

A review of “Trinity without Hierarchy”

© 2020 Daniel H. Chew

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

Introduction

In 2016, a series of posts by Carl Trueman, Liam Goligher and Todd Pruitt started an intense online war on the issue of a doctrine Trueman accused of being on the path to Arianism.¹ Known as ESS (Eternal submission of the Son, OR Eternal Subordination of the Son), EFS (Eternal Functional Submission/ Subordination), or ERAS (Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission), the opening salvo essentially accused those of holding this doctrine as being on the road to heresy, or even holding to heresy itself. The strong polemical tone in the opening salvo ensured that the firestorm that followed was intense. While some light came out of it, there was much more heat, and it is doubtful whether anyone came away with a better grasp of the position of the opposing side instead of hardening convictions on who is a heretic and who is not.

As someone who holds to a version of ESS, specifically termed as “eternal submission of the Son” and not “eternal subordination,” this firestorm was a fiasco. I do not necessarily hold to Grudem’s or Ware’s position on the topic, but in a battle where the lines are drawn, I am forced into defending them. I was especially disappointed into how self-proclaimed Reformed Confessionalists are more interested in partisanship instead of wrestling with the issues, more interested in figuring out who belongs to “us,” and who belongs to the enemy (“them”) so that they can be demonized.

It has been 4 years, and a couple of books have come out on the issue. In this book edited by Michael Bird and Scott Harrower, multiple contributors wrote essays on ESS, many either calling it an error or a heresy. Now, to term something heresy is a serious thing. If something is heresy, then whoever consciously believes and teaches it is in danger of hellfire. It is not something that should be easily thrown at a teaching or a person. For example, I believe egalitarianism is an error, but it is not heresy. I believe Evangelical Arminianism (as opposed to Classical Arminianism) is error, but it is not heresy. Therefore, I hold that an evangelical egalitarian and an Evangelical Arminian can be a brother or

¹ Carl Trueman, “Fahrenheit 381,” *Reformation 21* (blog), June 7, 2016, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.reformation21.org/mos/postcards-from-palookaville/fahrenheit-381#.V13bbvkrLIX>. For an early report of the debate up to that time, see Alastair Roberts, “The Eternal Subordination of the Son Controversy: The Debate so Far,” *Reformation 21* (blog), June 16, 2016, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.reformation21.org/blogs/the-eternal-subordination-of-t.php>. I am unable to find a compilation of links to the many blog posts on the topic since then, although I had seen at least one such webpage back in 2016 when the controversy was still raging.

sister in the Lord. I do not however treat a Classical Arminian or a Roman Catholic the same way, but as people to be evangelized.

Thus, the stakes concerning ESS are high. If some of the contributors to this volume are right, then I am in danger of hellfire. The question then is: Are they?

In this book review, I cannot say that I am not personally invested in the topic, and obviously since I still hold to ESS, my answer is obvious. This must however mean that I find the essays in the book unconvincing. But in what ways are they unconvincing?

I will review this book along the lines of an enquiry, instead of a normal thematic book review. The first question is: What is ESS, and did the contributors rightly understand ESS? The subsequent question then is: What do I think of their evaluation of ESS? Note that for the subsequent question I will only address those that I consider to have some understanding of ESS, or who deal with the supposed implications of ESS. If a contributor totally misrepresents ESS, then their evaluation of ESS will of necessity be false.

What is ESS?

In the introduction, editor Michael Bird has asserted that he is now convinced that ESS proponents like Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware are “arguing for something analogous to a semi-Arian subordinationism,” where the Son possesses a “lesser glory” than the Father.² Why that is so is not proven, as Bird proceeds to give a summary of the different essays in the book. That charge however sets the tone for the rest of the book, the chapters of which will attempt to put some teeth to the charge.

In chapter 1, Adesola Akala argues from the Gospel of John how the Son has “essential equality and oneness with the Father,” even where subordination language has been used.³ It is a good article, but it does not deal with ESS per se since all variants of ESS believe in the essential equality of the Son with the Father.

The argument of chapter 2 by Madison Pierce is that the Trinity is without a hierarchy while it has *taxis* or ordering. While there may be radical variants of ESS that believe in an *ad-intra* hierarchy, most including Grudem and Ware do not believe that there is an *in-intra* hierarchy among the persons of the Godhead. Just because there are eternal relations of authority and submission does not make these eternal relations an *ad-intra* hierarchy.

In chapter 3, Amy Peeler characterized ESS as teaching “a decrease in the divinity of the Son” if He is eternally submissive.⁴ Since that focuses on the supposed implications of ESS, I will address this in the next section.

² Michael F. Bird, “Preface: Theologians of a Lesser Son,” in Bird and Harrower, eds., 10

³ Adesola Akala, “Sonship, Sending, and Subordination in the Gospel of John,” in *ibid.*, 23-35

⁴ Amy Peeler, “What Does ‘Father’ Mean?,” in *ibid.*, 79

Ian Paul in chapter 4 looks at the Trinitarian Dynamic in the Book of Revelation, showing that “Revelations presents the equality of the persons of the Godhead.”⁵ ESS however does not deny that.

Chapter 5 sees the curious case of Peter Leithart, where the only relevance his article has against ESS is that he argues for a dependence of essence between the Father and the Son, and thus there is “an eternal mutuality among the Persons.”⁶ But except for some possible radical variants of ESS, everything that Leithart says is congruent with ESS. In fact, interestingly enough, Leithart even wrote a sentence that is pro-ESS, stating thus:

Unless the Father is capable of saying “I Father” and the Son capable of saying “I Son,” we are left with the conclusion that the only “I” in the Trinity is the “I” of the one essence, a conclusion that is hard to distinguish from modalism.⁷

This particular statement will come in handy when dealing with some of the critics of ESS in the book.

Amy Brown Hughes in chapter 6 looks into Gregory of Nyssa’s contribution to Trinitarianism. It is a helpful article but I do not see any relevance to ESS except a warning about reading too much into the names of God. As a caution, such is helpful, but that is about it. Tyler Wittman in chapter 7 look at Aquinas’ view, and there are certain things there that are questionable, but the chapter itself has no relevance to what ESS is.

T. Robert Baylor is the first one where an actual definition of ESS or EFS is attempted. According to Baylor, in EFS, *submission* is integral to the *filiation* of the Son, it is *eternal* because “it is a natural and necessary property belonging to the Son,” and it is *functional* because this submission “determines all acts of the Son.”⁸ That sounds like an adequate explanation. However, what does it mean that submission is “integral” to the filiation of the Son? That is unclear, and different variants of ESS would have different ideas of what that means. Also, what does it mean that the submission is a “natural and necessary property”? Is it an ontological property or a property of action? The two are not the same thing. Lastly, just because it is functional, does it mean that it determines ALL acts of the Son? As it can be seen, this definition is unclear and admit of both orthodox and heretical views.

Jeff Fisher in chapter 9 stated that ESS teaches that the Son is “relationally subordinate or submissive to the Father in eternity,” “in the divine nature.”⁹ ESS does teach that the Son is relationally subordinate or submissive to the Father in eternity, but it is false that it is so in the divine nature. Fisher here misrepresents ESS, and he is not the last to do so.

⁵ Ian Paul, “The Trinitarian Dynamic in the Book of Revelation,” in *ibid.*, 105

⁶ Peter J. Leithart, “No Son, no Father,” in *ibid.*, 121

⁷ Leithart, in *ibid.*, 111

⁸ T. Robert Baylor, “He Humbled Himself,” in *ibid.*, 166

⁹ Jeff Fisher, “Protestant Scholastics on Trinity and Persons,” in *ibid.*, 195-6

Jules A. Martínez-Olivieri argues that ESS teaches “hierarchical relations of subordination in the Godhead.”¹⁰ Also, Martínez-Olivieri argues that in EFS methodology, “Jesus Christ’s relationship of authority and submission to the Father in the economy of salvation is epistemically basic for conceptualizing the Son’s ontological divine filiation from eternity past, present, and future.”¹¹ It is true that certain forms of ESS teaches “hierarchical relations of subordination in the Godhead,” most notably the variants embraced by Grudem and Ware. But it is however false to say that they hold that there are hierarchical relations of subordination in the **divine nature**, *ad intra*. Also, while EFS in the Grudem-Ware variant utilizes authority and submission motifs to conceptualize the Son’s filiation, to assert that it is “epistemically basic” is questionable. Rather, it seems to me that Grudem and Ware are utilizing the authority and submission motifs so as to “fill in the blanks” for conceptualizing the filiation of the Son, reading the economic Trinity as a reflection of the ontological Trinity. The direction seems to be reasoning from filiation to authority and submission, rather than authority and submission informing what filiation is.

In chapter 11, John McClean looked at the thought of Wolfhart Pannenberg and his doctrine of the Trinity. It does not directly deal with ESS however. Chapter 12 by Stephen Holmes addresses what he thinks EFS requires but not what it is, so it will be addressed later. Similarly, James Gordon’s chapter deals with what he believes to be the implication of ESS, and thus will be addressed in the next section.

Graham Cole sees EFS as looking “into the eternal inner life of the Trinity, ... into the essential Trinity.”¹² While EFS does mention the inner life of the Trinity, we deny that we are looking into the essential Trinity. For ESS advocates, “inner life” does not equal being or essence, something that classical theists continue to fail to understand.

The last two chapters by Scott Harrower are interesting. Chapter 15 deals with Rahner’s Rule and especially Bruce Ware’s interpretation of Rahner’s Rule. Chapter 16 deals with the issue of theological culture, specifically looking at how the heterodoxy of Isaac Newton lead to full-blown Unitarianism in his theological successor Samuel Clarke.¹³ Theological culture is indeed important. But to use that as an argument against ESS is to assume that ESS is heterodox, which I deny.

Thus, in the entire book, I have not found a proper definition of ESS. Where it is explicitly offered, as for example by T. Robert Baylor, it is vague and ambiguous. Where parts of an assumed definition are mentioned in passing, they are false. As I have mentioned, there is more heat than there is light. This is what happens when people are not listening but rather conceptualizing “the enemy” in their heads.

Let me therefore offer a general frame of ESS, followed by my specific variant.

¹⁰ Jules A. Martínez-Olivieri, “There is a Method to the Madness,” in *ibid.*, 231

¹¹ Martínez-Olivieri, in *ibid.*, 223

¹² Graham Cole, “The Trinity without Tiers: A Response to the Eternal Subordination/ Submissiveness of the Son Debate,” in *ibid.*, 279

¹³ Scott Harrower, “The Intergenerational Impact of Theological Beliefs,” in *ibid.*, 333

The general form of ESS teaches the following:

- 1) The Son submits to the Father in eternity
- 2) This submission of the Son to the Father is proper and immutable.
- 3) Therefore, only the Son can submit to the Father; the Father cannot submit to the Son
- 4) Thus, while there is an equality of essence and nature, the Son willingly submits to the Father from eternity
- 5) This submission is seen in act, and thus it is functional
- 6) Since it done between the two persons of the Godhead apart from any creature involved, it is said to be in the “inner life of God.”

My specific variant of ESS adds the following:

- 1) The submission of the Son begins in eternity with the *Pactum Salutis*.
- 2) In the *Pactum Salutis*, the Father is the Lord of the Covenant, and the Son the Servant of the Covenant
- 3) The assigning of roles in the *Pactum* is immutable. The Son is always the Servant and thus always submits to the Father. There is no possible world whereby the Father submits to the Son
- 4) Therefore, while there is an equality between the persons of essence, the Son still submits to the Father, willingly, yet a willing submission is still submission
- 5) This submission to the Father informs the role the Son plays in history.
- 6) It is a real covenant, thus it belongs to the “inner life of God,” an eternal dynamic of “energies” that is not of the category “essence.”

Any critique of ESS has to first not misrepresent it. Unfortunately, even in a scholarly work, misrepresentations of the issue are present.

Evaluating the critiques of ESS

The first critique in Amy Peeler’s chapter argues that there is no submission of the Son since the Son already possess it by virtue of His divinity.¹⁴ But this is to fail to understand that the submission is not of nature but of persons. There is therefore no “decrease of the divinity of the Son” because ESS is about persons, not nature.

Tyler Wittmann’s chapter reveals to us the metaphysical problems that lie behind classical theism, in his attempt to put forward Thomas Aquinas’ supposedly superior view. The problem with Thomism is its dependence upon Aristotelian philosophy, and here is where we begin to see why classical theists fail to understand ESS, because they read ESS with

¹⁴ Peeler, in *ibid.*, 76

Aristotelian lenses. Thus, we see Wittman repeat a “truism” by Thomas that “acts follows being (*operari sequitur esse*).”¹⁵ That however does not follow if one does not follow Aristotle. The idea that act follows being comes from the idea that teleology is determined by ontology, or to put it in Aristotelian terms, the final cause of an object is part of what the object is. But, as we can see clearly through science for example, what a thing is means nothing as to its purpose. How a thing acts is how it wants to act or how a living being wants it to act. While certainly it can be argued that one cannot extrapolate from the creation to the Creator, yet the idea that act follows being is a philosophical imposition upon God that comes from the creation as well. Act does not follow being, not even in creation.

In James Gordon’s chapter, we are told that for ESS, “properties do not (and indeed cannot) exist abstracted from a property bearer, which entails that there must be ... four property bearers in God: God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹⁶ Here again we see the imposition of Aristotelian philosophy. Why is it that properties cannot exist from a property bearer? We are not told. Since ontology in philosophy is an attempt to understand the world, not a true description of how the world actually works (which is the domain of science), all properties are descriptors that do not require “property bearer(s)” to exist as a category.

Other philosophical assumptions that must be questioned are the idea that properties are necessarily ontological,¹⁷ that something eternal is necessary and not contingent for God otherwise God is no more immutable,¹⁸ that intellect and will are properties of the divine nature and not the person,¹⁹ and the view that the belief in the one divine will of God precludes the presence of three distinct wills of the persons.²⁰ All of these are assumptions made and never proven. All of these are philosophical assumptions that cannot be proven from the Word of God. It is regrettable that none of these assumptions are seen as what they are: assumptions.

Thus, in evaluating the critiques of ESS, it can be easily seen that the critiques stem from either misunderstanding of ESS, or reading ESS through Aristotelian lenses. The problem is that, one must always understand any philosophy or theology first according to its own terms. If we do not use the words and concepts with the same meaning as classical theists do, for example the term “inner life,” then critiques of ESS should be cautious and attempt to understand what ESS actually teaches first, before attempting a critique. As it stands, all critiques of ESS here stems from an assumption of Aristotelianism, a philosophy that is enjoying a resurgence in modern times which it should not have and does not deserve.

¹⁵ Tyler R. Wittman, “*Dominium naturale et oeconomicum*,” in *ibid.*, 145

¹⁶ James B. Gordon, “The Presence of the Triune God,” in *ibid.*, 294

¹⁷ Baylor, in *ibid.*, 166

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 173

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177

²⁰ Stephen R. Holmes, “Classical Trinitarianism and Eternal Functional Subordination,” in *ibid.*, 271

Conclusion

Since the 2016 fiasco, there has been a couple books about the subject of ESS. This book in particular aims to provide a theological rebuttal to ESS by multiple scholars on the topic.

As an exercise in conveying classical theism, this book is great. However, in its aim to refute ESS, it is a dismal failure. It fails because, where it attempts to provide a definition, it either misrepresents ESS or uses vague language to define it. It fails to notice that ESS in any of its variants does not begin with Aristotelian philosophy. It fails in noticing that there are many unspoken philosophical axioms that classical theism holds to which are not supported by Scripture or and which are not proven by the authors. Thus, despite the fact that many scholars have contributed to the book, the book is a failure in what it sets out to do.

This book sets out to “reclaim Nicene orthodoxy,” to which it is argued that one must confess “the same sort of divine life as the fourth-century fathers confessed” in order to be regarded as Nicene.²¹ But if the church is bounded by her confessions and not by the writings of individual theologians, as many have said on the issue of 6-day creation (since it is indisputable that almost all of the Reformed orthodox held to an approximate 6000 year old earth and 6-24 creation), then certainly the same applies to the issue of Nicene orthodoxy. To be orthodox according to Nicea is to confess the same faith as the Nicene creed, and not necessarily believe the same as any of the Nicene theologians, who reason in an atmosphere of Greek philosophy. We can accept the statements as understood within an Aristotelian framework (original context), without letting the Aristotelian framework dictate how we ought to do theology today as we build upon the Nicene skeletal framework. As it stands, this book betrays a naïve view of *ressourcement*. Going back to the sources is helpful in showing us what others have said in previous time. Sometimes that means that the older thought is better, but not always, and most certainly not where philosophy (as opposed to theology) is involved.

In conclusion, this book fails at refuting ESS, and fails in reclaiming Nicene orthodoxy. Much less has it shown that ESS is a serious error. It is helpful in seeing some of the more scholarly responses since the 2016 ESS fiasco, but it shows me only that nothing much has changed since then since nobody on the supposed “pro-Nicene” side has truly listened to the other side.

²¹ Holmes, in *ibid.*, 266