foundation of the atoning work of Christ. Therefore, Butner sees ESS as a small error that creates major problems when worked out logically.

Positive: Correct portrayal of ESS (EFS)

As stated, Butner has indeed listened to what ESS proponents are actually saying. Accordingly, Butner agrees that ESS or EFS is not Arianism (p. 4). As he wrote in his conclusion:

Opponents of EFS have often accused those who support eternal submission of Arianism, and for this reason EFS theologians are accused of offering an inadequate theology. The accusation of Arianism is inaccurate. EFS theologians are quite clear that they are speaking of the divine persons when they speak of eternal submission, so it simply is not the case that they necessarily abandon the *homoousios* when speaking of the Son's submission to the Father. This objection would only work if EFS advocates used categories like *ousia*, nature, person, and *hypostasis* with an identical meaning to pro-Nicene thought. They do not. Therefore, EFS should be seen as one of a number of modern efforts to explain the Trinity in a different manner than the pro-Nicene tradition. In this manner, EFS is more akin to social trinitarianism, for example, than Arianism. (p. 194)

This admission that ESS is not Arianism of any kind is a welcome move. While this does not necessarily imply that Butner has fully understood ESS, such concessions are welcome and would prevent the knee-jerk reactions that come from false and baseless accusations of heresy.

Analysis

The problem of what constitutes “pro-Nicene”

In Lewis Ayres' book *Nicaea and its Legacy*, cited by Butner (p. 30), Ayres postulated three principles that a theology must meet in order to be called “pro-Nicene”:⁴

1. A clear vision of the person and nature distinction, entailing the principle that whatever is predicated of the divine nature is predicated of the three persons equally and understood to be one (this distinction may or may not be articulated via a consistent technical terminology)
2. Clear expression that the eternal generation of the Son occurs within the unitary and incomprehensible divine being
3. Clear expression of the doctrine that the persons work inseparably

ESS theologians are clear on the first principle, wobbly on the second,⁵ and, according to Butner, deny the third (p. 31). Therefore, ESS is not pro-Nicene. But before we look at

⁴ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004). 236

⁵ While Grudem has initially denied eternal generation, he has changed his mind on the issue and now embraces eternal generation [See for example IVP, “Systematic Theology: Why A Second Edition,” IVP (blog), September 14, 2020, accessed December 22, 2020, <https://ivpbooks.com/blog/systematic-theology-why-a-second-edition.html>]

the substance of the charge, it is important for us to understand the use of this term, both by Ayres and by the contemporary pro-Nicene movement.

Nicaea in 325AD is the first ecumenical council of the Church. In that council, Arianism was condemned as heresy, and the initial Nicene creed formulated at that time had an anathema attached to it against the Arians. The second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381AD confirmed the condemnation of Arianism while removing the anathema and amending the Nicene Creed to the form we have today – the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. Against this backdrop, “Nicaea” in Christian parlance is therefore associated with orthodoxy. To be not Nicene is to be regarded as not orthodox, although since the choices are not a binary between Nicaea and Arianism, “not Nicene” is not necessarily a label for heresy. However, to be “not Nicene” is to be at best heterodox.

Ayres’ usage of the term “pro-Nicene” affords him a certain amount of rhetorical advantage. With this loaded term, Ayres can effectively denote what constitutes orthodoxy with regards to one’s doctrine of God. Of course, it is not denied that anyone who is against Nicaea is effectively a heretic; that is what rulings of ecumenical councils mean. But by co-opting the term “pro-Nicene,” Ayres has drawn a line in the sand and makes it clear that what he thinks it is to be in line with Nicene orthodoxy. He does attempt to argue for his case to be sure, but it must be noted that the line of orthodoxy for Ayres has shifted from the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381AD to a certain synthesis of Nicene and Post-Nicene thought in the early church.

However, Ayres’ usage of the term “pro-Nicene” is problematic mainly because the Nicene and Post-Nicene theologians do not always agree on many of those issues. Butner points out that Hilary of Poitiers was not clear on his view of the undivided divine actions (pp. 32-3), while Ayres likewise pointed out that people such as the later Athanasius, Phoebadius of Agen, and Marius Victorinus fell short of “that later orthodoxy” (p. 239). In other words, a developed idea of these three principles that constitute “pro-Nicene” orthodoxy is lacking even in some Nicene theologians. Therefore, while Ayres is within his rights to demarcate a certain developed theology as “pro-Nicene,” it is false to claim that this “pro-Nicene” theology is the same as Nicene theology. Nicene theology basically is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381AD, and Nicene theology is not well developed in certain principles like the undivided divine actions. This is NOT to argue that the three principles are not important, but just to make it crystal clear that Ayres is not doing Nicene theology per se.

Therefore, concerning the usage of the term “pro-Nicene,” if one wishes to use it to denote a particular post-Nicene manner of doing theology, one is free to do so. However, if by “pro-Nicene,” one wishes to use it to demarcate between the **substance** of the Nicene faith and what is not true to the Nicene faith, then the “pro-Nicene” crowd has gone too far. The fact of the matter is that the **manner of theologizing** about the Nicene creed post-Nicaea is not part of the Nicene faith. Analogously, it is often claimed that one can subscribe to the Westminster Confession of Faith without holding on to literal 6-day 24 hours creation, despite the fact that the overwhelming number of Reformation theologians

have held to literal 6-24 creation, with Archbishop James Ussher's view the norm not the exception. Likewise, one can be properly Nicene without necessarily holding on to the manner of theologizing of the post-Nicene theologians of the early church. The rhetorical advantage of those using the term "pro-Nicene" is unearned and undeserved. It would be better to call them "post-Nicene" instead.

The substance of Butner's charge that ESS is not Nicene or anti-Nicene should therefore be questioned. ESS is most certainly not "pro-Nicene" if that means following the manner of theologizing of the post-Nicene theologians. But just because it is not "pro-Nicene" in that way does not make it "not Nicene" or "anti-Nicene." Since the focus of the Nicene faith is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381AD, it must be said that ESS is extra-Nicene rather than "not-Nicene" or "anti-Nicene," in the same way that "pro-Nicene" is also extra-Nicene since it adds on to the Nicene faith.

What about the substance of the principles formulated by Ayres then? It seems clear that the principles in themselves are true to the Nicene faith, with the third principle being a development of the Nicene faith. In other words, while the first two principles are truly Nicene, it can be argued that one does not have to hold to the third principle in the same way as the "pro-Nicene" crowd does to be truly Nicene. The dictum *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* is true, but one does not have to formulate it in the same way as the "pro Nicene" crowd does or even the early church fathers did, in order to hold to it.

The problem of ecumenical councils past Chalcedon

In the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic churches, there are seven ecumenical councils: Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II, Constantinople III and Nicaea II. Protestants do not generally put much thought into these church councils, since our final authority is Scripture and not the councils. Nevertheless, we are not biblicist, and insofar as councils rule biblically, they are to be accepted. It should be a weighty matter if one believes that a council is wrong, for one is claiming that one is more biblical than a gathering of learned pastors and theologians. That could happen of course, but it is less likely to be true. Setting aside the judgments and deliberations of a church council should be done with the utmost scrutiny and reverence, and done only when the ultimate authority, the Scriptures, say otherwise.

That said, a case can be made that only the first four councils can be properly considered "ecumenical," involving the entire church, with the subsequent three being regional councils of the East that have been subsequently accepted in the West by the Medieval Catholic Church. Therefore, the subsequent three councils have less weight compared to the first four, and it is the first four ecumenical councils that defined orthodoxy concerning the doctrine of God. This is important as we consider how much weight we should give to the rulings of the subsequent councils.

In his book, Butner makes the case that ESS effectively holds to Monothelite Christology. Monothelitism, or the doctrine that Jesus Christ has only one will (whether human or divine or mixed), was condemned at the Sixth Ecumenical council or the Third Council of Constantinople in 681AD. Whether ESS leads to Monothelitism is a separate question of course, but even if it did, the fact that it was condemned by the Third Council of Constantinople does not mean much. After all, it was not an ecumenical council. Secondly, it condemned a specific form of monothelism, one which utilizes post-Nicene categories of thought. Lastly and most importantly, that it was one of the subsequent three councils is reason enough to ignore it. After all, iconoclasm was condemned in the Second Council of Nicaea in 787AD, yet icons are a blatant violation of the Second Commandment. When a church council outwardly violates Scripture, we can be assured that we can pay no regard whatsoever to that ruling. While Constantinople III is not Nicaea II, the fact that both are Eastern councils and that Eastern Orthodoxy was well on its trajectory away from the Christian faith by that time, as confirmed by Nicaea II, should give anyone pause in attempting to make Constantinople III normative for Christians in any way.

Whether ESS is indeed biblical or not, we should see the councils of the church as having no bearing on the issue. As stated concerning the term “pro-Nicene,” the historic rulings of the church have no bearing on the issue. One can utilize the resources of the post-Nicene period against ESS if one desires, but that is to make a systematic theological argument, not a church history or historical theological argument.

The relation of Christology to Theology proper as concerning the will

A main part of Butler’s argument is to look at the relation of will to nature from God to Christ, and thus to move from Theology proper to Christology. After all, if ESS makes will a personal property, does that work with Christology? Such a move seems legit. However, here is where I think is a flaw in Butner’s reasoning. The assumption is made that will is always a personal property and never a property of nature. Therefore, what one believes concerning the will must be true in both Theology proper and Christology, an assumption I reject.

The question of philosophy and philosophical assumptions

On the issue of theologizing, Butner confessed:

The issue of eternal submission is a question of how best to make sense of the broad testimony of Scripture, a question of which terminology provides conceptual clarity for Scripture’s broad testimony, and a question of whether the terminology considered is compatible with faith seeking understanding through reason and tradition. (p. 9)

In other words, what is involved in the issue of ESS is a second-order reasoning from Scripture, and not something explicitly taught or denied by Scripture. That is why Butner has decided to address the biblical texts in his last chapter instead. While I think that the biblical verses have more importance in the debate, I agree with Butner that the topic is more of making sense of biblical truths rather than the biblical truths themselves. But in making sense of biblical truth, we have to address the elephant in the room: the issue of philosophy.

In looking at the history of philosophy and theology, one thing seems crystal clear: Everyone does philosophy and theology through an interpretive lens, a worldview, which is partially or fully formed by the intellectual and cultural ferment of their times. That is one reason why biblicism is in error, because it is never possible to situate oneself transcendent above the world and reading the Bible “as God has always and fully intended it to mean.” This applies to the early church, the modern church, the “pro-Nicene” movement, and this reviewer as well. The question therefore is not whether one uses philosophy in one’s theology, but rather is one reflective and critical of one’s philosophical assumptions and that of others. Thus, it is not true that the Nicene and post-Nicene theologians are just “reading the Scriptures.” Rather, they bring with them the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, as they attempt to synthesize biblical truth.

Therefore, while it can be pointed out that modern evangelical theology and ESS seem to veer towards some version of social trinitarianism, it can likewise be pointed out that the post-Nicene theologians seem to veer towards Platonism in making God the Platonic Ideal. The fact of the matter is that neither of these are necessarily biblical or unbiblical; it all depends on whether the system produced in light of these philosophies do full justice to the entire range of biblical truth.

In response to classical theism and Butner’s critique of ESS, I will advance that theirs is an uncritical fidelity to the philosophy of the post-Nicene period as well as its forms. While not rejecting Platonism *en toto*, I will assert that we can use better philosophical (and theological) categories for our theologizing, categories that the post-Nicene and our modern “pro-Nicene” theologians do not have.

The nature of the will

Butner’s critique boils down to the nature of the will. What is “will”? According to classical theism, “will” is a property of “nature.” Therefore, since God has one nature, He has one will, shared among all three persons. Concerning the Incarnate Christ, since the Son took on a human nature, he also took on a human will. Therefore, as Chalcedon expressed it, the Son is one person in two natures, one divine and one human nature, “unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.” Against Eutychianism or Monophysitism, the two natures of Christ are distinct. Against Nestorianism, the two natures of Christ are united in one person. Since Christ has two natures, he must also have two wills: a human will and a divine will.

Logically, the system is airtight. The problem comes however when we start thinking of how “will” works in the real world. After all, is “will” primarily associated with “nature”? We think of willing and acting as coming from actors, those who will and do things. Thus, in the real world, it is actors or agents that will, and do. A “person” is an actor or agent, someone who can act and interact. When I talk to someone like Billy, I exercise my “will” to go up and initiate a conversation with Billy. Likewise, Billy exercises his “will” to choose to either engage me in conversation, or reject my attempts at conversation.

What about “nature” then? “Nature” is what a person is (ontology). Thus, for a normal person, he has one nature. This nature of course is held in common with all humanity, since all of us have human natures. Therefore, for a normal human person, he has one nature, and one will.

The problem comes with God, since God is both three and one. The classical theist approach is to approach the issue from the point of ontology. Since God is one, he has one nature, and thus one will. Since Christ took on humanity in the Incarnation, he now has two natures, one human and one divine. But is that the best approach we should take to the issue? Why is ontology prioritized over all others?

An alternative approach is to pay more heed to the biblical truths. There, we see the following data:

- 1) God is one; thus He has one nature.
- 2) God is three persons; they are all distinct actors.
- 3) Jesus is one person, who takes on humanity and therefore has one human and one divine nature.
- 4) Jesus is a distinct actor.

When we line up the data, we see that classical theism cannot do justice to all four data. If “will” denotes an actor, then classical theism cannot truly do justice to points 2 and 4. But in that case, should we then assert that “will” is a personal property? That should do justice to all four, does it? But then we run into this point:

- 5) Jesus is fully divine and fully human. Therefore, he must be truly human in every way, including having a human will.

This is why Butner’s approach to move from Theology proper to Christology is problematic. After all, all of us are trying to piece together biblical truths in a systematic manner. If one truly wants to be biblical, one cannot pick and choose which biblical data to include in one’s systematic theology. How then can we resolve this conundrum?

Here, I would like to suggest an alternative way of understanding the “will.” We have seen already that classical theism fails to do justice to the biblical data concerning the Trinity, and a mere predication of “will” with “person” is not possible either. I suggest that the will should be defined as *something that originates from one’s nature that terminates in an action*. Therefore, in this picture of the will, God has one nature, and thus the one will of God is its origin, dividing into the three wills of the three actors Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus has two natures, and what is human originates in the human nature and terminates in the person Jesus acting on that impulse. What is divine originates in the divine nature and terminates in the same person Jesus acting on that impulse. This position of nature and will in God and Christ can be depicted as follows:

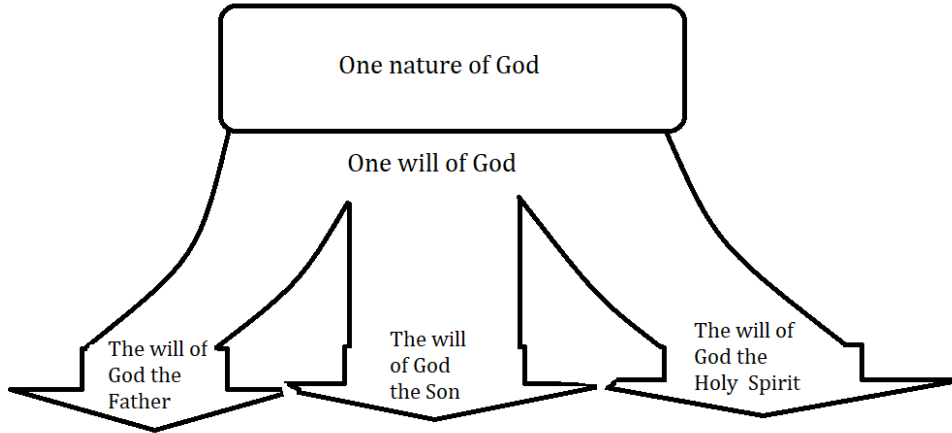


Fig. 1: Proposed understanding of nature and will of God

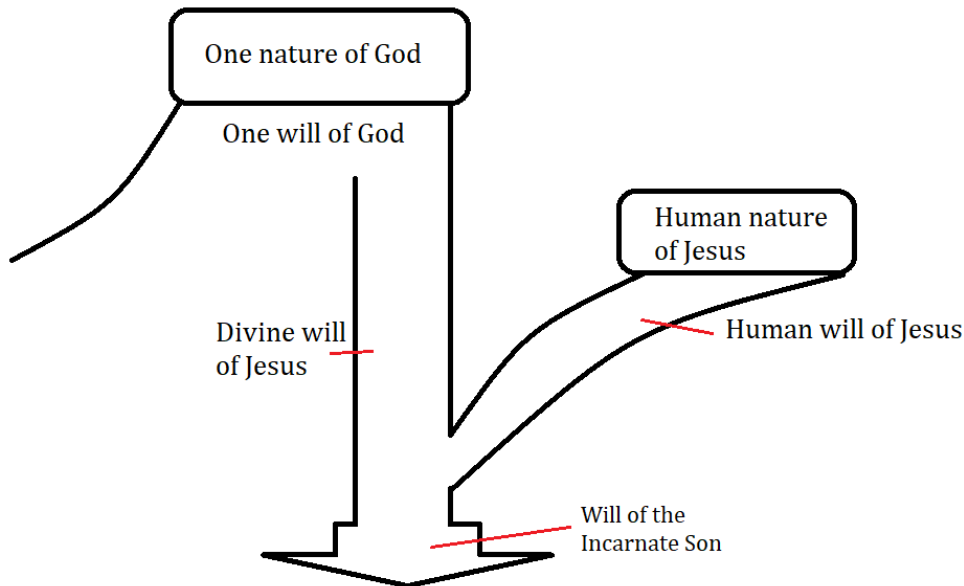


Fig. 2: Proposed view of the nature and will of the Incarnate Son

The key point about these understandings is that “will” is not a thing; it has no ontological substance. “Will” simply refers to action. The problem with classical theism is that it ontologizes everything. “Nature” is a thing, but “will” should not be treated as a thing. It is because of the patristic obsession with ontology that classical theism is, in my opinion, unable to do justice to all of the biblical data.

With this proposed view as an alternative to classical theism, it can be seen that many of the arguments against ESS simply melt away. With regards to the Monothelite controversy, the claim that “distinctive wills and operations allow us to identify distinctive natures” (p. 74) is simply false. Rather, distinctive natures are identified by the *quality* of the wills and operations, as opposed to whether they are distinct or not. Under this model, the *communicatio idiomatum* is natural (see Figure 2), not an artificial construct foisted upon Nicaea in order to ensure that “persons act according to their nature, but individual persons are the ones who act” (p. 78). Since the one who acts is the one person, while the sources are the human nature and the divine nature, the unity of the will of Christ in act is present, as Christ acts according to both natures and both wills as He sees fit. Over and against Butner’s argument, in this view, the divine person is the Son, who has a fully human will and a fully divine will, who acts as an actor with one will. Thus, dyothelitism is preserved in this new framework, while the distinct will of the Son remains. Therefore, Butner’s warning concerning the supposed danger of ESS as it attacks soteriology is likewise unwarranted.

The issue of inseparable operations

We will now look at the issue of inseparable operations. According to classical theism, and Butner, inseparable operations is essential to how God can be considered one God. If the operations are not inseparable, then how can it be said that there is ONE God?

One way of attempting to solve this solution in modern times is social trinitarianism. Accordingly, in social trinitarianism, the people are distinct and their “one-ness” is seen in the unity of action, often done by co-opting the doctrine of *perichoresis* for explaining that unity. But if God is truly one God with one nature, then there is a sense in which the actions of any one person must not be separable from the other persons of the Trinity, for otherwise it would be splitting the Godhead, like an initial monad splitting into three gods. Having a unity of purpose does not solve the problem because three humans united in a cause is still three humans, not one human. Inseparable operations therefore seems necessary in order for God to be truly one.

The manner of understanding the inseparable operations, as mentioned earlier, need not follow the thought process of the post-Nicene theologians. If in the alternative model I have proposed, will is defined as *something that originates from one’s nature that terminates in an action*, then the doctrine of inseparable actions would assert that everything that originates from one’s nature among the persons be one and the same. The one being of God means that everything that each person does comes from the one will of God. The Father does not originate something that the Son does not originate, or the Holy Spirit originates. But what the inseparability of operations does NOT say in the alternative model is that the actions do not terminate differently. Thus, we see that when God the Father said to Jesus, “This is my beloved Son,” the one doing the speaking is God the Father, not God the Son. Contra classical theism and Maximus, Jesus’ High

Priestly prayer that “not my will, but yours be done” was not about the “deliberations of the human will that submitted to the divine will” (p. 72), but rather about Jesus’ will (as to His terminus) submitting to the Father’s will (as to His terminus), while both Father and Son consent to the submission of one terminus end to the other.

Here, we can see already what ESS looks like in the new framework. In this framework, the Son (as to His terminus end) submits to the Father (as to His terminus end), while both the Father and Son consent to the submission of the Son to the Father. The submission is purely voluntary, and it is a submission of equals, for the Father and the Son and the Spirit are all fully equal and fully God.

ESS and the attributes of God

The attributes of God are what God is. Certainly, if ESS undermines any of the attributes of God, ESS is suspect and should be rejected. But is that really the case, or rather is it that Butner is operating out of the flawed metaphysics of classical theism?

Before moving further, it must be said that it is perfectly possible to retain the gems of classical theism while rejecting its metaphysical basis. After all, the metaphysics are the scaffolding while theology is the building. If we understand the providence of God in sustaining the Church such that the gates of hell cannot prevail against her (Mt. 16:18), then it is certainly possible for God to draw straight lines with crooked sticks like Platonic and Aristotelian metaphysics. The church’s job is to understand the theology as to what it is getting at, and then removing the kernel from the husk, the theological truth from the flawed metaphysics.

This applies to the doctrine of simplicity, a doctrine that basically states that God is not made of parts. In simpler words, simplicity asserts that one gets God, or nothing. It is not possible to get a part of God, or the “mercy” part only. God or nothing is the point of the doctrine of simplicity, with all the wordings of “parts” and “composition” being part of the scaffolding of the doctrine.

In this manner, Butner’s critique of the “distinction between function and being” (p. 138), as stating that “being and function have a real distinction, requiring composition in God” (*ibid.*), should be rejected as an argument based on flawed metaphysics. “Function” is not a thing, and therefore there is no composition in God when they are differentiated. Thus to Butner’s questions: “If God’s functions are distinct from the divine being, what explanation exists for why God has these functions?” (p. 139). My answer is: God’s secret will (c.f. Eph. 1:5), the same reason why God chose one to be saved, and not another. “If the divine functions are different from the divine being, can God change these functions without changing the divine being and attributes?” My answer is: God always acts according to His nature and His secret will. God cannot change these functions because His secret will is immutable. “If God is composed of distinct functions and being, are not the categories of function and being logically prior to God? Are they not the ultimate basis

of all knowledge, rather than God himself being the foundation?” My answer: I reject the premise of the question, its antecedent. God is not composed of distinct functions and being, but rather only His being. God’s secret will is not a “thing,” but it is what God desires to do. Therefore, ontologically, God’s being is the basis for existence, but the ultimate basis of knowledge (epistemology) is not God’s being (ontology) but the God who reveals His will.

Summarizing his objections to the language of submission in light of God’s attributes, Butner claims that any such submission “cannot include any idea of possible disagreement ... could include no succession or change ... any process or deliberation” (p. 147) But precisely what is the problem with a submission in which both Father and Son gladly agree to undertake? The word “submission” after all does not have to include any form of superiority or inferiority, or possibility of disagreement, or any deliberation. “Submission” simply refer to the **act** whereby one party puts oneself under the other party. It is “submission” when players in a board game nominate one person as the chairman and they listen (“submit”) to his leading in the game. It is an action word, not a motive word, not a status word, or anything of that sort. When God commands wives to submit to their husbands, should we read this as stating that wives are in any way inferior to their husbands, that wives must have a process of deliberation for every decision that they make under submission, or that wives are “obliged” (except for under the command of God) to submit to their husbands? Is “submission” an entitlement husbands should expect from their wives merely because wives are commanded to submit to their husbands?

It seems in the talk about “submission” that Butner takes a rather archaic view of submission suitable for the feudal age rather than modern society. But what is in mind when we assert ESS is merely the fact that Jesus in **act** submitted to the Father, no motives asked, no questions of status asked. There is no shame in submission for the right reason, and just because submission can be used negatively does not imply that all submission is in some ways wrong. As an aside, perhaps the question can be raised if that is what is wrong of American society: in which people either are stuck in the feudal age with unbiblical submission, or they are so egalitarian they refuse to submit to anyone for any reason at all, creating anarchy in society.

Eternity, Timelessness and Everlasting

Perhaps one of the main contributors to the confusion over ESS is the inability to think in terms of “eternity” as something other than timelessness, or the absence of succession. When it is predicated of God’s being, most assuredly if God is immutable then His being is timeless; He does not change. The problem comes when we speak of God and His interactions with us.

If God is timeless, how can he interact with us? Interactions require a point of contact, but even one point of contact splits time up to *before* and *after* the point of contact. As I had written before:⁶

Let's suppose that the Triune God is timeless. Now, to interact in time means that at a punctiliar "time," God interacts with the world. Let's put it as point t_1 . Now, if we say that God is always timeless, then point t_1 must be of infinitesimal "width," such that the "time before" the interaction is the same as the "time after" the interaction. Thus, before God interacts, it was point $(t_1 - \epsilon_0)$, and after God interacts, it is point $(t_1 + \epsilon_0)$. Thus, for all intents and purposes, God remains "timeless." For all other interactions, we can state them as t_2 to t_n , where $(t_n = t_1 + n\epsilon_0)$. Thus, in this manner, for any number of interactions God has with this finite creation, the "time" remains the same at t_1 , regardless of how many interactions God has had with His creation.

Such a solution would indeed seem to solve the problem of how God can interact with His creation. But it does not exactly cohere with timelessness. For an infinitesimal is still a quantity of some sorts, no matter how infinitely tiny it might be. t_1 is always bigger than $(t_1 - \epsilon_0)$, while $(t_1 + \epsilon_0)$ is always bigger than t_1 . Such a solution is congruent with a relative timelessness, but not absolute timelessness, which classical theism demands.

The only solution for classical theists is to embrace deism, where God in eternity enacts all his "interactions" in His eternal decree before time. In this scheme, any "interaction" God has with His creation and us is a pre-determined act that God, seeing down the corridors of time, has already put into motion from the beginning. Our interactions with God in this deistic frame is a mere illusion, since God does not at present interact with us personally.

Basic Christian belief holds that God loves His people and interacts with them. Therefore, the problem of interaction remains for classical theists, who on the one hand *philosophically* affirm a God who cannot truly interact with His creation, while on the other hand *devotionally* speak of a God who truly cares for us. If there is a place where devotion outpaces doctrine, here is one. The only other possible solution is to postulate that it is the Incarnate Christ who interacts, but then is it only the human nature and human will that interacts, since the divine nature and divine will evidently cannot do so?

Instead of tying ourselves into knots over an unsolvable problem, it is better to just jettison this aspect of classical theism. While God is timeless in His being, He is everlasting in His

⁶ Daniel C., "Eternity as Timelessness and the Issue of Interacting with the World," *Daniel's Place* (blog), August 1, 2019, accessed December 23, 2020, <https://puritanreformed.blogspot.com/2019/08/eternity-as-timelessness-and-issue-of.html>

energies or workings.⁷ God does genuinely interact with His creatures, but not from His being but His energies, the projection of Himself *ad extra*.

What does this have to do with ESS? ESS stands for ETERNAL submission of the Son, and this ties many people into knots as they see the word “eternal” and immediately think of the essence of God; His being. But that is not necessarily what ESS proponents think when they use the word “eternal.” Depending on the proponent, some of them use the word “eternal” to indicate that the submission of the Son is based on something within the Trinity, which they link to the notion of *taxis* or order. For others like me, the word “eternal” is merely to state that the submission happened before created time, and thus in “eternity past.” It is thus a submission in energies; in act, not in being.

The will of God and the *Pactum Salutis*

The submission of the Son from eternity comes to pass in the Covenant of Redemption or *Pactum Salutis*. Made in eternity past, the Son voluntarily took on the role of the Servant in the Covenant, in order to gain a people for Himself. The Father as the Lord of the Covenant presided over the covenant, promising a people for Christ as the reward for the obedience of the covenant servant. This act of covenanting marks the first submission of the Son, which, since done in eternity past, makes it an eternal submission.

Of the biblical support for the Covenant of Redemption there is little doubt (e.g. Ps. 110, Zech. 6:12-13).⁸ As the condition for the covenant involve Christ’s humiliation in his incarnation, suffering, and death, Christ is the one who has to fulfill the covenant conditions. Thus, the Son is the Servant in this covenant. All of these should be uncontroversial. However, does the *Pactum Salutis* imply the eternal submission of the Son? Since the Son submits in the covenant, it would seem that this should be the case. That this submission is voluntary is irrelevant since submission is an act, as we have mentioned. That it is between equals is likewise irrelevant. So why should this not be not proof of the eternal submission of the Son?

According to Butner, who attempts a response, he asserts that the Covenant of Redemption is not speaking of “distinct and cooperative acts of the Father commanding and the Son obeying and submitting” (p. 61). In other words, the objection focuses on the

⁷ The “energies” of God are the projection of His being onto time and space, such that we can interact with Him. The Eastern Orthodox utilized this distinction to promote their view of *theosis*, as it is explained:

The energies, then, are not an intermediary between God and the world, but they are God Himself entering into direct, unmediated contact with us. [Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, *How are we saved? The understanding of salvation in the Orthodox Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing, 1996, 2018), 48]

As Reformed evangelicals, we do not hold to *theosis*. However, the idea that God interacts with us through His energies is a helpful concept we can appropriate.

⁸ See also John V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2016)

one divine will. However, if we reject that metaphysic, then it can be clearly said that the Father (as to the terminus of will) commands, and the Son (as to the terminus of will) submits, and both are done by a singular will of God.

Thus, it seems that Butner's tepid objection to seeing the *Pactum* as proof of ESS is predicated on what he thinks ESS implies concerning will, and not the actions of the person within the Godhead in the *Pactum* itself. Given his focus on the will of God, this is perhaps understandable. However, it means that the link between the *Pactum* and ESS remain undisturbed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Butner's book is a step in the right direction. As it does not trade in strawmen about the supposed "Arian heresy" of ESS, but actually engages the teaching and its proponents seriously, it is already in a class of its own. As it stands, it is the best book so far against ESS written by someone who disagrees with it.

I have said, and will say again, that I have no problems with accusations of heresy or falsehood. But what I require is honesty and integrity. Butner does in fact make serious accusations against ESS, but he seeks to substantiate his case with actual engagement both with ESS proponents and with the Christian tradition. Where Butner shines is showing forth how ESS would work in a world of classical theism. In such a world, ESS is indeed problematic on many fronts, and through its Monothelism would undermine the Gospel message. However, classical theism is part of the problem. As I have shown in this review, we need to continually question our philosophical assumptions. Systematic theology has to be done to make sense of all of the biblical data. Unfortunately, classical theism fails to make sense of much biblical data, which is why it should be rejected.

In its place, I have proposed an alternate theism that defines "will" as *something that originates from one's nature that terminates in an action*; as a non-ontic entity. This definition allows a system whereby God has both one will and three wills, and Jesus has both two wills and one will, seen differently depending on the source or terminus of that will. In such a system, all the relevant biblical data look reconciled and we have a way to talk about God's interaction with the world, utilizing the essence/ energies distinction to speak about the distinction between timelessness and everlasting in eternity.

The correct way of understanding ESS is through the *Pactum Salutis*, whereby the Son freely bound Himself to be the Servant of that covenant, to earn a people for Himself. If we reject classical metaphysics, there is no reason why ESS cannot be clearly seen in the *Pactum*, and Butner's attempt to divide the two is seen as an exercise in a discredited metaphysic.

So what can we say about Butner's book? I would strongly recommend it, if only because it is the only book out there that attempts to deal with the issue honestly. Yet, I believe I

have shown that it has not succeeded in refuting ESS, and I hope that God might be pleased to use this review to advance the dialogue on this issue further.