

## **Contra Barrett on the issue of EFS: A critique of Chapter 8 of *Simply Trinity***

© 2021 Daniel H. Chew

Matthew Barrett, an associate professor at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has written a book that claims to be all about a recovery of Nicene Orthodoxy, and in particular the doctrine of simplicity of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> The blurb at the back calls it a “groundbreaking book,” although how groundbreaking it truly is is a matter up for debate. What it does however is to dig down hard on a strong version of Thomistic Classical Theism, and label all alternatives as doctrines that manipulate the Trinity, “recreating the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in our own image.” Such polemics are strong words indeed, and there will be a review of the book forthcoming.

For now, I will focus on chapter 8 of that book, which deserves an article on its own. In chapter 8, Barrett writes against the doctrine of EFS (Eternal Functional Subordination), otherwise known as ESS (Eternal Submission of the Son). Barrett waxes extremely polemical against this doctrine, with a vehemence reminiscent of the worst of the 2016 ESS controversy. Waxing polemical against a doctrine held by many Reformed and Evangelicals is one thing, but being justified in one’s polemics is another. Certainly Barrett is entitled to his feelings about the matter, but from a rational perspective, one has to address the actual topic. Does Barrett really and truly address the issue of EFS? I would assert no. It is my view that chapter 8 of Barrett’s book consolidates the worst of the supposed “Nicene” attacks upon EFS, including all the misrepresentations seen in the 2016 fiasco.

That is what I have asserted. Now let us look at Barrett’s writings and examine what he says to see if that is the case.

### **What is EFS/ ESS? EFS is all about hierarchy in a relational community?**

In order to prove that EFS is heresy (the exact word Barrett uses), one must correctly represent EFS, then prove that what it teaches is heresy. The first step is representation, and that is where the problems begin.

So, what is EFS? At the beginning of the chapter, Barrett has this to say:<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 217

What kind of "roles" and "relationships" distinguish the persons? ... EFS's answer: a society of authority and submission. A relational community of hierarchy *inside* God.

Ware presented the Trinity with a strong *social* emphasis, defining the Trinity as "triune persons in *relational community*."<sup>10</sup> "Eternal relationality calls for and calls forth a created community of persons."<sup>11</sup> As a society itself, the Trinity is the model for human society. Sometimes Ware even looked to human society to define the Trinity.<sup>12</sup>

10. Emphasis added. This phrase is used throughout chapter 6 of Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*.

11. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 133; c.f. 134

12. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 134.

Barrett makes two accusations here: (1) ESS believes that the Trinity is a relational society, (2) ESS believes there is a community of hierarchy inside God. Are these true? To support his case, Barrett cites Bruce Ware's 2005 book *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* multiple times throughout the chapter, especially with regards to these two supposed definitions.<sup>3</sup> Before we look at the sources, it is indeed suspicious that the major source for all criticisms of EFS by Barrett is Bruce Ware. Most certainly Ware is a representative of EFS, yet (i) he is not the only representative, and (ii) this is one of his earlier works, so this earlier work may lack precision, as we will see in an instance.

In order to see if Barrett has correctly represented Ware, here is what we can find from Ware's book:

#### LESSONS FOR OUR LIVES AND MINISTRIES FROM THE RELATIONSHIPS AND ROLES OF THE TRIUNE GOD

...

2. Eternal relationality calls for and calls forth a created community of persons.<sup>4</sup>

When we look at the source material, we notice the following: Chapter 6 of Ware's book is the last chapter of his book, and it is clear from his book that he is trying to draw analogies and practical lessons from all that he has said in the previous 5 chapters of his

---

<sup>3</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Ware, 132-3

book. Endnote 10 of Chapter 8 of Barrett's book is indeed correct that the phrase is used throughout chapter 6, but what is missing is a discussion of the context, which is that Ware is trying to use the Trinity as an analogy for lessons for us. Whether one thinks that should be done or not is not the point; what is the point is that Ware is not defining the Trinity as "triune persons in relational community" but using the phrase for analogy and practical applications.

We see the issue again in endnote 11, where Barrett rightly cites the sentence but divorces it from its context. In context, Ware uses that as a subheading under the heading "lesson for our lives and ministries from the relationships and roles of the triune God." Note the preposition "from." Ware is not defining the Trinity relationally, but asking us to apply to **our** relationships lessons we can learn *from* the Trinity. This is the same problem for endnote 12 where the direction is the exact opposite of what Ware is advocating. Here is what Ware is advocating for in chapter 6 of his book:

In our own relationships in the home and in ministry, we should endeavor, by God's grace, to model our work and worship in ways that reflect the trinitarian unity expressed through harmony.<sup>5</sup>

So what shall we make of Barrett's accusation here? First of all, it is false that Ware "presented the Trinity with a strong social emphasis, defining the Trinity as 'triune persons in relational community,'" as we can see from the source material. The use of the subheading in page 134 of Ware's book is misleading, and Ware does not look to human society to define the Trinity. As seen from the actual source material, nothing could be further from the truth. Again, Ware said that "we should endeavor, by God's grace, to model our work and worship in ways that reflect the trinitarian harmony expressed through harmony." Put the two side by side and you see how badly Barrett has misrepresented Ware. Whereas Ware is asking us to model the trinitarian harmony in our social relationships, Barrett accuses him of defining the trinity as "triune persons in relational community"

The first part of the definition of EFS is shown to be not true. What about the second part of the supposed definition: that of hierarchy in the Trinity? Barrett explains the charge further:<sup>6</sup>

For EFS, the position of supremacy within the Trinity belongs to the Father alone, not to the Son, and definitely not to the Spirit, who has the least authority of all. The Father alone is "supreme among the persons of the Godhead."<sup>13</sup> He alone has "ultimate supremacy," and he alone is "supreme in the Trinity."<sup>14</sup> The Father "stands above the Son," and the "Father has *absolute and uncontested supremacy*, including authority over the Son and Spirit,"<sup>15</sup> The Father "stands above the Son" and is "supreme within the Godhead."<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ware, 136

<sup>6</sup> Barrett, 217

EFSers were adamant that these indications of supremacy and subordination tell us who the persons are apart from creation and salvation. They are even person-defining. Just as subordination distinguishes the Son as *Son*, so too does supremacy distinguish the Father as *Father* within the Trinity. Apart from these roles there is no Trinity, a point Grudem also stressed repeatedly.<sup>17</sup>

13. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 46-51

14. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 65

15. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 49, 153, emphasis added.

16. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 51.

17. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251. C.f. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 47, 433; Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 457, 540.

Here is a relevant citation that will help us address this claim:

So it appears that McCall confuses two sets of properties that are distinguished within the ERAS position: (1) properties possessed fully and eternally by the Father, by the Son, and by the Spirit, of the one and undivided *essence*—properties, then, that are the *essential attributes* of God comprising the eternal nature of God, which is the one and same divine nature possessed fully and eternally by the Father, and by the Son, and by the Spirit— and (2) properties possessed distinctly by the Father, and other properties possessed distinctly by the Son, and yet other properties possessed distinctly by the Spirit, as properties of each of their respective *persons*—distinctly *relational and personal properties*, which must not be confused with the essential attributes of the one common divine nature. When advocates of ERAS state that the Son possessed eternally the property of being under the authority of the Father, they also propose this as a relational property of the Son's personhood and not an attribute of the Son's essence.<sup>7</sup>

On the surface, Barrett's argument seems convincing. Flipping to the pages referenced in endnotes 13 to 16, one can see the exact words, and the immediate context seem to

---

<sup>7</sup> Bruce A. Ware, "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?: A Response To Millard Erickson and Tom McCall," in Bruce A. Ware and John Starke, eds., *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 245. ERAS is a synonym of EFS, as "Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission"

support Barrett's argument. However, in order to get a grasp at what EFS teaches, one must read what EFS teaches in general, and interpret Ware's words accordingly.

We read in a more recent book, *One God in Three Persons*, that Ware conceives of properties in two levels: (1) properties of the one essence, and (2) properties of each person. In other words, personal properties do not affect the one essence. While less clear in his older book *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, it is more charitable to interpret what he says about any distinctions of the persons as pertaining to their personal properties, not each person as to their one essence. As I have said in my review of that older book,<sup>8</sup> "uncharitable interpretations are available for those who do not read the cues properly." But taking the charitable reading is to see that the mountain of evidence mustered by Barrett should be recognized as pertaining not to the divine essence and to each person in their essential relations, but to their personal relations. Now, does that address all concerns? I am not claiming that it does, but at least such a charitable reading should show us that the references mustered by Barrett is at the least misleading.

Now, is there "hierarchy inside God"? It depends on what you mean by the term "hierarchy"? If by "hierarchy," it is implied that there are grades of being, or that one person is superior to the other in nature, then EFS rejects "hierarchy" altogether. If by "hierarchy" one means higher and lower roles, higher and lower distinctions, then it could be argued that some EFSers would assert that to be true. However, I myself would reject "hierarchy" altogether, because I do not believe even a difference in roles and eminence in functions indicate any higher or lower status of any sorts.

Therefore, to the question, the short answer is that, "no, there is no hierarchy in the being of God," "maybe, there might be a functional hierarchy among the persons of the Godhead," and "no, distinctions in roles and eminence are not hierarchical among the persons of the Trinity." Barrett's statement that EFS believes in "hierarchy inside God" is at best misleading, and at worst an error.

### **What is EFS? EFS asserts subordination of the Son to the Father within the immanent Trinity?**

The subjugation of the Son is not just an *economic* reality either, limited to salvation or the incarnation. The subordination of the Son is ingrained within the very DNA of the Trinity apart from creation, within the *immanent* Trinity itself (which EFSers assume is synonymous with what they label eternity past and future).<sup>9</sup>

In the beginning, there was God. God in Himself, in the three persons of the Trinity, is love. Modern Christian apologists utilize this point particularly against Islam, in pointing

---

<sup>8</sup> Daniel H. Chew, *Review of Bruce Ware's book Father, Son and Holy Spirit*.

<sup>9</sup> Barrett, 218

out that a unitary God cannot actually be love. For there to be love, the persons of the Trinity must be loving each other from eternity past to eternity future.

In the beginning, God has a decree. The one decree of God translates to the many decrees of God which are enacted in time and space. This one decree is in eternity past. The many decrees are also in eternity past, for a decree must exist before its results come to fruition. Since a decree must exist before its results come to fruition, then the decree to create the world must be in eternity before time. But since God is immutable, that means all the many decrees must be already present before time exist, in eternity past.

What is the point of looking at these, you might ask? The point is simple: The love of God **expressed** towards each other person in the Trinity is outside of the being of God. The one decree is God, but the many decrees coming from that one decree is not God, for it is many (Divine simplicity asserts only one). Already in orthodoxy Christian theology, and especially Reformed theology, there are divine things that are from eternity and before time. The *ad extra* ("to out of") elements of God are not just limited to the incarnation or to salvation. **Anything** that is not one-ness is *ad extra* by virtue of the doctrine of divine simplicity. That includes the expressed love of the persons of the Trinity, the decrees (plural) of God, the relationship God has with any of His people, even the upholding of creation.

Straightaway, we see the problem with Barrett's accusation. In Barrett's mind, and in the minds of many classical theists it seem, the economic Trinity, God *ad extra*, pertains only to salvation and the incarnation. That assertion is expressively rejected by all proponents of EFS. In fact, from the examples I have given of the love of God and the decrees of God, it is uncertain that Barrett's assertion is even coherent much less logical. There is God *ad intra*, with regards to His being in the one essence, and God *ad extra*, which includes any and everything that is not of the being of God, including the decrees and actions of any one person or all of them.

Barrett's accusation against EFS proponents stem from reading concepts into their words. Many EFS proponents are biblicists,<sup>10</sup> and they, I would say, use words carelessly like the life of the Trinity, or the inner life of the triune God or words to that effect. What they have in mind is that the persons of the God relate to each other, and these relations happen in eternity past, and will continue to happen in eternity future. This inner life of the triune God is NOT The same as the immanent Trinity, which refers to the being of God. Here, I acknowledge that part of the confusion is a failure by the biblicists to properly use terms like "immanent" and "economic," or "ad intra/ ad extra." However, when read in context according to the words and concepts they use, it is clear that what they mean is that EFS pertains to the economic *ad extra* aspect of the Godhead, as they are seen in the relations of the triune persons from eternity past to eternity future.

When Barrett states that "EFSers assume [the immanent Trinity] is synonymous with what they label eternity past and future," the person who is confused is Barrett, not EFSers.

---

<sup>10</sup> Biblicism can be defined as a hermeneutical framework that espouses an isolation from the traditions of the church without necessarily rejecting it.

Barrett misrepresents EFS as teaching subordination within the immanent Trinity, whereas EFS merely teaches submission of the Son to the Father in eternity, but such is economic not immanent.

This confusion over EFS and the immanent Trinity continues over into the distinction between the supposed ontological and functional properties of the Trinity. As Barrett confidently asserts,

It may sound neat and tidy to say there is something ontological (essence) and something functional (hierarchical roles) in the immanent Trinity, and one need not affect the other. But that bifurcation divorces essence and person and misunderstands what a divine person is and how each person relates to the essence. The person don't have an ontological side to them and a functional side (let alone one of hierarchy). As subsistences *of the essence*, the persons are ontological through and through. EFS doesn't recognize this because it has added a novel category, a *social* category (roles of authority/ submission) that does not fit with Nicene language. We would be wise to listen to the Great Tradition, which does not miss the connection between essence and person: "For to God it is not one thing to be and another to be a person, but it is altogether the same thing," says Augustine. "Just as for him to be is to be God, .... thus also for him to be is to be personal" (*The Trinity* 7.6). Or as Bavinck explains, in "each of the three persons ... the divine being is completely coextensive with being Father, Son, and Spirit" (*Reformed Dogmatics* 2:304, 305).<sup>11</sup>

The problem with Barrett's assertion is that function is not part of the immanent Trinity, but rather function is in the inner life of the Trinity, because the Triune God has an inner life that is not part of His being. Anytime we talk about the intra-Trinitarian love of God, there the inner life of the Trinity can be seen.

Therefore, there is nothing wrong with agreeing with Nicene language, and agreeing with the quotes from Augustine and Bavinck. All of those pertain to the being of God, and the persons of the Godhead obviously subsist ontologically in that one essence. Again, functions pertain to God *ad extra*, which includes both the works of God as well as the workings of God. When EFS asserts that their subordination is functional and not pertaining to the being of God, they actually mean it.

### **What is EFS? Is EFS contrary to Nicaea?**

At first, Ware promises he is orthodox and Nicene, but the more he elaborates, the more noticeable it becomes that he is dissatisfied with the way the Nicene fathers and the Great Tradition have articulated the Trinity. For example, the orthodox

---

<sup>11</sup> Barrett, 234

"appeal to divine appropriations falls short of expressing fully what Scripture indicates regarding the functional relations." "Yes, the order of operations *ad extra* is expressive of the order of relations *ad intra*, but saying only this excludes a significant portion of scriptural indications." What exactly is excluded and "missing"? Authority. Hierarchy. *Inside the Trinity*. Without authority-submission within the *immanent Trinity*, Ware believes the Father sending the Son is but a "mechanical" and "impersonal outworking of the relations of origin."<sup>12</sup>

The fallout from the 2016 ESS fiasco did indeed result in some positive changes, in that more orthodox language and concepts were adopted by many biblicists. Nevertheless, according to Barrett, all changes are at best cosmetic and at worst make the "heresy" even worse. Reacting to Bruce Ware's 2019 article, Barrett charges that (1) Ware is "dissatisfied with the Nicene fathers and the Great Tradition," and Barrett thinks that anyone who thinks the Nicene doctrine of God is not the pinnacle of orthodoxy to be one of at least questionable faith, and (2) Barrett still thinks that EFS teaches authority-submission within the immanent Trinity. We will look at these in turn.

First, Barrett is highly critical of anyone who is "dissatisfied with the Nicene fathers" and the 'Great Tradition.' Note here the elevation and capitalization of the "Great Tradition." But just what is this "Great Tradition"? Barrett is using it as a short form for classical theism, but not just any classical theism but Thomism. Saint Thomas Aquinas is now his patron saint it seems! But this whole idea that there is a Great Tradition which holds to everything Barrett is teaching is a mirage. Thomas Aquinas's view is not the only classical theist view concerning the doctrine of God. This is not to mention the total neglect of Eastern Orthodox views with its idea of the essence- energies distinction. The "Great Tradition" Barrett is promoting is as much a modern phenomenon as EFS. The only difference is one has Saint Thomas while the other doesn't.

It must be noted that the doctrine of God is never static. The idea that even pro-Nicene thought is the same as Thomistic classical theism is a figment of Barrett's imagination, and ignores the fact that philosophical changes and development does happen between Nicaea and Thomas Aquinas. If the Nicene doctrine of God is the pinnacle of orthodoxy, then why should the charge that Thomas Aquinas is "dissatisfied with the Nicene faith" not be true, since he adds to the Nicene doctrine of God as well? The fact of the matter is that everyone by virtue of being a theologian "adds to" the Nicene faith, as long as one attempts to formulate what one believes to be the biblical view of the Trinity.

That goes to the heart of the problem with Barrett's attack on Bruce Ware. It is false to think that dissatisfaction with the Nicene fathers is a bad thing, because everyone including Barrett alters or improves upon the beliefs of others. The only difference is that some are more honest about their theological project than others. Barrett himself is not

---

<sup>12</sup> Barrett, 224

content with the Nicene faith but embraces Thomas' views of the Trinity, seeing Thomas instead of Nicaea as the pinnacle of faith.

Secondly, Barrett doubles down on his accusation that EFS teaches that authority and submission is within the immanent Trinity. However, he gave no proof that this is the case, so we can safely ignore it as we have dealt with the issue already.

So, is EFS contrary to the Nicene faith and the "Great Tradition"? It is not, in the same way as Thomism is not contrary to the Nicene faith either even though Thomas defines "person" in a way that Nicaea does not. EFS is extra-Nicene, and has to be evaluate accordingly. And unless the "Great Tradition" excludes Eastern Orthodox views of the Trinity, otherwise EFS should not be considered outside of the broad "Great Tradition" as well.

### **What is EFS? EFS holds to separate wills?**

OK, so if EFS is not teaching submission in the immanent Trinity, surely the teaching of separate wills is a major problem for it? Barrett lays in on this as well, as he writes:

But if one considers how EFS has introduced a new, novel category of functional relations of authority-submission into the immanent Trinity, suddenly this language is very alarming. Especially talk of an authority *exclusive* to the Father and a subordination *exclusive* to the Son. It screams, "Multiple wills!" Here is EFS's social trinitarianism—distinct centers of consciousness— coming through thick and heavy. Point is, EFS segregates the persons of the Trinity from one another, even sets them over against one another.<sup>13</sup>

Can we say also: "Talk of a paternity *exclusive* to the Father and a spiration *exclusive* to the Spirit," "segregates the persons of the Trinity from one another, even sets them over against one another"? Of course not, for that is nonsense, but this is what happens when one is more interested to find fault than to actually note the difference. The fact of the matter is that personal properties are always exclusive to the persons, or they would not be called personal properties at all. Noting that a personal property is exclusive to a person is like noticing that water is wet; nothing to make a big fuss about.

More significantly, Barrett asserts that such talk of functional relations of authority-submission screams of multiple wills. Barrett does not indicate why that is the case. A possible case might be made saying that stative words exclusive to the persons are fine, so there is nothing wrong with paternity or spiration, but action words are not, since actions are dynamic and refer to wills. However, that is not true even in classical theism. Only the Son is incarnated, so the property of "being incarnated" is exclusive to the Son only. Only the Son atones for sin, so the property of "atoning for sins" is likewise exclusive

---

<sup>13</sup> Barrett, 228

to the Son. Therefore, whether a property is stative or active should be irrelevant to the issue at hand.

What other reason is there for the charge of multiple wills? Perhaps it can be argued that authority requires a separate will from submission, but since we think of God analogously not univocally, why can we not speak of a single will that consists of an authority exclusive to the Father and submission exclusive to the Son? The fact of the matter is that I have not seen anyone positing three separate wills of the Trinity, only three distinct wills. If Barrett cannot conceive of a single will subsisting in the authority of the Father and the submission of the Son, that is a failure of his imagination and a failure to think analogously.

The charge of multiple wills is therefore flawed. Barrett has asserted over and over that EFS holds to multiple wills, by which he means multiple separate wills. However, he has failed to substantiate the claim. EFS does not believe in three separate wills of the Trinity, but three distinct wills or willings of the Trinity. Distinct, not separate. One and three at the same time.

This idea of separate wills is lambasted by Barrett in the supposed practical distortions it has on one's view of God. Concerning EFS and the relations of the divine persons, Barrett asserts the following:

Ware went so far as to compare the Son to creation: "In many ways, what we see here of the Father choosing not to work unilaterally but to accomplish his work through the Son, or through the Spirit, *extends into his relationship to us*. Does God need us to do his work?<sup>25</sup> The answer is no, but for EFSers the reason why stems from the Trinity: the Son's involvement is optional. The Son is not involved, because he is the Son. He is only involved because the Father chooses to include him. The Father could have asked the Son to stand aside the watch him do all the work. Likewise with the work of creation.<sup>14</sup>

Generosity is key to the EFS view. Otherwise, the Son might be ungrateful, buck his place of submission, and attempt to exalt himself to the Father's position of authority within the Trinity. But EFSers say the Son won't do that because he "accepts his role" and minds his place below the Father.<sup>29</sup> There is, then, "neither jealousy nor pride"; rather, each person "works together with the others for one unified, common purpose."<sup>30</sup> ... Jealousy, pride, discord? Why would EFSers feel the need to preclude these *within* the eternal, immanent Trinity?<sup>15</sup>

25. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 57

29. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 20

---

<sup>14</sup> Barrett, 219

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-20

### 30. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 20

Now, while EFS does not hold to separate wills, here there is a valid criticism of Ware. According to Barrett, EFS teaches that the "Son's involvement [in the works of God] is optional." Barrett cites Bruce Ware there, and that is certainly an error on the part of Ware. It is certainly true that Ware is talking about a hypothetical here, but still if we are to preserve the fact that there is one God who is simple, then this hypothetical is nonsense. Ware is in error on this point.

Barrett's next criticism however misses the mark altogether. Citing Ware again, Barrett states that EFS teaches that there is "neither jealousy nor pride" within the Trinity. But certainly just denying that such things exist within the Trinity does not give anyone the license to insinuate that somehow something nefarious is happening. (Note also how Barrett asserts that the Son being in a certain role is equivalent to the negative phrase "minds his place below the Father.") It is unfair to infer from something that Barrett himself will agree with (i.e. there is neither jealousy nor pride within the Trinity) to cast shade on one's opponents.

The main problem with Barrett's criticism is that Ware does qualify all these as pertaining to the persons, as personal properties not as ontological properties. Thus, even where Ware is in error, he does not imply or teach separate wills in the Trinity.

### **What is EFS? Is EFS a species of Social Trinitarianism?**

Before we look at what EFS is, Barrett has a final categorization of EFS. According to Barrett, EFS is a species of social trinitarianism, as he wrote:<sup>16</sup>

Now that you're seen the EFS view, notice how so many of these marks are an exact match:

- Starting point (and emphasis) is not simplicity but the three persons—some reject simplicity altogether
- Trinity redefined as society and community, analogous to human society
- Persons redefined as three centers of consciousness and will
- Persons redefined according to their *relationships* and roles
- Large overlap (sometime collapse) of immanent and economic Trinity
- Social Trinity is paradigm for social theory (ecclesiology, politics, gender, etc.)

EFS lines up with each of these marks, which makes EFS a species of social trinitarianism.

---

<sup>16</sup> Barrett, 226

So, is EFS a form of social trinitarianism? It depends on how you define "social trinitarianism." Barrett has defined social trinitarianism with these 6 points. Thus, defined, he then asserts that EFS has all 6 points, and therefore this "makes EFS a species of social trinitarianism." But is this a valid characterization of EFS? In order to answer this question, we must ask ourselves: (1) Are these 6 points valid markers of social trinitarianism, and (2) Does EFS fulfill these 6 marks?

First, are these 6 points valid markers of social trinitarianism? Social trinitarianism, if defined just according to its name, is any view of the Trinity that defines the Trinity socially. In other words, if the Trinity is defined as a society of persons, then by virtue of the adjective "social," that view of the Trinity is a version of "social trinitarianism." Of course, things are much more complicated, but let's take that as a basic marker of social trinitarianism. Note that any marker for social trinitarianism must be something that is in some manner definitive of it. In other words, if a point (Point X) is shared between social trinitarianism and a non-social trinitarian view of the Trinity, then Point X cannot be definitive of social trinitarianism.

When we look at it this way, only point 2 (Trinity redefined as society and community, analogous to human society) is definitive of social trinitarianism. What about the other points? Point 1 is not definitive of social trinitarianism, otherwise Eastern Orthodoxy would be considered to be social trinitarian in nature. Point 3 would be needed for social trinitarianism, but to claim it is necessary does not make it definitive of social trinitarianism. Nevertheless, since it is necessary, we can grant it as a marker for social trinitarianism. This goes the same for points 4 and 6. As for point 5, that is a very subjective criterion: what is seen as a small overlap can be seen as a large overlap by others, and vice versa. Regardless, that is in no way definitive of social trinitarianism, since social trinitarianism is independent of one's view of the relation between the immanent and economic Trinity.

We are left with points 2, 3, 4 and 6. Now, how does EFS match to these points? EFS in its generic variety simply is a teaching that the Son submitted to the Father in eternity. Generic EFS therefore does not correspond to any of the points. How about specific variants of EFS? The dominant variant of EFS promoted by Bruce Ware, Wayne Grudem and others would line up with points 4 and 6. With regards to point 2, a case could be made that Bruce Ware in his earlier work *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* seem to hold to point 2, although as have shown, Ware is using it for deriving practical applications. Regarding point 3, I have not seen any EFS proponent assert that each person is an individual center of consciousness and will. Barrett is inferring from phrases talking about the will of the Father, the will of the Son, and the will of the Spirit as distinct wills, that therefore EFS teaches three centers of consciousness and will. However, that does not follow (Non Sequitur). Classical Theism holds to the Father loving the Son, the Son loving the Father, and so on. Yet, the Father loving the Son in Classical Theism does not imply two wills, so why should any phrase or sentence discussing the will of the Father, the will of the Son and so on necessarily imply three **centers** of will?

Therefore, is EFS a version of social trinitarianism? Not necessarily. Is the dominant variant of EFS a version of social trinitarianism? No. We have said that only point 2 is definitive of social trinitarianism, while allowing points 3, 4 and 6 as they are necessary for social trinitarianism. But necessity is not the same as sufficiency. Points 3, 4 and 6 are necessary for social trinitarianism, but they are not sufficient for social trinitarianism. Therefore, merely having points 4 and 6 does not mean that the dominant variant of EFS is a version of social trinitarianism. Is Bruce Ware's version of EFS a form of social trinitarianism? It depends on how one interprets his earlier work *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*. Correctly read and interpreted, the focus of that work uses relationality for application, not for definition. If however, one reads that as reflective of his view of the Trinity, both immanent and economic, then it can be argued that Bruce Ware's view embraces point 2. Nevertheless, we note here the one simple fact that EFS is not necessarily a version of social trinitarianism, and only if one's version of EFS holds to point 2 can that version of EFS be considered a version of social trinitarianism.

Barrett asserts that EFS exactly matches all 6 points of social trinitarianism. That is however a false statement, and continues to show us how Barrett completely misunderstands and misrepresents EFS.

## **So what is EFS?**

EFS, as its name suggests, has to do with the functions of the persons of the Trinity. In other words, it deals with the persons of the Trinity *ad extra*. From eternity past to eternity future, the persons of the Trinity interact with each other in perfect love and harmony. In order for them to be distinct persons, the persons have distinct personal properties that only one of the persons has and the others do not, otherwise we just have a soup of persons X, Y and Z.

EFS asserts that one personal property of the Son is that He submits to the Father from eternity. It pertains to His person in His *ad extra* engagement with the other persons of the Trinity, in that "inner life of the Trinity." Different versions of EFS will say more about this submission, but the Reformed version looks at this submission as grounded in the *Pactum Salutis*, something which we will look at towards the end of this article. Note that in no version of EFS is submission said to pertain to the essence of God, or the persons in their essential relations with each other. Insofar as we are speaking of the essential relations of the persons, there is no submission whatsoever, something that Barrett fails to understand.

## **The heresies of EFS: Tritheism?**

Barrett calls EFS heresy. To that end, he has indicated three heresies EFS tend towards: tritheism, Sabellianism, and subordinationism. We will look at these in turn.

First, tritheism. That stems from the charge of separate actions, which, assuming the principle of *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt* (The external works of the Trinity are undivided), would result in three deities. But does EFS really teach separate actions?

Furthermore, the three persons cannot perform a *single action* if one or more persons are, by definition of their personhood, inferior in authority to another person. As soon as you insert gradations of authority within the *immanent* Trinity, gradations that are person-defining and therefore *essential* for the Trinity to be a Trinity, you forfeit *one will* in God. *You forfeit the Trinity's one, simple essence. Our God is simply Trinity ... no more.*<sup>17</sup>

In response, we might ask what does actions have to do with being? In Aristotelian metaphysics, the final cause of an object is part of the determiner of the object, alongside the other three causes (material, formal, efficient). A being acts towards its final cause, therefore being determines actions. However, that is a philosophical position that is simply not true. In the modern scientific world, what a thing is is independent of its purpose, and its purpose is independent of what it does. For the latter, the clearest example of this is the human person, whose purpose or final cause is to be the image of God representing Him in front of creation, yet humans routinely rebel against God. Actions therefore have absolutely no link to the purpose of a thing. For the former, as being a modern scientific person and in rejection of Aristotle, the purpose of a thing is not part of the being of a thing. The Statue of Liberty is used as an American national monument, but if taken away and placed in a remote jungle, it could be used as an idol to be worshipped. Purpose is ascribed by the one who utilizes the object. What a thing's purpose is is determined by its owner or user or creator, depending on the object and its environment.

What does this have to do with one's doctrine of God? We see in the paragraph above an extremely condensed argument by Barrett. Unfortunately, Barrett does not make his argument plain, so we have to explicate them. Why does Barrett believe his argument to be foolproof, and why does he condense it? Perhaps he is so steeped in this way of thinking that he himself fails to recognize the assumptions baked into it?

What then are Barrett's arguments? The first sentence links the idea that an inferiority in authority means that the three persons cannot perform a single action. Why is that the case is not stated, since one can think of any group of ranked individuals who can perform a single action. Likewise, the second sentence states that gradations that are "persons-defining" would forfeit the one will in God. Again, why that is the case is not shown. Without an idea of the philosophy behind such statements, such statements are just mere assertions that make no sense whatsoever. What needs to be added are the Aristotelian philosophical principles so that the arguments can start to make sense.

The first sentence can be explicated as follows:

---

<sup>17</sup> Barrett, 229

P1: If one or more persons are inferior in authority to another person, then their lower rank would correlate with a different final cause than the other person.

P2: A different final cause would mean a different action.

C1: Therefore, the three persons, if one or more are inferior in authority, cannot perform a single action.

We note here that this "different action" may not be an altogether different action. It just needs to be not the exact same action. Once it is written down this way, we see here the smuggling of Aristotelian philosophy in order to create this argument, and therefore we can reject this argument in the same light.

The second sentence can be explicated as follows:

P3: Gradations that are person-defining are essential for the Trinity to be a Trinity.

P4: Gradations of authority within the immanent Trinity are gradations that are person-defining.

IC1: Gradations of authority within the immanent Trinity are essential for the Trinity to be a Trinity.

P5: Inserting gradations that are essential for the Trinity to be a Trinity would result in multiple wills in God.

C2: Inserting gradations of authority within the immanent Trinity would result in multiple wills in God.

There are major problems with this second argument. For premise 3, it is true that gradations that are person-defining are essential for the Trinity to be a Trinity. However, the premise is only true if the word "essential" here is synonymous with "necessary," and not with "pertaining to the essence of a thing." This is because in classical theism, the *taxis* or order of the Trinity are a type of gradation that is person-defining and yet does not deal with the essence of the Trinity. Now, this is important because in intermediate conclusion 1, the fallacy of amphiboly is committed here. Whereas premise 3 is true only if the word "essential" is taken as "necessary," the word "necessary" in intermediate conclusion 1 has shifted to pertaining to the nature of a thing. This is the definition of "essential" in premise 5, which when combined with intermediate conclusion 1, creates conclusion 2. The whole argument is invalid as it runs on equivocating on the word "essential."

The premises themselves are problematic. First, premise 4 assumes EFS teaches gradations of authority within the immanent Trinity, which is a false statement no matter how many times it is repeated. Premise 5 is basically a form of argument 1, and therefore false. The number of wills in God (*ad extra*) is a separate question altogether from

gradations in the Trinity or the lack thereof. Thus, Barrett's second statement shows an invalid and unsound argument, with premises smuggled in from Aristotelian philosophy and not Scripture.

Barrett uses these statements to claim that there is a danger of tritheism within EFS. That is however false, since EFS does not even teach multiple wills or separate actions in God. The reason why Barrett accuses EFS as tending to tritheism is because EFS **as interpreted within Aristotelian metaphysics** would lead to tritheism, but EFS does not follow Aristotle at all. Barrett's assertions and accusations therefore should be rejected as mere assertions based upon a faulty metaphysics. EFS does not "forfeit" the one will in God, because EFS rejects Aristotelian metaphysics altogether. Since Aristotle's writings are not Scripture, and neither is Thomas' *Summa Theologica* part of the biblical canon, we can safely reject them while holding on to the biblical revelation concerning who God truly is.

### **The heresies of EFS: Sabellianism?**

Traces of Sabellianism also appear like invisible ink held under fluorescent light when EFS says that the Father doesn't need the Son and Spirit to act in creation and salvation. He can act unilaterally; nevertheless, he is generous enough to include them. Not only is this a blatant violation of simplicity and a flagrant dissolution of God's one will, but this is something very close to Sabellianism.<sup>18</sup>

Tritheism and Sabellianism are almost at opposite ends on the spectrum of one's view on the numericity in the Godhead, where tritheism stands at one end, and Unitarianism at the other. In Sabellianism, there is only one person, and this one person changes either depending on manifestation or in a certain sequence. It is indeed surprising to see Barrett attempt to tar EFS with both tritheism AND Sabellianism, since how can something be accused of being A and not-A at the same time?

To tar EFS with Sabellianism, Barrett refers to the problematic expression of Bruce Ware whereby the Father could work and the Son and Spirit could rest, which I have pointed out likewise as errant yet one needs to read the context to see it refers to the person not the essence. But let us give the most uncharitable reading to Bruce Ware, and what we get are three distinct gods in a society. Just because one works and the other two doesn't, does this tritheistic society suddenly morph into a single person who manifests the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in differing manner, or to do so in a particular sequence? How does three distinct deities suddenly become one single three-faced deity just because two of them are not working?

I would counter-charge that EFS critics seem to tend towards Sabellianism. If persons do not truly interact as distinct persons within the Trinity, but are just differentiated by relations, then it seems that what distinguishes the persons is a difference in the abstract

---

<sup>18</sup> Barrett, 231

notations they possess. The Father has the notation “unbegotten” and “paternity,” the Son has the notation “begotten,” and “eternal generated,” and the Spirit has the notation “spirited,” and “proceeding.” But after crossing the t’s and dotting the i’s of orthodoxy, what remains are three interchangeable abstractions that have only abstract notational differences between them. That tends towards Sabellianism, where there is only one actor with three different “slants” to it.

### **The heresies of EFS: Subordinationism? Attributes and persons**

The final “heresy” of EFS is none other than subordinationism, the ever-present bogeyman hiding behind the curtain. As Barrett states:

Third, EFS has robbed the divine essence of power and authority and segregated power and authority to the persons, but the Father above all, violating the simplicity of the Trinity. Nicene orthodoxy was very careful in its affirmation of simplicity: essence and attributes are not different things; attributes are not parts of God's essence. Rather, God's essence *is* his attributes and his attributes his essence. As subsistences of the same divine essence, no one person possess one attribute more or less than another—God's power and authority included.<sup>19</sup>

Barrett’s first two reasons for why EFS is subordinationist comes down to his confusion over ontology and functionality, and confusing the life of God with the immanent Trinity. His third reason deals with the issue of attributes. Through this, Barrett hopes to show that EFS’s differentiation of attributes leads to subordinationism.

What do we mean by the term "attributes"? We talk about the attributes of God because that is the way we can describe and know God. God possess these attributes in the sense that God has these things in His being. In other words, God logically precedes His attributes. There is a God, and we come to know God through the revelation of His attributes. We do not come to know attributes first, then come to know God.<sup>20</sup> Now, what does this mean for us in our knowledge of God? The logical precedence of God to His attributes mean that attributes are primarily descriptive rather than substantive. They are words used to describe, to express God. Therefore, the words in themselves are not tied to the attributes of God, since descriptions are not tied to the substance/ subsistences they describe.

Barrett however makes attributes substantive, thus he claims that power and authority are attributes of the one divine essence. Therefore, any talk about power and authority in the persons is a violation of divine simplicity and espouses ontological subordinationism. But if we take attributes as primarily descriptive, then we can agree that the divine attribute of power and authority is indeed equal among all persons of the Trinity, such that there

---

<sup>19</sup> Barrett, 237

<sup>20</sup> This is a reason why I reject natural theology, since I do not believe anyone even with regenerate reason can reason to God without God having prior revelation to them.

are not three almighties but one almighty, AND at the same time state that there are personal properties of power and authority that are distributed differently between the persons. The power and authority of the divine persons as personal properties are NOT the same power and authority that is equally shared among the persons of the Trinity in their subsistences! The former is the Trinity in action *ad extra*; the latter the Trinity in being *ad intra*.

Thus, we see in this final attack that Barrett continues with his ignorant attack upon EFS. EFS does not rob the divine essence of power and authority, neither does it segregate power and authority over the divine subsistences, nor violate the simplicity of the Trinity. Rather, EFS differentiates between power and authority as attributes, and power and authority as personal properties. Barrett unfortunately refuses to see the attributes as primarily descriptive, and only substantive when used to describe the one essence. EFS is not subordinationist precisely because it does not think of attributes or personal properties as necessarily substantive in nature.

### **An excursus into the *Pactum***

The Reformed version of EFS is based on the *Pactum*, and arguments based on the *Pactum* have probably been raised to Barrett before. Nevertheless, it is probably a minor view so he doesn't deal with the *Pactum* in the main text of his book, leaving it to the endnotes. Be that as it may, let us look at the endnote and observe why he thinks the *Pactum* is not a variant of EFS.

Barrett writes thus:<sup>21</sup>

92. ...

(1) Even if (for the sake of argument) subordination were to be located in the covenant of redemption, we are still speaking of the economy ...

(2) It is illegitimate to read subordination back into the covenant of redemption. EFSers like to read their definition of subordination into Reformed *pactum* language. ... In other words, the Son's agreement to the covenant does not stem from some intrinsic subordination between the Father and the Son, but the Son accepts the covenant for the specific purpose of accomplishing redemption. The covenant is *economic* and therefore *optional*. If the Father and the Son never entered into a covenant, nothing within the Trinity would change.

---

<sup>21</sup> Barrett, 344-5

So why is the *Pactum* not a version of EFS? Barrett's first reason is to assert that the *Pactum* is economic not immanent. On that we agree, and I will add that EFS is economic not immanent. Barrett's second (and third) reason is a bit trickier. Since in the *Pactum* the Son *voluntarily* takes on the role of the servant of the covenant, therefore Barrett argues that what is *optional* cannot be person-defining. But is that really as good an argument as Barrett makes it out to be?

Consider this question: Is it necessary for Christ to go to the Cross? If it is necessary, then that makes atonement necessary, sin necessary, and creation necessary. If it not necessary, then the *Pactum* is not necessary, Jesus Christ is not the eternal Savior, and so on. The fact is that it is neither necessary for Christ to go to the Cross, nor is it unnecessary for Christ to go to the Cross. Rather, we must have a third category—that of hypothetical necessity. It is not necessary in the sense that Jesus' sacrifice was purely voluntary. It is however necessary in that Jesus must be the Savior of the world. Therefore, it is a hypothetical necessity from God's perspective for Jesus to go to the Cross—necessary in all possible worlds, yet He did not have to do so if He chooses not to.

We can see this in the *Pactum*. Was the *Pactum* necessary? On the one hand, it is optional for Jesus because He did enter it voluntarily. On the other hand, no *Pactum*, no Cross, no salvation, not an eternal Savior. Therefore, it is a hypothetical necessity from God's perspective that Jesus would eternally submit to the Father. How does this bear on the issue of EFS? EFS is therefore a hypothetical necessity for God, and consequent absolute necessity for us, and the person-defining properties of the persons of the Trinity are likewise necessary in those senses. We can never say that who goes to the Cross is a matter of rolling the dice and seeing which person becomes the Son; it was always the Son who would be the Son and go to the cross. There is no possible world in which the Father would incarnate and die on the Cross. In this sense, the personal property "being incarnated" is always and only the personal property of the Son.

The *Pactum* is indeed voluntary. Yet, it is also necessary. The failure to see that it is both lies at a main reason of Barrett's rejection of the *Pactum* as a form of EFS, and shows also that many classical theists have not thought much through the concept of necessity as it relates to God and salvation.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 8 of Barrett's book is all about attacking EFS as heresy. Yet, as we have looked through Barrett's assertions and compare them with the original sources as well as examine his arguments, we have seen that Barrett routinely misrepresents his opponents, and where there is possible cause for concern he routinely takes the most uncharitable reading of his opponents. Barrett also is blind to his Aristotelian presuppositions, smuggling them into arguments that would not make sense without Aristotelian philosophical notions of being, final causation, and action. Barrett is also extremely caustic in his attacks on EFS, calling it heresy despite the fact that those promoting EFS

were once seen to be orthodox conservative evangelicals. His attempt to label EFS as tending towards both tritheism and Sabellianism smells of someone who is throwing mud and seeing what sticks, since it is impossible to be leaning towards both tritheism and its almost polar opposite Sabellianism.

With regards to the doctrine of God, EFS is an extra-Nicene doctrine. That means one can choose to hold to EFS, or choose not to hold to EFS, and one is still a Christian. However, to attack EFS in such a manner as Barrett does in chapter 8 of his book is no more to engage in a mere disagreement. One can only hope that this is not due to willful misrepresentation in violation of the ninth commandment, and here I would plead for Barrett to repent of his misrepresentations of EFS, for the glory of our one God who is truly and simply Trinity.