

EFS, Metaphysics and Theology - A second response to Derrick Brite on EFS

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Back in December 2021, Rev. Derrick Brite wrote a response to Dr. Owen Strachan concerning his most recent defense of EFS (Eternal Function Submission or ESS - Eternal Submission of the Son).¹ Despite the fact that I had expressed skepticism over his desire for conversation, Brite did seem sincere and I wrote a response to his article.² One month went by, then two. My cynicism however was misplaced, as Derrick Brite pulled through with his commitment to a conversation on the topic of EFS, and wrote a response to my post.³ I would therefore like to respond to his article with the same care and kindness he has shown.

In this first response, Brite expressed dissatisfaction with my response. In his view, while he acknowledges that we (EFS and EFS-adjacent) overtly reject ontological subordination, our theologies would ultimately result in a belief in ontological subordination. In his view, “You can’t make the claim that EFS/ERAS isn’t about ontological subordination while continuing to make statements of ontological disparity.” In other words, according to Brite, any statement in line with EFS is a statement of ontological disparity. Therefore, even though we deny ontological subordination, our statements are making a case for ontological subordination despite our denials that we are doing so.

Since I as a Reformed Christian focus on the *Pactum Salutis*, it is fitting that Brite addressed that issue head-on. According to Brite, he believed that distinct wills are not required for a covenant, stating that such “would be news to many Reformed theologians” and that “submission is not a necessary ingredient for covenant.” Citing D. Glen Butner and Herman Witsius, Brite believed that my interpretation of the *Pactum* is in error. What is required for the covenant is merely agreement without the Son “subject[ing] ... to the Father.”

Brite’s response is careful and nuanced. As someone who learns how to see things from different angles (i.e. different paradigms), I would certainly agree with him if I held to his philosophical presuppositions. But that is the crux of the issue: I don’t. With that, I will like to unpack what this means in the rest of this response.

¹ Derrick Brite, “A Response to Strachan,” *Reformation 21* (blog), Dec 13 2021. Accessed Feb 14 2022 (<https://www.reformation21.org/blog/a-response-to-strachan>)

² Daniel H. Chew, “A Response to Derrick Brite on the Issue of EFS,” *Daniel’s Place* (blog), Dec 16 2021. Accessed Feb 14 2022 (<https://puritanreformed.blogspot.com/2021/12/a-response-to-derrick-brite-on-issue-of.html>)

³ Derrick Brite, “Covenant and Ontology: An EFS Rejoinder,” *Reformation 21* (blog) Feb 10 2022. Accessed Feb 14 2022 (<https://www.reformation21.org/blog/covenant-and-ontology-an-efs-rejoinder>)

On the Metaphysics of Will and Submission

What is “will”? What is “submission”? What do these words mean? Brite has not really explained them, but rather used them in a certain manner which I guess he thinks is self-evident. “Will” to Classical Theists is a theological term with a history going back to the Sixth Ecumenical Council (Constantinople III - 680-1AD), where Monothelism was rejected as heresy against the Catholic (i.e. universal) Church. In this early medieval setting, “will” was understood to be a property of nature. Since Jesus Christ has two natures (human and divine), a truth established at Chalcedon in 451 AD, he must have two wills as well (human and divine). From then on, theology done in line with that tradition ties “will” to “nature.” Shifting from Christology to Theology Proper, the fact that God has one nature must necessarily mean that God has one will as well. The link tying “nature” to “will” is taken to be an axiom in theological discourse, but for some strange reason was never questioned at all. Why should “will” be a property of “nature”?

We can see Brite taking this axiomatically when he asserts that “will is a natural property,” and therefore states that “to teach that the Son submits His will to the Father in eternity strikes at the heart of the doctrine of divine simplicity.” Lost in all this is the failure to question that key assertion. Lost in this as well is the failure to think critically about church history. We must remember that the Sixth Ecumenical Council was no ecumenical council at all, regardless of whether what they had pronounced was or was not true. Furthermore, as it emerged in a time when the light of the Gospel was rapidly fading leading to the relative darkness of the medieval period (thus necessitating the Reformation), questions should be raised as to the orthodoxy of that council. Ruminating on the progress of church history, we should realize that the same Eastern splinter of the Church Catholic directly contradicted Scripture in the “Seventh Ecumenical Council” of Nicaea II where it mandated the use of icons.

The axiom that “will” is a property of the nature and not of the person poses problems for one’s theological anthropology as well. The Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky asserts that in a human person, “the nature wills and acts, the person chooses, accepting or rejecting that which the nature wills.”⁴ In other words, in order to preserve Constantinople III’s assertion that will is a property of nature, Lossky states that the person does not will anything at all, but chooses after the will wills. Of course, that helps to preserve the Synergism in Eastern Orthodoxy, since the human nature is totally sinful yet Man is free to choose or not choose God. Regardless of that, the point to take note here is how unnatural such a definition of “will” is.

⁴ Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1957), 125

It is Brite and the Classical Theists' prerogative to define "will" in that strange manner. For the rest of us however, "will" just means "will" - what a person does in choosing something or another thing; one action or another action. Therefore, because we do not define "will" in that strange, unnatural manner, Brite's argument fails. We do not therefore see the submission of the will of the Son to the Father as undermining the doctrine of divine simplicity.

I have a few questions here for Brite and other Classical Theists: (1) Can you admit that we EFSers are running with a different definition for "will" here? (2) In light of Martin Luther arguing for the bondage of the will, do you agree that both Rome and Eastern Orthodoxy would have no problem with Luther's view on the will if a distinction is made, per Lossky, between "will" and "choosing"? (3) Therefore, do you think that the definition of "will" you are running with (Constantinople III's definition) is truly the normal meaning of "will" and the prevalent one in the Reformed Tradition, and if so, why?

On the meaning of the word "submission," I must state again that in EFS, the word always indicates an action. The idea that "submission" necessarily implies ontological ordering, or any idea of superiority or inferiority, is a view we reject. Here again, I would like to ask Brite and the other classical theists: Can you agree that EFSers do not associate superiority or inferiority to the word "submission"? Therefore, would you be willing to not read tones of superiority and inferiority every time you see the word "submission"?

Witsius on Will and Submission in the *Pactum Salutis*

Along with Brite's insistence that will is a property of nature is his citation of Herman Witsius to assert that there is absolutely no submission of the Son to the Father in the *Pactum Salutis*. Herman Witsius of course is the Dutch Reformed theologian who synthesized Cocceian and Voetian thought to create a mature 17th century covenant theology. His *Economy of the Covenants* is taken to be the pinnacle of Reformed thought on the covenants. If we want to know what Reformed scholasticism believes about the covenants of God, Witsius' work would be the place to go to. Support from Witsius would not necessarily imply that one's position is correct, but it would certainly imply that one's view is supported by the Reformed Tradition. Is Brite therefore correct in marshaling Witsius as a witness for his view on the *Pactum*?

Before continuing, I would like to put up two quotes from Witsius' *Economy of the Covenants* so we have a sense of what Witsius taught:

II. When I speak of the compact between the Father and the Son, I thereby understand the will of the Father, giving the Son to be the Head and Redeemer

of the elect; and the will of the Son, presenting himself as a Sponsor of Surety of them; in all which the nature of a compact and agreement consists.⁵

IX. It is also proof of this, that Christ, often in the Psalms and elsewhere, calls God the Father his God. ... in these things the whole nature and design of the covenant consists. As therefore Christ calls God the Father his God; and on the other hand, the Father calls Christ his servant, both of them do by that name indicate a compact of obedience and reward.⁶

In the first quote, we notice that Witsius speaks of a distinct “will of the Father” and a distinct “will of the Son,” something which seems to put him outside the classical theist usage of “will” as a property of nature. In the second quote, we notice that the names of God have covenantal overtones indicating “a compact of obedience and reward,” and another word for “obedience” is “submission.” Witsius agrees that Christ is the servant in the covenant, and therefore there does not seem to be any reason to assert that Witsius does not teach submission within the Covenant. A voluntary submission to be true, but a submission nonetheless.

We now go to Brite’s citation of Witsius. For a time, I could not find the exact quote, and the reason for that is because the actual sentences are on a different page. This does not bode well for Brite’s citation of Witsius, as getting page numbers wrong may very well indicate that one did not actually check the actual source material. Also, although I am citing a reprint edition, I have the original ones as well, and the page numberings of Witsius’ work is preserved from the original version cited by Brite to the Reformation Heritage edition.

Brite’s article places the Witsius’ quote at page 151 in Witsius’ *Economy of the Covenants*. The actual page number the quote is found is page 180 of Witsius’ work. I will now cite the passage and its immediate context.

V. The law, proposed to the Mediator, may be considered in a twofold view: 1st *As the directory of his nature and office*. 2dly. *As the condition of the covenant*. The Mediator himself may be considered these three ways. 1st *As God*. 2dly, *As Man*. 3dly, *As Mediator God-man*. We are distinctly to compare these things, together. ⁷

⁵ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenant between God and Man*, 1.2.2. This version Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenant between God and Man* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 165

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.2.9; This version, pages 170-1

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.3.5. This version, page 179

VI. The Son, as precisely God, neither was, nor could be subject to any law, to any superior; that being contrary to the nature of Godhead, which we now suppose the Son to have in common with the Father. ...⁸

VII. Nor is it any objection against this, that the Son, from eternity, undertook for men, and thereby came under a certain peculiar relation to those that were to be saved. For, as that engagement was nothing but the most glorious act of the divine will of the Son, doing what one but God could do, it implies therefore no manner of subjection: it only imports, that there should be a time, when that divine person, on assuming flesh, would appear in the form of a servant. And **by undertaking to perform this obedience, in the human nature, in its proper time, the Son, as God, did no more subject himself to the Father, than the Father with respect to the Son, to the owing that reward of debt, which he promised him a right to claim.** All these things are to be conceived of in a manner becoming God.⁹

VIII. Nor ought it be urged, that the Son, even before His incarnation, was called *the Angel*, Gen. xlvi. 16. Exod. xxiii. 20. For that signifies no inferiority of the Son, before the time appointed, for his incarnation; but only a form resembling the appearances of angels, and prefiguring his future mission into the world.¹⁰

As it can be seen, Witsius in context is discussing the status of the Mediator in relation to the law. He does this by looking at the Son firstly as God, secondly as Man, and thirdly as the God-Man. With regards to the law, the Son could not be subject to the Law as God, for He is God, as stated in section 6 above. Witsius continued this flow of thought in section 7 by stating that even the submission due to His incarnation and death did not make him inferior to the Father and thus “subject” to Him. Rather, as the *Pactum* binds the Son to submit, likewise the Father is bound to reward the Son for His submission (“the owing that reward of debt”), and therefore the Son is not inferior to the Father because of His earthly humiliation. Section 8 further continues the thought by stating that the pre-incarnate Son (i.e. before His humiliation) was not inferior despite being called “the angel.”

The context of Witsius’ quote therefore lies in exploring the implication of the Son’s submission to His ontology. First, Witsius states that the Son is co-equal to God and therefore is not inferior. Second, Witsius states that the Son’s humiliation does not make Him [ontologically] inferior because the *Pactum* is mutually binding. Thirdly, Witsius states that the Son’s pre-incarnate name of “the Angel” does not make Him

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.3.6. This version, page 179

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.3.7. This version, page 180. Bold added to highlight the cited portion.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.3.8. This version, page 180

inferior because the Angel is a prefigurement and only bears resemblance to actual angels.

How does that tie in with Brite's citation? Brite's citation fails because the verb "subject" as used by Witsius is ontological, whereas Brite is using it to argue that submission of any kind is not present in the *Pactum*. Brite also fails to notice that "the Father's debt to the Son" is with regards to the owing of the reward the Father is bound to give the Son in the *Pactum*. "The Father's debt to the Son" is not the submission of the Father to the Son. While Witsius is arguing that the submission of the Son does not imply inferiority ("subject to") since both parties are bound to the conditions of the covenant, Brite uses the quote to argue that reading submission into the *Pactum* would imply mutual submission. But don't just blindly agree with me. I would urge readers to read for themselves Witsius' writings and decide who has adequately represented what Witsius says in that chapter in his book.

Witsius has more to say about the *Pactum*, but I will look at those later when we deal with the issue of necessity.

On the Metaphysics of Attributes and Act

Alongside this idea of will being a property of nature comes the classical theist view of attributes. For classical theism, "attributes" are substances or things. They exist really just like cars and wind, since for Aristotle, thought "in its actualized states is identical to the act in which it is thought,"¹¹ and God is pure act. When classical theists claim that God is His attributes, they are asserting more than the view that God cannot be separated from His attributes (the biblical view). Rather, each "attribute" is a thing that really exists. In order for any attribute to not achieve autonomous existence, God must be them, so that there are no parts of "free moving" attributes attached to God as like a composite thing.

All of such ideas about attributes depend on Aristotelian metaphysics. For most of us, "attributes" at their core are descriptive terms. To say that William is a man is to merely state that "man" is a descriptor that fits him. Nobody believes that to call William a man is to assert that a reified attribute "being a man" is either William himself or is attached to him, sticking to him like magnets on a fridge. Of course, as composite creatures, we do have parts, and therefore our "parts" contribute to our attributes as well (e.g. "having two eyes," "having two legs"). However, "parts" and "attributes" are not necessarily the same thing, as the attribute "being a man" shows. "Attribute" is first and foremost a descriptor term that can be used to describe parts of things.

When it comes to God, the simplicity of God is an attribute of God that asserts that God has no parts. If attributes are things, then any "part" of an attribute that is not

¹¹ David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 35

identical with God would be outside of God's simple being, and therefore simplicity is denied. The total identification of God's attributes of God's being is necessary for classical theism, or God would cease being God.

If however we take attributes as primarily descriptors, as I do, then the whole issue would be construed differently. The identification of God's attributes with God's being is merely to say that one cannot separate God from His attributes, as if God's justice can be removed and God remains God. It is an "is" of union, not an "is" of absolute identity. To assert that God has attribute X is merely to say X is what God is like without any commitment to how that is or whether X is of the essence of God.

This is important as it goes to the core of why Brite and other classical theists continually assert that we hold to "ontological disparity" despite our repeated denials to the contrary. Brite points to one statement I had made, where I had said "For the Son to not submit to the Father is for God to be not God; an impossibility." He then moves on to cite Strachan's book *The Grand Design*, stating from there that EFS is committed to the idea that "a definitional aspect of the being of God is the relationship of authority and submission." The problem is that neither Strachan nor I have mentioned anything about the "being of God." In fact, I would object to the statement "a definitional aspect of the being of God is the relationship of authority and submission" as heretical. But why would Brite think that is what EFS teaches? The only way it seems that one can get from statements from Strachan and me to statements like Brite's is to hold to attributes as things.

When I state that the Son must submit to the Father, that is not a statement of ontology. In my first response, I had made it clear that such submission is a submission in God's energies not His essence. It is to state merely what it appears, what God does and has done. There are attributes of God that pertain to His being, for example simplicity. But attributes such as "the Son submits to the Father" is not a proper attribute but a descriptor. It is not an attribute of the Son in the divine essence.¹² Therefore, although we say that the Son submits to the Father, we deny that submission of the Son is of the essence of the divine.

Brite brings further artillery onto the scene in the writings of Kevin Giles, where he remarks that subordination of being lies behind submission in act or function. That brings another plank of Aristotelian philosophy into the scene: that act follows being (*agere sequitur esse*). But this depends on Aristotelian fourfold causality, especially the idea of final causation, which I reject.¹³ While certainly nature influences act, I reject the view that nature or being fully directs act. After all, if God has the freedom

¹² I do not hold to such things as the "essence of the Son." There is only one undivided essence: Father, Son and Spirit

¹³ See Daniel H. Chew, "Why Act follows Being is unbiblical," *Daniel's Place* (blog), Dec 20 2021. Accessed Feb 14 2022 (<https://puritanreformed.blogspot.com/2021/12/why-act-follows-being-is-unbiblical.html>)

to save one person or not to save the same person, that act must not come from His own immutable nature or He would not be free at all to choose whom He would save.

As someone who rejects Aristotle and holds to modern physics, I reject both the reification of attributes and Aristotelian four-fold causation. I do not hold them to be true of this world, and I do not see why they are needed for theology either. I would challenge Brite, and other classical theists like him, to prove these to be true and necessary for a biblical theology before proceeding further.

On the Metaphysics of Necessity

The final issue I would like to address is the issue of necessity. What does it mean for something to be necessary? According to Brite and the classical theists, if something is necessary, then it is essential and thus ontological. As I have said in my review of chapter 8 of Matthew Barrett's book *Simply Trinity*, such argumentation depends on equivocation between two meanings of the word "essential."¹⁴ Something is "essential" if it has to happen. Something is also "essential" if it pertains to the essence of a thing. The two meanings of the word "essential" are not the same. The two are the same only if one holds to Aristotelian philosophy, whereby a thing can be described by its four causes. If that is the case, if something has to happen ("essential" as being necessary), then the happening must be described by one of its four causes. Since God is pure act, any such cause would pertain to His being, and therefore anything divine that is necessary must pertain to the essence of the divine.

However, if we throw out Aristotelianism, this line of reasoning falls apart. If God's will is free, His will must not be determined (deterministically) by His nature, otherwise an immutable nature implies a determined will and thus God is not free. If God is to be free, He is who He is, and He does what He does, and He is not what He does.

Necessity in this light is not about some mutability or immutability of the divine essence. Rather, necessity here has to do with the logical flow between cause and effect as it relates to possible worlds. X is "necessary" for Y if and only thing X is found in all possible worlds where Y is, and not found in all possible worlds where Y is not. To put it more systematically,

$$\Box X = \sim \Diamond \sim X$$

$$\Box (Y \rightarrow X) = \Box Y \rightarrow \Box X = (\sim \Diamond \sim Y) \rightarrow (\sim \Diamond \sim X)$$

Where X = "The Son submits to the Father" and Y = "God is"

¹⁴ Daniel H. Chew, *Contra Barrett on the Issue of EFS: A Critique of Chapter 8 of Simply Trinity*, accessed June 6 2022 (<http://puritanreformed.net/theology/ContraBarrettEFS.pdf>)

Thus, to state that it is necessary for the presence of the biblical God to lead to the Son submitting to the Father is equivalent to saying that the necessity of God leads to the necessity of the Son submitting to the Father. Therefore, it is not possible for God to not exist, and for the Son to not submit to the Father.

As it can be seen, this is an exercise in modal logic, and says nothing at all about the divine essence. What is required is just to note that the Scripture teaches that the Son submits to the Father, and that such submission is part of the eternal plan of God which is true in all possible worlds. The necessity of the Son's submission to the Father is one of modal necessity, and has no relation to the divine essence at all.

This issue of necessity has come up before in the history of theology, albeit on different topics. The question has been asked whether it is necessary for Jesus to die on the Cross in atonement for sin. On the one hand, God's plan is immutable, and Jesus is the eternal Savior who was slain before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; alt rendering). But dying on the Cross happens in time, and it happens in a world of contingencies. Furthermore, God is free so He does not need to save sinners and therefore dying on the Cross is not necessary, is it? One can start to see the thorniness of such a question, and why questions on necessity are not as easy as the classical theists have made them out to be.

My question for Brite and the classical theists is this: Can you see there is a difference between modal necessity and essential necessity? Can you at least recognize the complexity of questions of what constitutes necessity as it relates to God, and stop pigeon-holing all ideas about necessity into questions on the divine being? Perhaps classical theists should actually engage the philosophical literature on this topic and others instead of insisting on reading everything through the lens of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

This brings us to Witsius and the *Pactum*. Here is what Witsius has said about the *Pactum* as it relates to necessity:

XXI. The third thing we promised to enquire into was this: "Could the Son refuse to undertake, or withdraw himself from this covenant?" To which question, we are again to answer distinctly. 1st. If *the Son* be considered as *God*, the whole of this covenant was of his own most free will and pleasure. There neither was, nor could be any necessity to bind the Son of God, as such, to this covenant. Here is nothing but mere *good pleasure, philanthropy unmerited*, and altogether liberal, pure, and unmixed grace. 2dly. If he be considered as *man*, though he indeed entered into this engagement of his own accord, without being constrained; yet he could not, without sin, from which he is at the greatest distance, withdraw from this agreement ... ¹⁵

¹⁵ Witsius, 1.3.21; This version, p. 184

XXIII. 2dly. The Son of God had from eternity engaged to satisfy this covenant, by assuming human nature, and obeying in it ... If the human nature, personally united in him, could have withdrawn itself from, and renounced the covenant, it was possible that the Son of God himself might have violated his covenant engagements. And in that case Christ would not be either the true and faithful God, who cannot lie, or not be God omnipotent ... ¹⁶

XXIV. 3dly. God had by an eternal and irrevocable decree, *appointed, promised, and confirmed by oath*, the inheritance of all blessings in Christ, Heb. vi. 13-18. Luke i. 73. But if Christ could have withdrawn himself from the covenant, then *the decree* of God would have become *void*, his promises *been deceitful*, and his *oath falsified*; and therefore the whole counsel of God concerning the oeconomy of our salvation, so often inculcated in the prophetic writings, would have become of no effect; which is indeed blasphemy to imagine. ... ¹⁷

Witsius, in responding to the question whether the *Pactum* was necessary for the Son, retreated to the difference between the human and divine nature, focusing only on the fact that it was impossible for the human nature to retreat from the *Pactum*. The divine nature delights in the *Pactum* and thus no necessity bounds the Son as God to the covenant. And if one sees “bound” here as forcing the Son to go through the *Pactum*, that is true. But what Witsius glosses over is the fact that for the Son to choose to, in a sense, go against what he delights in, is an impossibility. The idea of modal necessity is present in Witsius’ thought, yet not emphasized.

The main point to drive here is that modal necessity is not new to the Reformed tradition. There is nothing wrong with insisting on the modal necessity of the submission of the Son in the *Pactum*. To those who insist that the Reformed Tradition does not historically speak using such language, are we more interested in policing speech or speaking truth?

Conclusion

I have looked at the metaphysics of will and submission, then taken an excursus into the writings of Herman Witsius on the *Pactum*. I continued with discussing the metaphysics of attributes and act, and the metaphysics of necessity. All of such is done in an attempt to show that the difference between classical theism and my view, and perhaps the views of others who dissent from classical theism, is based on numerous philosophical differences. I have laid down my particular take on these issues, not in an attempt to place philosophy over theology, but to show that my dissent is based upon my disagreements over philosophical assumptions (not biblical assumptions) made by classical theists that, to my knowledge, have never been

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.3.23; this version page 185

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.3.24; this version page 186

defended or addressed. The disagreement is not between Scripture and philosophy, but one philosophy against another philosophy.

In this light, I would like to make two pleas to my classical theist brethren in general (assuming they still think of me as a fellow believer), and Rev. Brite in particular. First, if you are genuinely interested in truth, and the truths of God, can you concede that the differences between classical theism and EFS views like mine are due to fundamental philosophical differences? Can you note those differences, and examine your own theology to see if you have smuggled these unexamined assumptions into your theology? Even if you remain a classical theist, could you be self-reflective and be conscious of your assumptions?

Secondly, since I reject your unexamined assumptions, perhaps you can see fit to actually examine these points. If you believe in the principle that act follows being and other such Aristotelian notions, please defend those notions instead of merely repeating them. Why must act follow being for example? Why must necessity be equivalent to the divine essence? How can God be truly free to save whom He wills if His immutable nature is His will? Please address these questions, if you believe classical theism to be the truth on the matter.

Lastly, I would like to add a personal address to all classical theists: Ever since 2016, I have truly wished that the temperature would lower and the demonization would stop. Is all this infighting worth it? You are not the Nicene fathers, you are not whichever theological hero you think you are. You are fighting to divide the Church upon the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, the Saint of the Roman Catholic Church. Is all this worth it? Ask yourself this in your heart as you come to personal prayer before our Lord, who will judge between us on the matter.

Maranatha. Amen.