

## Response to Glen Butner's journal article attacking EFS

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In 2017, Dr. Glen Butner wrote a journal article for *Priscilla Papers*, the academic journal of the egalitarian organization *Christians for Biblical Equality* (CBE). Entitled *Against Eternal Submission: Changing the Doctrine of the Trinity Endangers the Doctrine of Salvation and Women*,<sup>1</sup> this article deals with the doctrine of Eternal Functional Submission (EFS), arguing that it is a threat to the doctrine of salvation and women. As someone who holds to a version of EFS, I disagree with Butner's portrayal of EFS and with his arguments to this effect. I would thus like to engage with the arguments in his article, showing why Butner's arguments against EFS are unsound.

### Butner's arguments

In the article, Butner first argument deals with the issue of the atonement. Butner acknowledges that defenders of EFS assert that "obedience of the will is a personal property."<sup>2</sup> In response to this, Butner reasons that if will is a personal property, then Christ must have no human will since he has no human hypostasis, human obedience is thus impossible and therefore satisfaction in the atonement is impossible.<sup>3</sup> The argument is unpacked as follows: Christ does not have a human hypostasis, since he is one person, the God-man. If will is a personal property, then it is a property of the one person. It is therefore not human since the one person is not human but the God-man (divine-human). But if Christ has no human will, then it is impossible for him to atone for sins as he could not offer human obedience. This is because only something human can atone for humans, or "what is not assumed is not healed," as what Gregory of Nazianzus has said.

Butner's second argument has to do with the supererogatory nature of the atonement. In order for the atonement to merit salvation, the work cannot come from what is owed or ought to be done. Divine obedience is obligatory, while human obedience to the divine is meritorious. If the Son's obedience is divine, the question is then asked as to how Jesus' death can be meritorious instead of a necessity of justice. As Butner argues, "if the Father commanded the Son to die, and if the Son must eternally submit to the Father, then the Son must die in order to be just."<sup>4</sup>

The third argument focuses on the issue of the active obedience of Christ. Citing Jonathan Edwards, Butner puts forward the argument that active obedience requires

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<sup>1</sup> D. Glen Butner Jr., "Against Eternal Submission: Changing the Doctrine of the Trinity Endangers the Doctrine of Salvation and Women," *Priscilla Papers* 31 No. 1 (Winter 2017): 15-21

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 16

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 17

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

a human will, since the divine cannot suffer or live in obedience to the law as Man.<sup>5</sup> Overlapping with the first argument in arguing for the need of a human will, Butner concludes that EFS undermines “the role of active obedience in Christ’s merit.”<sup>6</sup>

Butner then moves to the supposed “pastoral and ethical consequences of EFS on penal substitutionary theory.”<sup>7</sup> The fourth argument states that EFS, because of its focus on the wills of the Father and the Son, undermines the traditional defense against liberal accusations of “cosmic child abuse” at the cross by rejecting the one will of God and the inseparable operations of the Godhead. Butner’s fifth argument continues with the claim that EFS’ version of penal substitutionary atonement teaches the “powerless to submit to the powerful even to the point of death.”<sup>8</sup> This leads to pastoral consequences as the self-sacrificial love of God is replaced with “the authority of one who can subdue the weak,” leading to “the harm and abuse of Christian women.”<sup>9</sup>

## Analysis

Butner seems to have a strong case, for those who confess and hold to the orthodox doctrines of the atonement. But I would counter that Butner’s arguments in his article are based on certain faulty ideas, and are therefore not sound at all.

Butner’s first argument is foolproof, if you hold that “will” being a personal property implies that Jesus has no human will. But that is a false statement. What after all is a “will”? For the patristics, being influenced by Greek philosophy, “will” was considered to be something stemming from nature. One wills in line with one’s nature or who one is. However, we know this to be false in these modern times. While it is true that one’s nature influences how one wills, so we do not hold to libertarian free will, the will is not determined by one’s nature, as if nature determines how we choose in life. The idea that nature determines will is either a form of hard determinism, or a teaching of Aristotelian final causation. Both I reject, and I suspect many others reject hard determinism and Aristotelian final causation as well.

If nature influences but does not determine the will, then it cannot be said that “will” is something that stems from “nature” only, such that “will” is a property of “nature.” Rather, “nature” and “will” are two distinct things, that are related in some manner to each other, but the one is not a property of the other. How then can they be related? I suggest that “will” should be considered as something that stems from “nature” but terminates as personal choices. This after all is the most natural meaning of “will” for

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 18

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 19

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

a soft determinist, where nature does influence choices made, but does not absolutely determine the details of our every single action.<sup>10</sup>

With this definition of “will,” we can begin to address Butner’s argument. The argument, that “will” being a personal property implies that Jesus has no human will during and after his incarnation, is unsound. Jesus has a human will insofar as the will originates from the human nature and terminates at the one divine-human person. Thus, from the point of origin (*terminus a quo*), there are two wills: one divine, one human. From the point of expression (*terminus ad quem*), it is one. Based on the soft determinist definition of will therefore, “will” can be considered a personal property and yet Jesus has a human will as well. Jesus thus is human in every way like us, and therefore true humanity is assumed and we are healed.

Butner’s third argument, being partially dependent on the focus on the human will, falls apart as well. I agree that active obedience requires a human will. Therefore, in the sense I have mentioned that Jesus has a human will in its origin, Jesus’ active obedience is indeed present for our salvation.

The second argument asserts that EFS must hold that Jesus’ obedience is divine, since EFS teaches obedience in the immanent Trinity. First, I reject the idea that there is obedience in the immanent Trinity. Rather, all of God’s decrees are done in His energies. Regardless, there is nothing against claiming that there is an obedience in the immanent Trinity (not that I hold that to be the case but stating thus for argument’s sake), and another obedience during the incarnation. The former could be a pre-temporal obedience, which necessitates the second obedience. Therefore, even if it is accepted that there is obedience in the immanent Trinity (which I do not hold to), Butner’s argument fails.

Butner’s fourth argument is basically a claim that three wills is a rejection of both the one divine will and inseparable operations. As someone who holds to EFS, one will, and inseparable operations, this argument is singularly unconvincing. After all, Butner has not shown why EFS necessarily leads to the rejection of the one will of God and inseparable operations.

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<sup>10</sup> Consider the relation of “nature” and “will” in God. If “will” is a property of “nature,” then whatever God wills, he cannot do otherwise, since God is immutable. Therefore, God does not have the freedom to save whomever He wills, but the grounds for election and reprobation stem not in the counsel of God’s will (c.f. Eph. 1:11) but in His immutable nature. Why is one person saved, and another not? If “will” is a property of “nature,” then the answer must be, “there is something in God that makes the elect more worthy of salvation than the reprobate.” That is obviously not the answer Paul gave in Romans 9, but then, when one is more interested in “theological retrieval,” biblical exegesis takes a back seat.

Obviously, the idea that something in God makes the elect more worthy of salvation than the reprobate seems to make God fatalistic in salvation. While for the Calvinist, we can appeal to God’s mysterious counsel, thus showing that God has a plan for why one is elect and one reprobate, there is no plan in God’s being, for God just is. This does not strike me as a very comforting answer to a person concerned about the fairness of God in election and reprobation, for there is no other telos in God’s being than His being.

Lastly, the fifth argument betrays a failure to truly understand how authority and submission work in EFS. Butner caricatures EFS, painting a picture of a father bossing around the son who just goes around saying “Yes, Sir,” “Alright, Sir,” with every bark of the father’s command (small letters intentional). That is a ridiculous caricature— that the son as “powerless” must “submit to the powerful (father) even to the point of death.” For an article about the doctrine of God and gender, Butner casually misrepresents his opponents on the very issue they have been very clear on: that there is no oppression or hierarchy of being within the Trinity. In EFS however, the Son willingly submits to the Father without compulsion, and the Father stands in authority not as superior but as first in the Godhead. Thus, Butner’s last argument, based on a faulty understanding of authority and submission, is not even an argument on theology proper but on anthropology, showing us that he is already holding egalitarian views on gender, regardless of whether he personally holds to complementarianism in practice.

## **Conclusion**

This journal article by Butner has given us weighty arguments against the doctrine of EFS. However, upon examination, Butner’s arguments are seen to be based upon faulty premises and thus unsound, based as they are on faulty philosophy. Regardless of one’s position on EFS, one should be wary of adopting Butner’s arguments and manner of argumentation.

It is trendy to claim to retrieve patristic thought., and for Butner this means the sixth “ecumenical” council, Constantinople III. However, one should be careful and examine the consequences of imbibing such Greek philosophy, and of holding to a view of “will” that is out of place with the Calvinist idea of “will.” On the human side, if “will” is necessarily a property of “nature,” then there can be no human free agency at all. What we are determines what we do, and the next transhumanist who can alter the genetic code will alter human will as he pleases. Nature triumphs over nurture, and those who are “born this way” cannot change who they are, and must be accepted whatever they are. If that sounds like a recipe for disaster leading to an embrace of all things LGBTQ+, it is. That is the issue before us, and unless we can divorce “nature” from “will,” we will have trouble calling those “born this way” to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

This is not to claim that Butner is pro-LGBTQ+, but that adopting his view on “nature” and “will” could lead us there easily. After all, if one holds that “will” is a property of “nature,” upon what basis can one argue for repentance of LGBTQ+ identifying individuals, if they did not actually sin in fornication? One could attempt to reject the “born this way” assertion, but I suspect that line of argument would not prove persuasive in the long term, since one is hard-pressed to prove what is “natural” and what is “sinful” from studies of any kind. Yes, one can appeal to Natural Law, but Natural Law arguments as law are about what things ought to be, not what things are,

and any use of Natural Law to deal with “born this way” arguments, without divorcing “will” and “nature,” commits the is-ought fallacy.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, Butner’s article puts forward some interesting argument, but fails ultimately. If one wants to reject EFS, one should find better arguments than these, although I will admit that Butner’s arguments are better than anything Matthew Barrett or Michael Bird could ever dreamed up.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> A LGBTQ+ identifying individual can agree with Natural Law on the wrongness of the sexual sin, but because his nature is what it is, he can say that he simply does not fornicate and thus commit the sexual sin, but his identity is what he is (Side B “Christianity”)

<sup>12</sup> See Daniel H Chew, *Review of Simply Trinity by Matthew Barrett*, 2021, accessed [https://puritanreformed.net/reviews/SimplyTrinity\\_Review.pdf](https://puritanreformed.net/reviews/SimplyTrinity_Review.pdf) (12 Sept 2022); Daniel H. Chew, *A Review of Trinity without Hierarchy*, 2020, accessed [https://puritanreformed.net/reviews/Trinity\\_wo\\_Hierarchy\\_Review.pdf](https://puritanreformed.net/reviews/Trinity_wo_Hierarchy_Review.pdf) (12 Sept 2022)