

LSM's 'Authority & Submission' Tampers with the Trinity

Watchman Nee's Eternal Subordination Error

A year ago, in the summer of 2016, a Civil War¹ erupted within conservative, evangelical Christianity over the Trinity. We say, 'conservative' because those involved—mostly Reformed (or 'Covenant') theologians, e.g., Presbyterians and Southern Baptists—have a high view of Scripture, affirm the ancient Church Creeds, and assert man's primacy in marriage, family & church affairs (so-called) 'complementarians.' For decades this consortium rebutted challenges from opposing liberal, modernist and feminist views. Last year, however, a full-blown social media battle erupted *within* this group; it played out on the Internet via Twitter, Blogs, and YouTube debates. Participants included theologians, professors at seminaries & Bible colleges, plus prominent ministers and regular believers. The conflict caught the attention of Christian media; *Christianity Today* [CT] called it a "Civil War." The Gospel Coalition referred to the "Battle of the Blogs." The central issue concerned the Triune God, Christianity's fundamental tenet. At issue was the eternal functional subordination of God's Son. CT explained, "The debate focused on Christ's relationship to God the Father. Some argue that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, while others say the Son was subordinate *in his earthly life only*."²

This was not just a "storm in a theological teacup." For over a decade³ certain prominent theologians sought to ground subordination in human gender roles—man's headship over his wife and family—upon an (alleged) authority-submission relationship within the eternal Godhead of the Trinity.⁴ This attempt to link authority-submission within the Trinity to subordinate gender roles guaranteed this would be a 'hot-button issue.'

CT identified the catalyst in the latest flare-up as a June 3, 2016 blog post⁵ by Dr. Liam "Goligher [which] strongly criticized well-known theologians Bruce Ware (S. Baptist Theological Seminary) and Wayne Grudem (Phoenix Seminary) for presenting a 'novel view of God; a different God than that affirmed by the church through the ages and taught in Scripture.' Goligher claimed that Ware, Grudem, & other[s]...have—in order to support their view of biblical gender roles—adopted a theology that makes God the Son eternally subordinate to God the Father, effectively dividing the Trinity...[which] goes 'beyond orthodoxy'," CT reported.⁶ Dr. Goligher regards this as "a departure from Christian orthodoxy." Serious issues are at stake; charges have been leveled that Ware and Grudem's subordination view involves "tampering with the Trinity."⁷ Glenn Butner calls it "a destructive articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity."⁸ It has been labelled "reinventing the doctrine of God,"⁹ and "outside the bounds of Nicene Orthodoxy,"¹⁰ due to its espousing "Arianism,"¹¹ and/or tri-theism.¹²

This is relevant to LSM's Local Church since their founding father, Watchman Nee [倪柝声; Ní Tuòshēng], propounded views not significantly different from those of Drs. Ware and Grudem.¹³ Their novel teaching—commonly called 'eternal functional subordination' [EFS]—is also dubbed 'the eternal relationship of authority and submission' [ERAS]. This topic is the theme of Watchman Nee's "*Authority and Submission*" (LSM, 1988) also titled "*Spiritual Authority*" (CFP, 1972). Witness Lee acknowledged that W. Nee's authority-submission teachings have been misused. He said, "Some who do not meet with us have already greatly misused Brother Nee's book *Spiritual Authority*."¹⁴ Elsewhere he said,¹⁵ "I am sorry that some Christians utilize Brother Nee's book, *Spiritual Authority*, to make themselves an authority over others. This kind of authority is self-assumed."

Other writers have raised "red flags" about the teaching itself. Dennis McCallum observes that,¹⁶ "Late in his career, Nee is said to have developed some doctrinal aberrations...These areas had to do with a heavy emphasis on authority and submission...It cannot be denied that Nee was extreme in some areas, including spiritual authority...The emphasis on delegated human authority was in perfect harmony with Confucian ethics." Dr. G. Wright Doyle says after World War II, W. Nee "was preaching absolute, even unthinking, submission to church leaders, especially himself."¹⁷ These statements address problems arising from the (mis-)application of the teaching. However, to my knowledge, Watchman Nee's authority-submission doctrine itself has not been evaluated from a theological perspective—is it biblical? Is it consistent with orthodox Christian teaching about the Trinity (e.g. the Nicene Creed, AD 325 & Chalcedonian Creed, AD 451)? The recent EFS debate highlights the relevant issues; here we address the implications of that debate for LSM's 'authority-submission' dogma.

What is Eternal Functional Subordination [EFS]?

Dr. Bruce Ware, a leading exponent, defines ‘eternal functional subordination’ [EFS] as follows: “This view holds that God reveals himself in Scripture as one God in three persons, such that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are fully equal in their deity as each possesses fully and eternally the one and undivided nature; yet the *Father is revealed as having the highest authority among the Trinitarian persons*, such that the Son, as agent of the Father, eternally implements the will of the Father and is under the Father’s authority.”¹⁸

The first sentence comports with standard Nicene orthodoxy about the Trinity. The second statement, however, posits a hierarchy within the Trinity. “The Father,” says Dr. Ware, has “the highest authority...” He also asserts, “The Father is supreme in authority, the Son is under the Father, and the Spirit is under the Father and the Son. Yet there is also full harmony...”¹⁹ Clearly, although they are “fully equal in their deity,” an authority gradient, or hierarchy, is asserted—God the Father has greater authority, and God the Son has less authority.

When does this hierarchy exist—only during the Son’s incarnation or also in eternity past? Dr. Ware answers: “The Son is *always* the Son of the Father and is so *eternally*. As Son of the Father, he is under the authority of his Father and seeks in all he does to act as the Agent of the Father’s will...”²¹ In Dr. Ware’s view this authority-submission relationship is intrinsic to the Father-Son relationship, so it applies in eternity past. Since, the Son is subordinate to God the Father in eternity (and also during his earthly ministry) it is aptly called “*eternal subordination*.” This is important. All concur that Christ, God’s Son, submitted to His Father while on earth; the point of contention is whether this subordination applies in eternity. Dr. Bruce Ware asserts that it does.

Professor Wayne Grudem’s endorsement of ‘eternal functional subordination’ [EFS] is easily established. He is on record declaring, “I hold to the eternal submission of the Son to the Father.”²² Moreover he asserts that the “Son is eternally subordinated to the Father in role or function”²³

For adherents of the EFS doctrine, it is not a secondary or auxiliary tenet of Trinitarian theology. It is central. Strachan & Peacock state: “The Son is the Son because he submits to the Father’s will...*There is no Holy Trinity without the order of authority and submission.*”²⁴ Again Dr. Ware asserts that an “authority-submission structure...exists in the three Persons of the Godhead, each of whom is equally and fully God...[It] *marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the [Trinity]*...This *hierarchical structure exists in the eternal Godhead.*”²⁵

Why is EFS important? For proponents it removes authority-submission issues out of the realm of relativity, where some argue (for example) that the Apostle Paul’s attitude towards women’s submission reflects first-century Greco-Roman cultural norms. Since 21st-century cultural norms regarding gender roles are different, some argue that Paul’s instructions don’t apply today. The EFS doctrine undermines such objections, since it anchors authority-submission issues in the absolutes of the eternal being of the Triune God. Proponents then argue “as above, so below”—relationships in human society ought to reflect what is true in the eternal Trinity.

Did Watchman Nee teach Eternal Subordination?

In order to distinguish between Jesus Christ’s obedience to His Father as the incarnate Son and His relationship within the Trinity, we focus upon the Son’s pre-incarnate relations in eternity past. The central issue focuses on the Son’s subordination within the ‘essential Trinity’ in eternity, not His submission in the ‘economic Trinity’ in time. We quote 3 successive passages from W. Nee’s *Authority & Submission* (LSM, 1988) which present his position regarding eternal subordination within the ‘essential Trinity.’ First, W. Nee says:²⁶

“In the beginning was the Word [Jn. 1:1]...With God in the beginning there was a glory...The Father and the Son are equal, equipotent, coexisting, and existing simultaneously. But there is a difference in person between the Father and the Son. It is not a distinction in intrinsic nature but in arrangement in the Godhead...*In the Godhead the Lord voluntarily chose to be the Son, submitting Himself to the authority of the Father...* The Son’s position was a voluntary choice of our Lord. In the Godhead there is full harmony. In the Godhead there is equality, yet it is happily arranged that the Father should be the Head and that the Son should submit. The Father became the representation of authority, and the Son became the representation of submission.”

The context is eternity past—“in the beginning” (Jn.1:1). In that eternal state, W. Nee asserts that the Father and Son are different in person, yet equal, having no “distinction in intrinsic nature.” He asserts that the “difference in person” relates, not to the Son’s eternal generation, but to an authority-submission “arrangement in the Godhead,” which entailed “the Son, submitting Himself to the authority of the Father.” Watchman Nee’s position is not significantly different from the EFS view outlined above. We conclude that W. Nee would endorse Professor Bruce Ware’s statement above that, from eternity past, “The Father is supreme in authority, the Son is under the Father, and the Spirit is under the Father and the Son. Yet there is also full harmony...”¹⁹

Shortly thereafter, Watchman Nee reiterates, saying:²⁷

“Originally, there was no need for submission in the Godhead. Because the Lord created submission, the Father became the Head to Christ in the Godhead. Both authority and submission were established by God. They were present from the beginning. Therefore, those who know the Lord will be submissive spontaneously. Those who do not know God nor [sic.] Christ will not know authority or submission. With Christ there is the principle of submission. Those who accept submission are accepting the principle of Christ. Hence, those who are filled with Christ will be filled with submission.”

Watchman Nee asserts that submission (and its corollary, authority) were “created” by the Lord in eternity past, when the Son voluntarily took the initiative to submit to God the Father. Therefore authority and submission are eternal, divine principles—the “principle of authority,”²⁸ “the principle of Christ”—“established by God...from the beginning.” This is eternal functional subordination, expressed in W. Nee’s own terminology.

Finally, prior to expositing Philippians 2, W. Nee says,²⁹

“It seems as if there was a conference in the Godhead in the beginning in which a plan was made to create the universe. In this plan the divine persons of the Godhead agreed with each other and came to the understanding that the Father would be the representation of authority. But if there was only authority without submission, authority could not be established... Hence, there must be submission in the universe ...God’s foreknowledge foresaw the rebellion of the angels and...man. God’s authority cannot be built upon the angels or...the descendants of Adam. In the Godhead there was a harmonious decision that authority would be established first within the Godhead. From that time on there was a distinction in operation of the Father and the Son. One day the Son willingly emptied Himself to become a created man...”

Here W. Nee introduces the idea of “a conference in the Godhead,” in eternity past, prior to creation, where “the divine persons” made a “harmonious decision” that authority would be represented by the Father, thereby introducing “a distinction in operation of the Father and the Son.” Thus Watchman Nee has consistently stated that the distinction between the Persons of the Trinity is not in “intrinsic nature” (or essence), but in “operation” (role or function). This matches the description of ‘eternal functional subordination’ advocated by Professors Ware, Grudem and others. We shall return to re-examine Watchman Nee’s statements below.

What’s wrong with ‘Eternal Functional Subordination’?

Before addressing this question, let’s remind ourselves of a few points:

1. The EFS debate pertains to the relationship within the Trinity in eternity—the ‘essential’ (immanent) Trinity. All participants in the debate agree that Christ (God’s incarnate Son) was submissive & obedient to His Father during His earthly ministry—in the ‘economic Trinity.’³⁰ This is clearly taught in Scripture (e.g. Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8). The eminent theologian Thomas Torrance warns that “The subjection of Christ to [God] the Father in his incarnate economy *cannot be read back* into the eternal hypostatic relations and distinctions subsisting in the Holy Trinity.”³¹ Donald Macleod concurs, warning that it is “precarious ...to read the subordination...in John’s Gospel back into the pre-temporal [eternal] relations between the Son and the Father.”³² The key issue is whether the Son’s subjection is also true in eternity past. Here we ought also to recognize that the vast majority of Scripture applies to the ‘economic Trinity;’ only a small portion addresses eternal relations within the ‘essential (immanent) Trinity’ (e.g. Jn. 1:1; 17:5, 24).

2. Standard orthodox statements about the Trinity say: “God exists as three persons or *hypostases*, but is one being, having a single divine nature [*ousia*]. The members of the Trinity are co-equal and co-eternal, one in essence, nature, power, action, and will.” The three ‘persons’ are distinct in that the Father is not begotten, but the Son *is* begotten (eternally generated) from the Father (Jn. 1:14, 18; 3:16). Eternal generation from the Father is *the* property which constitutes the Son *as* the Son.³³ This does not mean, however, that the Son is not equal to God the Father in essence & divine nature. Plus the Holy Spirit is distinct in proceeding from the Father (Jn. 14:26) and being sent by the Son (Jn. 15:26). Scripture uses these terms —‘begotten’ & ‘proceed’—to distinguish between the members of the Trinity. It does *not* use ‘authority’ or ‘submission’; they are not properties that constitute the Son *as* Son or Father *as* Father.
3. The English terms ‘submit, subordinate’ usually translate the Greek verb *hupotasso*--a compound verb composed of the preposition *hupo*, ‘under, subject to’ and the verb *tasso*, ‘to arrange.’ Thus the word literally means, ‘to arrange under,’ or ‘place under.’ It is a military term meaning ‘to arrange under one’s authority,’ as a general arranges his troops in orderly array before him. *Hupotasso* appears 40 times in the Greek NT and frequently involves voluntary or involuntary submission to legitimate authority.³⁴ The middle voice, ‘to subject oneself,’ assumes the exercise of the volition (will) to come under another’s authority. The will is a part of the human soul of man, who is made in God’s image (Gen. 1:26; 2:7).³⁵

Dr. Thomas McCall’s Devastating Critique of EFS

The most devastating critique of eternal functional subordination propounded by W. Grudem, B. Ware and Watchman Nee has been levied by Dr. Thomas H. McCall of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. In his book, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* Professor McCall “looks at recent Evangelical proponents of ‘Eternal Functional Subordinationism’ and evaluates them as most likely *guilty of Arianism*.”³⁶

Dr. McCall’s critique proceeds through five logical propositions:³⁷

- 1) If EFS is true, then the Son has the property of *being functionally subordinate...in all possible worlds* [eternity & time]
- 2) If the Son has this property in every possible world, then the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*)
- 3) If the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*), then the Son has it essentially
- 4) If EFS is true, then the Son has this property essentially while the Father does not.
- 5) If the Son has this property essentially and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* [of a different essence/substance] rather than *homoousios* [of the same essence/substance—a fundamental tenet of the Nicene Creed.]

Professor McCall contends that, within the essential Trinity, “If one [the Father] is always and necessarily authoritative over the other [the Son], then the difference must extend from function to being [essence/nature].”³⁸ The net result is that EFS implies that the Son and Father are not the same essence/substance/nature (*ousia*). It does so because “being functionally subordinate requires that there...exists a substance to which the property can be predicated”³⁹ That specific substance/essence differs between Son and Father (and, by extension, the Spirit). Theology professor, Millard Erickson explains this corollary, saying, “Authority is part of the Father’s essence, and subordination is part of the Son’s essence, and each attribute is not part of the essence of the other person. That means that the essence of the Son is different from the essence of the Father ...That is equivalent to saying that they are not *homoousios* [of the same essence] with one another.”⁴⁰ This inevitable implication contradicts the fundamental statement of orthodoxy in the Nicene Creed (325 AD). Different essences suggests that the Son and Father are different Gods—a “lesser God and a greater God.” This is a significant step away “one God in three persons” towards multiple Gods within a hierarchy. So Dr. Glenn Butner says, “The problem with EFS is...the fact that it entails tri-theism.”⁴¹

How many wills in the essential Trinity?

Does the Triune God have one will or three wills? Since the Trinity is ‘three-in-one,’ the answer depends on whether the ‘faculty of will’ is related to the aspect of the Trinity’s oneness or three-ness. Orthodox statements about the Trinity say: “God exists as three persons or *hypostases*, but is one being [*ousia*], having a single divine nature. The members of the Trinity are co-equal & co-eternal, one in essence, nature, power, action, *and will*.” The Church Fathers deduced from Scripture that the Triune God has only one will possessed equally by all three ‘persons;’ each ‘person’ of the Trinity does not possess their own differentiated will. The Church Fathers linked the divine will to the divine nature. Since by incarnation the Son has both human and divine natures, as a God-man he possesses both a human will and a divine will (the latter shared with the Father). Jesus’ Gethsemane prayer, “not as I will, but as You will,” (Mt. 26:39) was interpreted to mean “not Jesus’ *human* will, but the divine will (of both Father and Son).” Nevertheless prior to incarnation, in the eternal essential Trinity, orthodox doctrine asserts that the Son and Father have only one will. Professor of Historical Theology, Dr. Khaled Anatolios informs us “the church Fathers [asserted] that ‘will’ as a volitional capacity is a property of the divine nature. So, in this sense, each of the [Trinity’s] three persons possesses the identically same will, just as each of them possesses the identically same power, and knowledge, & holiness, & love, etc.”⁴²

This poses a serious problem for the EFS dogma of B. Ware, W. Grudem, & W. Nee. The problem--how can there be ‘submission’ in the eternal relations, between the Trinity’s three persons, who share the same essence [divine nature] and thus share the same will? Submission assumes two discordant wills where one is laid aside—“Not my will, but yours.” But, if the wills always coincide—what the Father wills, the Son also wills—no will is denied; there’s no subordination or submission. So Mark Jones asks “How can the Son eternally submit to the Father if...God has one essence and one will which is identical with his essence?”⁴³ As Glenn Butner states, “To suggest that the Father and the Son are distinguished by eternal submission and obedience is to suggest that the Father and the Son have different wills.”⁴⁴ Recognizing the problem, Ridley College theologian Michael F. Bird, writes “There are limits that cannot be transgressed...‘functional subordination’ cannot mean submission of the Son’s will to the Father’s will within the Godhead *as they have the same divine will*.”⁴⁵

One scholar explains this crucial point further, saying “One often overlooked feature of...[EFS] is that this understanding of the eternal relationship between Father and Son seems to entail a commitment to three distinct wills in the immanent Trinity. *In order for the Son to submit willingly to the will of the Father, the two must possess distinct wills. This way of understanding the immanent Trinity does run counter to the pro-Nicene tradition, as well as the medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation Reformed traditions that grew from it. According to traditional Trinitarian theology, the will is predicated of the one undivided essence [substance, or nature] so that there is only one divine will in the immanent Trinity.*”⁴⁶

Professors Ware and Grudem appeal to various Church Fathers for support of their EFS proposal. However, Christian scholars who specialize in this area have found their arguments wanting. Theologian Michael F. Bird comments “when two of the biggest names in fourth century trinitarian theology graciously dismantle your theological argument for...subordinationist trinitarianism [i.e. Eternal Subordination], the game is over.”⁴⁷

The Triune God—one will or multiple wills?

Most Christians have never consciously addressed the question of whether the Triune God has one (common) will or multiple wills. Nevertheless, in Christian practice we assume the Trinity has one divine will. When faced with a serious choice, Christians ask, “What is God’s will in this matter?” They do not pray three separate prayers--to the Father, Son and Spirit (respectively)--and then adopt the majority decision (2 to 1)! We implicitly assume that there is one divine will. Thus Christian practice coincides with the judgment of learned theologians enshrined in the ancient orthodox creeds. These same creeds declare that there was also one divine will (linked with one divine nature) shared equally by the three ‘persons’ of the essential Trinity in eternity.

Recognizing one divine will, therefore, undermines the basis for eternal subordination. As Nancy Hedberg says, “If you say the Father and the Son have one will and are equal in their essence, their works and their power, it is slicing things too thinly to then argue that the Son is eternally subordinate in function and authority.”⁴⁸

Three Persons, Three Wills, Three Gods?

Matthew Emerson observes that eternal subordination “seems to require 3 wills in the Godhead, for how can one person submit to another without two distinct wills?”⁴⁹ Yet Glenn Butner asserts that,⁵⁰ “If...a will is a property of nature, then there can only be one will in the Trinity because there is only one nature. To posit two wills or 3 wills in the Godhead is to posit 2 or 3 natures & thereby...undermine the idea of a Trinity altogether.” An alternate strategy, advocated by Drs. B. Ware & W. Grudem, is to link the faculty of will to the three persons of the Godhead. Mark Jones points out that in “arguing for eternal authority and submission in the Godhead, Ware, Grudem, and others...conceive of *will as a property of person rather than essence*. The model of a three-willed Trinity then provides the basis for the conviction that structures of authority and submission actually serve as one of the means of differentiating the divine persons.”⁵¹

The difficulty with this approach is that the “more cargo” is placed upon the Trinity’s three Persons (rather than their one essence/nature) the closer we approach tri-theism. So Glenn Butner observes, “The problem with Eternal Functional Subordination [EFS] is not Arianism, but the fact that it entails tri-theism.”⁵²

While some theologians (e.g. B. Ware, W. Grudem) are willing to embrace this option it is unlikely that LSM will take this route. After all, Witness Lee roundly criticized Christianity for teaching tri-theism. He said, “The traditional explanation of the Trinity is grossly inadequate and borders on tri-theism.”⁵³ Plus he said, “Many Christians really believe in three Gods. They do not dare to express their belief openly, because it is contrary to the Scriptures, but in their way of thinking of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, They are three Gods...If we over-emphasize the concept of three Persons, we may be led into tri-theism.”⁵⁴ Replacing one divine will (linked to the Triune God’s one nature) with three divine wills (linked to the Trinity’s three ‘persons’) represents a significant movement towards the tri-theism which Witness Lee warns against.

Witness Lee accepted the Nicene Creed as Orthodox

It is worth noting here that Witness Lee never repudiated the Nicene Creed. He is on record saying,⁵⁵ “The Nicene Creed...was not bad in presenting the orthodox and fundamental doctrines concerning God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit...” W. Lee’s quibble with the creed was that it was “incomplete.” He declared that,⁵⁶ “although the Nicene Creed contains no heresy and is actually not bad, it is still incomplete in its contents, since there were 7 [NT] books that had not yet been authenticated as authoritative.” Specifically, “The creed speaks of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but it says nothing concerning the seven Spirits.”⁵⁷ W. Lee wished to stay within the bounds of orthodoxy; he rejected the charge of modalism⁵⁸ and denounced tri-theism. Endorsing the Nicene Creed implies accepting the Trinity’s one nature and one divine will. This contradicts the EFS doctrine.

Watchman Nee’s “Conference in the Godhead in the beginning”

Let us briefly consider W. Nee’s specific proposal concerning the Son’s eternal functional subordination [EFS]. Watchman Nee posits that a “conference in the Godhead” occurred in eternity past which established authority and submission within the Trinity. He says:⁵⁹

“It seems as if there was a conference in the Godhead in the beginning in which a plan was made to create the universe. In this plan the divine persons of the Godhead agreed with each other and came to the understanding that the Father would be the representation of authority. But if there was only authority without submission, authority could not be established...there must be submission in the universe...In the Godhead there was a harmonious decision that authority would be established first within the Godhead. From that time on there was a distinction in operation of the Father and the Son.”

As a result of this eternal council “the Father became the Head to Christ in the Godhead. Both authority & submission were established by God. They were *present from the beginning*,”⁶⁰ Watchman Nee concludes.

W. Nee attempts to anchor authority & submission in the eternal existence of the essential Trinity. However, in doing so he falls into the same error as Grudem and Ware—requiring a difference in the wills/essence/nature (*ousia*) of the Father and Son within the essential Trinity. Hence *it contravenes Nicene orthodoxy*. Moreover, this is not a minor problem to be resolved by a little semantic gymnastics; it is a fundamental contradiction.

Before proceeding, let us raise a few matters. The first issue relates to the (alleged) distinction of ‘roles, functions or operations’ in eternity past. Prof. Thomas McCall asks “What is this ‘functional subordination? What are these functions? What *could* they be? A possible world [eternity past,] containing no sin needs neither Judge nor Savior. A possible world [eternity past] with no creation needs no Governor. In fact, it is hard to even conceive of ‘functional subordination’ in a possible world in which only God exists—in which there is only the triune communion of holy love.”⁶¹ There is no scope for authoritative Trinitarian roles in eternity past. Second, Scripture mentions “love” and “glory” (Jn. 17:24b, 5) within the essential Trinity in eternity; it never mentions “authority” or “submission.” Theologians use the term “*perichoresis*” to describe the Trinity’s eternal relations. For example, Damon So tells us⁶² this “means the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have always been in perpetual holy and loving communion before the creation of the world...The Father has always loved the Son and reaches out to his Son through the Holy Spirit...The Son has always loved the Father and responds...This perpetual giving of love to one another and the receiving of love from one another amongst the three persons of the Trinity is called *perichoresis* by theologians, meaning mutual indwelling. Jesus described [this] (Jn. 14:10; 17:21)...In this mutual indwelling of the Trinity, the Son has always co-possessed the divine glory with his Father, even before the world came into being.” Inserting “authority and submission” into the “perpetual holy & loving communion” of the Trinity is like a SWAT team invading a newly-married couple’s harmonious home!

Reformed Theology’s *Pactum Salutis*

Scripture refers to God’s eternal “counsel.” Acts 2:23 says Jesus was “delivered up by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23 Rcv.) Witness Lee says “This counsel must have been determined in a council held by the Divine Trinity before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8), indicating that the Lord’s crucifixion was not an accident in human history but a purposeful fulfillment of the divine counsel determined by the Triune God” (Acts 2:23¹). The context here is the Son’s redemptive death to accomplish God’s economy. Support is found in 1 Pet. 1:19-20 which refers to Christ as a Lamb “foreknown before the foundation of the world.” Also Rev. 13:8 says He is the “Lamb...slain from the foundation of the world.”

Watchman Nee was not the first to posit a conference of the Godhead in eternity past. Reformed (Covenant) theology has a well-developed theology on this topic called “the *pactum salutis*,” (Latin) or “Counsel of Peace.” It has been defined as “a pre-temporal [before time, i.e. in eternity past], intra-trinitarian [within the Trinity] agreement between the Father and Son in which the Father promises to redeem an elect people. In turn the Son volunteers to earn the salvation of his people by becoming incarnate...”⁶³ This agreement, known as the “Covenant of Righteousness,” in Reformed circles, occurred in eternity past and involves the ‘Persons’ of the Trinity. Its purpose is the “redemption of God’s elect.” Hence, it is defined as “an intra-Trinitarian agreement before the beginning of the ages by which the Father and Son consented to *procure an elect people by the atoning work of the Son and the uniting work of His Spirit.*”⁶⁴ This matches W. Lee’s exposition of Acts 2:23.

However, this *pactum salutis* doctrine does not match the “conference in the Godhead,” *establishing authority and submission* posited by Watchman Nee. There is no causal link or direct connection between Watchman Nee’s ‘authority and submission’ conference in the Godhead and God’s economy for the redemption of God’s elect. Scripture provides a basis for the latter (e.g. Acts 2:23; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8). But, we find no equivalent basis for the former--Watchman Nee’s ‘authority & submission’ conference of the Godhead.⁶⁵

Watchman Nee’s ‘Authority & Submission’ Teaching

“What we have here is *not diversity but error – Trinitarian error*”—Mark Jones

Watchman Nee’s ‘Authority and Submission’ teaching is not significantly different from the doctrine of the Son’s eternal functional subordination [EFS] proffered by Professors Wayne Grudem & Bruce Ware. Since the latter has been judged as inconsistent with orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, Watchman Nee’s ‘Authority and Submission’ doctrine is also heterodox; therefore it too ought to be rejected. Moreover, since it touches the Trinity, this is not a secondary or tertiary issue, about which Christians can agree to differ. As Mark Jones states, “What we have here is *not diversity but error – Trinitarian error.*”⁶⁶

Watchman Nee attempted to anchor his authority/submission doctrine in the eternal being of the essential Trinity. He presented authority as *the* overriding attribute of the Trinity. This allowed W. Nee to assert that “Once we touch God’s authority, we touch God Himself...Meeting God’s authority is the same as meeting God ...Offending God’s authority is the same as offending God Himself. A Christian should submit to authority.”⁶⁷ Yet the Bible never says “God is authority;” it says “God is love” (1 Jn. 4:8, 16), “God is light” (1 Jn. 1:5) and “God is Spirit” (Jn. 4:24). By inserting authority into the Godhead, W. Nee elevated authority above its place in the divine order. This issued in the exaggerated emphasis on authority and submission which characterizes LSM’s Local Church until today. What does this teaching produce? W. Nee described the desired outcome: “In order to practice submission, the first thing to ask is who is above me...Whenever any brother or sister or co-worker goes to a place, he or she has to find out who his or her authority is.”⁶⁸ Moreover Witness Lee echoes these sentiments: “Whenever the brothers and sisters are together, each one should keep the order and take his proper place, whether he is above or below others or on the right or the left...In God’s house there is only the question of God’s authority and order.”⁶⁹ A hierarchical view of God produces a hierarchical church & society. W. Nee & W. Lee both appeal to Noah’s blessing on his two sons, Shem & Japheth and his curse upon Ham to illustrate submission to God’s deputy authority. W. Nee asserts,⁷⁰ “Ham’s descendents were to be slaves, put under others’ authority, for generation after generation,” due to exposing Noah’s nakedness. Plus W. Lee says “According to history and geography, Shem, Noah’s 1st son, was the forefather of the Hebrews, the Jews. Ham, his 2nd son, was the forefather of the black people. Ham’s son was Cush, the forefather of Ethiopia. Japheth, Noah’s 3rd son, was the forefather of the Europeans.”⁷¹ Hence, Noah’s three sons are identified as the ancestors of 3 ethnic-racial groups—the Jews, “black people,” and “the Europeans.” He then declares, “Ham has been cursed...he became a slave of slaves. Has this been proved by history or not? It has.” (p. 450) Hence, W. Lee says “Ham...was the forefather of the black people.” “Ham has been cursed...he became a slave of slaves.” This, W. Lee says, has been proven by history--black slavery was the fulfillment of Noah’s curse upon Ham. Thus a hierarchical Trinity based on authority/submission is used to justify the hierarchical subjugation of Blacks. This one example ought to be sufficient to demonstrate that that LSM’s dogma of Eternal Roles of Authority and Submission [ERAS] in the Trinity is far from innocuous; it is a dangerous doctrine. Those still unconvinced ought to consider the potential for abuse in the doctrine that [1] God’s deputy authority is answerable to no one except God Himself⁷² [2] Covering a deputy authority’s failings brings blessing, exposing them brings a curse.⁷³

“Finding in the Trinity what they themselves hid there in the first place”—Prof. Fred Sanders

A fundamental problem with Watchman Nee’s authority-submission dogma is *eisegesis*. It reads that dogma into the Biblical text. As BIOLA University Theology Professor Fred Sanders recently observed, “The most obvious problem with this...approach is the mirroring technique: It is not something that the Bible ever directs us to do...Further, there are no controls on what we might find in God to imitate...*People are only finding in the Trinity what they themselves hid there in the first place* [i.e., *eisegesis*].”⁷⁴

Darren Sumner finds Dr. Bruce Ware guilty of this. He says, “*The EFS mode of reasoning is...human projection misidentified with divine revelation*. Ware takes a human cultural construct and...reads it upward into the life of God...Ware first reads the authority-submission structure from creaturely existence into the life of God; then he reads it back out again from God to human creatures...to male-female relations...*Ware has derived from his doctrine of God exactly what he put into it*.”⁷⁵

Drs. Ware & Grudem find authority & submission because they wish to justify authority & submission in male-female gender roles. W. Nee does the same in order to justify a hierarchical authority & submission structure in the church; he attempts to ground such hierarchical relationships in the eternal inner-life of the essential Trinity. However the Bible does not do this. Moreover, in order to achieve his goal, Watchman Nee tampers with the Trinity and violates the most basic postulates of orthodox Christian belief—the Nicene and Chalcedon Creeds. If we accept W. Nee’s authority-submission dogma we must reject orthodoxy as defined by the Nicene & Chalcedon Creeds. Conversely, if we affirm those Creedal definitions of the orthodox faith *we must reject W. Nee’s dogma*. As Trinity Evangelical Divinity School Professor of Biblical & Systematic Theology Thomas H.

McCall states “There is no room in orthodox Christian theology for any view [he cites the EFS doctrine] that would diminish the full and equal divinity of the Son and Holy Spirit with the Father.”⁷⁶

Human Projection onto the Divine Trinity

Professor Fred Sanders⁷⁷ reminds us that Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) perceived in the Trinity a kind of monarchical structure similar to that of the Roman Catholic Church. The Eastern Orthodox scholar, John Zizioulas observed a structure like that of Eastern Orthodoxy. Meanwhile the Baptist, Miroslav Wolf, perceived the Trinity as a free association like the Baptists. Dr. Anne Hunt observes,⁷⁸ “One cannot but observe that the conclusions reached bear close correspondence to the particular ecclesial tradition...from which the theologians themselves come.” She warns of the danger of human projection—of “making the Triune God in our own image;” she says, “We should be very wary of appropriation of God language in support of our structures and systems, be it ecclesial, political, or social.” These examples suggest that, in his era, Watchman Nee fell into the same error—projecting an Asian-style hierarchical structure of authority and submission onto the Triune God.

Asian Cultural Concept ‘baptized’ as an Eternal Trinitarian Principle

“China is famously Confucian.” Jackson Wu explains,⁷⁹ “Confucianism...is socially hierarchical...All social interactions are regulated by the principle of the subordinate deferring to the superior. Thus, authority is central to ethics, values, and identity.” Hence, Watchman Nee’s authority-submission dogma resonates with Chinese Confucian values. Dennis McCallum astutely observes that “Late in his career, [Watchman] Nee... developed some doctrinal aberrations...These areas had to do with a heavy emphasis on authority & submission ...The emphasis on delegated human authority was *in perfect harmony with Confucian ethics*.”⁸⁰ Dr. G. Wright Doyle concludes that the Chinese culture encourages authoritarian leadership. He alleges “All observers have noted the authoritarian nature of Chinese leadership, from Imperial times to the present.”⁸¹ Jackson Wu agrees that Chinese “culture encourages authoritarian leadership and an unwillingness to show weakness...”⁸²

These observations raise the spectre that Watchman Nee’s authority-submission dogma was the result of “human projection misidentified with divine revelation.”⁸³ Via Watchman Nee’s authority-submission dogma the Asian cultural concept of an authority hierarchy was ‘baptized’ as an eternal “principle”⁸⁴ of the Triune God. Teresa Zimmerman-Liu has argued that Watchman “Nee contextualized the message of Western missionaries to China.”⁸⁵ W. Nee’s authority/submission dogma represents a further example of this process. Yet, there is a significant difference; styles of worship can be contextualized, producing an Asian style of worship. But the Triune God cannot be contextualized; there is neither an Oriental Trinity, nor an Occidental Trinity. There’s simply the ontological Trinity. W. Nee projected authority onto the Triune God, resulting in an *Asian* Trinity.

Vigorous Debate vs. LSM’s Stonewalling

The issue of the Son’s eternal subordination has confronted adherents of Reformed theology and also LSM’s Local Church movement. In the latter case Watchman Nee’s authority-submission dogma has been taught for 70 years. It has become a standard tenet of Local Church teaching and part of LSM’s arsenal employed during “turmoils” to subjugate “the saints” during (so-called) “rebellions.”⁸⁶ Never, in those seven decades, has this doctrine been tabled by ‘the Recovery’s leadership’ for evaluation in an open forum allowing for discussion and debate. There has never been an “Acts 15 conference” on this issue in the “Lord’s Recovery Church.” Watchman Nee declared that “God specifically placed this unique [Acts 15] conference in the Bible to be a pattern,”⁸⁷ for solving problems. But, to my knowledge, this pattern has never been applied in the Local Church. Instead, “God’s infallible oracle”—Witness Lee & LSM’s “blended brothers”—present this dogma as a non-negotiable tenet of the Local Church movement. All challenges to this (or other) doctrines are met with stonewalling. As a result this erroneous and dangerous doctrine remains firmly entrenched in LSM’s theology.

In Reformed circles the EFS doctrine (as an adjunct to ‘complementarianism’) is a recent innovation. In marked contrast to LSM’s Recovery, the EFS doctrine has not gone unchallenged in these circles. This novel teaching has been challenged by academics, Church leaders and by regular believers. Like the Bereans, they

“examined the Scriptures...to see whether these things were so.” (Acts 17:11, RCV.) Discussion and vigorous debate occurred via books, journal articles, mediated public debates, Internet articles, Blog posts and tweets.

This open and vigorous debate regarding the Son’s eternal functional subordination produced clarity for many of those involved. I believe the majority of informed participants & observers have rejected the EFS doctrine. The well-known Reformed minister, R. C. Sproul issued a statement regarding his position, which said:⁸⁸

“Dr. R. C. Sproul and Ligonier Ministries deny the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son and the idea that the Father eternally has greater authority than the Son. The Bible clearly teaches the deity of Christ (e.g. John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8–9; 2 Pet. 1:1), and there are no degrees of deity. All of the attributes of God belong equally to all three Persons of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is why we confess the Nicene Creed, declaring that the Son is *homoousios* (i.e. same nature, same substance) with the Father. To use the language of the Athanasian Creed, the Father, Son, and Spirit are ‘co-equal with each other.’ The fifth ecumenical council in AD 553, elaborated on the implications of the *homoousios* doctrine, explaining that the Father, Son, and Spirit ‘have one nature or substance’ and that they have ‘one power and authority.’ There can no more be levels of authority within the one divine being than there can be levels of deity.” [Dr. R. C. Sproul & Ligonier Ministries, Dec. 22, 2016]

In contrast, among LSM Local Churches, Watchman Nee’s authority-submission doctrine, which mirrors the EFS dogma, has survived for seven decades unchallenged. The lack of open discussion among LSM’s leadership reflects a number of factors. First Local Church adherents have been thoroughly indoctrinated with this authority doctrine. W. Nee assigned absolute authority to God’s deputy authority; they answer to God alone. He taught: “God appoints authority...Whether or not a deputy authority is wrong is nobody else’s business...We have to...submit to deputy authority...If a deputy authority makes a mistake, we do not...bear any responsibility for his mistake...God only requires [our] obedience.”⁸⁹ To challenge an LSM doctrine is perceived as an affront to “God’s oracle,” his deputy authority—an act of rebellion. Hence, the doctrine itself puts a “severe chill” on discussion or debate, even when a teaching, like this one, is manifestly erroneous and does serious damage.

Second, I believe that, here again, we see the pervasive influence of Asian culture on the Local Church. Jackson Wu observes that,⁹⁰ “One of the most important authorities found in Chinese life...is the teacher...‘Education is the acquisition of correct knowledge, not the...generation of new knowledge,’ hence, ‘the teacher is the repository of knowledge, to be passed onto his students.’...‘Uniformity, rather than individualization, is sought.’...Classrooms are primarily managed through criticism...this is meant to spur diligence and submission to the teacher...In addition, persistence & proficiency in memorization is developed.” These Asian values, translated into a Christian context, aptly describe the role of Witness Lee as “God’s oracle” within the “Lord’s Recovery.” This top-down approach leaves no room for theological discussion or debate. As Don Rutledge said “fellowship is like water, it flows downwards (not up)” in LSM’s Local Church. 20 years after Witness Lee’s departure Local Church members don’t evaluate Witness Lee’s teachings, they only memorize & recite them as Witness Lee’s “tape-recorders.” LSM’s publication, *Affirmation & Critique*, only affirms Witness Lee, it never critiques him. Asian cultural norms are pervasive in the Local Church, even in 21st-century North America. A decade after the Great Lakes Area [GLA] local churches parted ways with LSM, many of these characteristics remain. Most GLA local churches are *Asian* churches. The “apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” as John Myer said in this context.

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June, 2017.

Notes:

The author wishes to thank those who commented on earlier drafts. The author alone is responsible for the contents of this piece. The views expressed here are solely the author’s & should *not* be attributed to any believers, elders, co-workers or churches with whom/which he is associated. He makes no claims of advanced knowledge on Systematic Theology or Patristics. He has sought to rely on primary & secondary sources and to quote the findings & views of qualified scholars.

1. The term “civil war” was applied by Michael F. Bird who wrote: “I predict that there is about to be a *miniature civil war* among conservative Calvinist Complementarians about Trinity and gender.” [Michael F. Bird, “*Coming War: Nicene Complementarians vs Homoian Complementarians*,” www.Patheos.com, June 8, 2016]
2. KATE SHELLNUTT, “*Complementarian Women behind the Trinity Tussle*,” *Christianity Today*, Aug. 22, 2016(emph add)
3. Michael Tapper provides some chronology: “An argument arose in 2006 among the Evangelical Theological Society’s 4,000 membership over the functional & eternal subordination among the persons of the Godhead...Later in 2008, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School [Deerfield, IL., USA] hosted an event in which [Bruce] Ware & Wayne Grudem debated Tom McCall & Keith Yandell on the question, ‘Do Relations of Authority & Submission exist eternally among the Persons of the Godhead?’.” [Michael A. Tapper, *Canadian Pentecostals, the Trinity, & Contemporary Worship Music*, p. 19] The 2½ hour Trinity debate is on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySFrG3mOp50&t=225>
4. The book, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* by Millard J. Erickson (Kregel Academic, 2009) propounds the view that ‘new evangelical subordinationists’ teach “that *the Son is eternally functionally subordinate to the Father* within the Trinity in order to bolster their arguments by way of analogy for the functional subordination of women in the church and in the family.” (John Jefferson Davis’ book review)]
5. Data from *Google Trends* tracking Internet searches for “eternal functional subordination” worldwide were graphed for the period Jan. 1, 2004 to June 1, 2017. (The index averaged ‘5’ for the entire period.) Prior to June 2016, the data indicate occasional ‘spikes’ of interest--July 2009, Sept. 2013, April, July/Aug 2015, and March 2016. However, a period of sustained interest began Jun. 2016 (coinciding with initial Blog posts by Goligher, etc.) extending to March 2017. Interest peaked in Nov. 2016 (scaled to 100) which coincided with the 2016 Evangelical Theological Society [ETS] meetings Nov. 15-17, 2016 in San Antonio, TX., USA. Google Internet search interest has remained high for the last 12 months [Jun. 2016 to May 2017], averaging 43.5% of the peak (~9 times the overall 13-year average).
6. CALEB LINDGREN, “*Gender & the Trinity: From Proxy War to Civil War*,” *Christianity Today*, June 16, 2016
7. Cf. the title, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* by Millard J. Erickson (Kregel Academic, 2009)
8. Glenn Butner Jr., *Against Eternal Submission: Changing the Doctrine of the Trinity Endangers the Doctrine of Salvation...*, p. 15
9. The sub-title of Kevin Giles’ book: *Jesus & the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity*
10. “Carl Trueman, professor at Westminster Theological Seminary, wrote that those who hold to the eternal subordination of the Son wander outside the bounds of Nicene Orthodoxy,” says Christopher Woznick, “*Examination of Recent Philosophical responses to Thomas McCall’s Argument against EFS*.” (Sept. 2016) p. 2
11. Scot McKnight commented “These folks sound far too Arian.” (Scot McKnight, “*Is it New? Yes. Is it Orthodox? No.*” Jesus Creed Blog, June 9, 2016.” Thomas McCall “looks at recent Evangelical proponents of ‘Eternal Functional Subordinationism’ and evaluates them as *most likely guilty of Arianism*.” [James F. McGrath, *Review of Thomas McCall, ‘Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?’* May 20, 2011]
12. Dr. Glenn Butner says, “The problem with EFS is...the fact that it entails tri-theism.” [D. GLENN BUTNER JR., “*ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION & THE PROBLEM OF THE DIVINE WILL*,” *JETS* 58/1 (2015) p. 132]
13. At this point we note that Watchman Nee’s view on gender roles is not significantly different from Ware & Grudem’s ‘complementarianism.’ W. Nee says, “In God’s arrangement, the man is the head of the woman. Therefore, sisters have no administrative power in the church.” [W. Nee, *Mystery of Christ*, Ch. 8, Sect. 3]
14. W. Lee, *Elders’ Training, Bk. 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord’s Recovery*, Ch. 8, Sect. 3
15. W. Lee, *Life-study of Revelation*, Ch. 65, Sect. 2 p. 742. He also said, “Many outsiders use Brother Nee’s teaching on spiritual authority as their ground to exercise, not their spiritual authority, but their human authority. They do not exercise the authority in life but the authority by organization.” [W. Lee, *Elders’ Training, Bk. 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord’s Recovery*, Ch. 9, Sect. 2]
16. Dennis McCallum, *Watchman Nee & the House Church Movement in China*, www.xenos.org
17. G. Wright Doyle, “*Nee Watchman (Ni Tuosheng) 1903 ~ 1972*,” *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*
18. Bruce A. Ware, “*Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship...?*” in B. A. Ware, John Starke (eds.) *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Person...* (2015) p.
19. Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance*, (2005) p. 131
20. [Blank]
21. Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (2005) p.
22. Wayne Grudem, www.waynegrudem.com

23. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 1994:454-470. Moreover, Grudem writes: “Between the members of the Trinity there has been equality in importance, personhood, & deity throughout all eternity. But there have also been differences in roles between the members of the Trinity. God the Father has always been the Father & has always related to the Son as a Father relates to his Son. Though all three members of the Trinity are equal in power & in all other attributes, *the Father has a greater authority. He has a leadership role among all the members of the Trinity that the Son & Holy Spirit do not have.*” [Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 1994:459]
24. Owen Strachan & Gavin Peacock, *Grand Design: Male & Female He Made Them*, p. 89 (emphasis added)
25. Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance*, p. 21
26. W. Nee, *Authority and Submission*, Ch. 5, Sect. 1 (1988) pp. 39-40 (emphasis added) The CFP translation has basically the same thought, except that it inserts a reference to John 14:28 where Jesus (the incarnate Son) declares “the Father is greater than I.” Note however, Jesus makes this declaration *as the incarnate Son* (with humanity, as well as divinity). This declaration is, therefore, not directly relevant to the situation, *prior to Jesus’ incarnation*, in eternity past.
27. W. Nee, *Authority & Submission*, Ch. 5, St. 1 (1988) p. 40 (emphasis added) Some background information on this publication is provided by LSM: “*Authority & Submission*, based on a series of messages given by Watchman Nee [in Chinese] in his training at Kuling Mountain in 1948 through 1949, contains two distinct but related parts. In 1988 the Living Stream Ministry published the first part under the title *Authority & Submission*, covering the general subject of spiritual authority and submission. Vol. 47 of *The Collected Works* includes a 2nd previously untranslated, part covering the matter of being God’s deputy authority.” [W. Nee, *Collected Works, Vol. 47: Orthodoxy of the Church & Authority and Submission*, Ch. 2, Sect. 1]
28. W. Nee does not use the phrase “principle of authority” in the paragraph quoted above. But, later in the same book, he says: “There are two principles in this universe. One is *the principle of God’s authority*, and the other is the principle of Satan’s rebellion.” [W. Nee, *Collected Works, Vol. 59, Ch. 13, Sect. 4 Spiritual Authority*, (1972) p. 16 (emphasis add.)]
29. Watchman Nee, *Authority & Submission*, Ch. 5, St. 2 (1988) pp. 41-42 (emphasis added)
30. Here we employ the terms “essential Trinity” & “economic Trinity” in the manner conventionally used today by most theologians. (Note: These definitions differ significantly from those used by Witness Lee.) Warren McWilliams explains, “The relation of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity has surfaced as a major issue in contemporary trinitarian discussions. Ultimately, theologians agree that there is only one God & only one Trinity, but sometimes they distinguish two dimensions of the one Trinity. The economic Trinity refers to God’s revelation in history as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The term “economic” relates to God’s *oikonomia* or his orderly, purposeful revelation in history. The economic Trinity, in other words, is “the revelatory Trinity.” The immanent Trinity refers to God’s inner essence. The two trinities, so to speak, refer to God for us & God in himself.” [Warren McWilliams, “*Only the Triune God Can Help: Relation of the Trinity to Theodicy*,” PERSPECTIVES IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES, (2006) p. 355] This distinction ought to be kept firmly in mind when evaluating the relevance of Biblical texts to the central issue being investigated. For e.g., at first sight 1 Cor. 11:3 might appear relevant—“...Christ is the head of every man, & the man is the head of the woman, & God is the head of Christ.” (1 Cor. 11:3, R^cV). Concerning 1 Cor. 11:3, W. Lee says, “In the universe there is the headship: God is at the top as the head of Christ, Christ is the head of every man, the man is the head of the woman, & human beings are the head of all animals & plants (Gen. 1:26-28). Originally, there was such a headship in the universe, a headship that maintained *a proper order in God’s creation.*” [W. Lee, *Conclusion of the NT, (Msgs. 306-322)*, Ch. 7, Sect. 1 (emphasis added)] However, this verse & Witness Lee’s exposition are both in the context of God’s creation, hence they relate to the “proper order” in God’s economy—i.e., the economic Trinity in time, *not the essential Trinity* in eternity past. Significantly, it does *not* say “God the Father is the head of the Son”—a Father-Son relationship. It says “God is the head of Christ”—the Messiah, the *self-emptied, incarnate* Son (Phil. 2).
31. Thomas F. Torrance, *Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons*, p. 238
32. Donald Macleod, *Person of Christ*, pp. 76-77. The quote (in context) reads: “It is precarious...to read the subordination...in John’s Gospel back into the pre-temporal relations between the Son & the Father....The Jews conclusion from [Jesus’] claim to be God’s Son was precisely that he saw himself as *equal with God* (Jn. 5:18).” Macleod notes that the Jew’s did *not* deduce that Jesus, by claiming to be God’s Son, was less than (or subordinate to) God, His Father; they charged him with claiming *equality* with God the Father.
33. Christopher Woznick, “*Examination of Recent...responses to T. McCall’s Argument against EFS.*” (Sept. 2016) p. 11
34. William E. Wenstrom, Jr., “*Exegesis & Exposition of Titus 2:5-6,*” p. 7
35. W. Nee says, “the soul includes 3 primary parts—the mind, emotion, & will.” [W. Nee, *Spiritual Man (2)*, Ch. 12, St. 1]
36. James F. McGrath, *Review of Thomas McCall, ‘Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?’* May 20, 2011 (emphasis added)

37. In Chapter 6 of his book, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?*, Thomas McCall states his case, as follows:
- 1) “If ...EFS is true, then the Son has the property being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds.
 - 2) If the Son has this property in every possible world, then the Son has this property necessarily. {Furthermore, the Son has this property with *de re* rather than *de dicto* necessity.}
 - 3) If the Son has this property necessarily {(*de re*)}, then the Son has it essentially
 - 4) If...EFS is true, then the Son has this property essentially while the Father does not
 - 5) If the Son has this property essentially and the Father does not, then the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is *heteroousios* rather than *homoousios*.” [Thomas McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* pp. 179-180, Note: McCall uses the term “Hard EFS”]
- Combining & simplifying these statements: “If...EFS is true, then the Son has the property being functionally subordinate in all time segments in all possible worlds [which implies] the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*). [Moreover] If the Son has this property necessarily (*de re*)..., then the Son has it essentially, while the Father does not. [Logically] If the Son has this property essentially and the Father does not, then *the Son is of a different essence than the Father. Thus the Son is heteroousios rather than homoousios*.” [Thomas McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?* pp. 179-180 (emphasis added)]
38. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (3rd edition) p.
39. Woznick, “*Examination of Recent Philosophical responses to T. McCall’s Argument against EFS*.” (Sept. 2016) p. 11
40. Millard Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (2009) p. 172. Elsewhere Professor Erickson writes: “More serious is the philosophical problem [with EFS] of the distinction between equal essence & unequal roles. If the Father’s authority over the Son & Spirit and the Son’s & Spirit’s subordination to the Father is a part of the very structure of the Trinity [as claimed by Owen Strachan & Gavin Peacock, *The Grand Design*, for example,] so that it could not be otherwise, then this superiority & subordination are not contingent, but necessary characteristics of each of the persons. That means that they are not accidental [incidental] but essential qualities & the essence of the Son is different from, & inferior to that of the father. In other words, invariable & inevitable differences in authority imply ontological, as well as functional subordination. The danger is that...[this portends a] move to some variety of Arianism.” [Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (3rd ed.) p.]
41. D. GLENN BUTNER JR., “*ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION & DIVINE WILL*,” JETS 58/1 p. 132
42. “*Response to Bruce Ware; Khaled Anatolios in Context & Lewis Ayres*,” July 5, 2016
43. Mark Jones, “*SOME PROPOSITIONS ON GOD, DIVINE ESSENCE, TRINITY, & THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION*,” 15 Jun. 2016, Calvinist International. The quote in context reads: “How can the Son eternally submit to the Father if the simplicity of God is true, which means therefore that God has one essence & one will which is identical with his essence?”
44. D. GLENN BUTNER JR., “*ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION & DIVINE WILL*,” JETS 58/1 p. 142
45. Michael F. Bird & Robert Shillaker, “*Subordination in the Trinity & Gender Roles*,” in Dennis W. Jowers, H. Wayne House (eds.) *New Evangelical Subordinationism?: Perspectives on the Equality of God...*, p. 292 (emphasis added)
46. Kyle Claunch in John Starke & Bruce Ware (eds.), *One God in Three Persons*, pp. 88-89
47. Michael F. Bird, *Patristics Scholar Lewis Ayres Weighs in on the Intra-Complementarian Debate*, June 13, 2016
48. Nancy Hedberg, *Women, Men, & the Trinity: What Does It Mean to Be Equal?* p.
49. Matthew Emerson, “*A Biblical case for Eternal Generation*,” Biblical Reasoning (Blog) June 17, 2016
50. D. GLENN BUTNER JR., “*ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION & DIVINE WILL*,” JETS 58/1 p. 149
51. Mark Jones, *Irony of Mohler’s Post on the Trinity*, June 29, 2016
52. D. GLENN BUTNER JR., “*ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION & DIVINE WILL*,” JETS 58/1 p. 132
53. W. Lee, *Life Messages, Vol. 2 (#42-75)*, Ch. 19, Sect. 2
54. W. Lee, *Life Messages, Vol. 2 (#42-75)*, Ch. 31, Sect. 2
55. W. Lee, *Issue of the Union of Consummated Spirit of Triune God & Regenerated Spirit of the Believers*, Ch. 6, Sect. 3
56. W. Lee, *Revelation and Vision of God*, Ch. 3, Sect. 3. Along the same lines he says: “The creed speaks of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, but it says nothing concerning the seven Spirits. 7 books—Hebrews, James, 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, Jude, & Revelation—were not recognized as the canon until A.D. 397 at the Council of Carthage. The entire NT was formally recognized only at that time. Hence, we have strong ground to say that the Council of Nicaea was not based on the entire Bible. Hence, we neither accept nor follow the Nicene Creed as a complete statement of our faith.” [W. Lee, *Crucial Words of Leading in the Lord’s Recovery, Bk. 3: Future of Lord’s Recovery...* Ch. 7, St. 1 (emphasis added)] I take the emphasis of W. Lee’s last statement to be upon the (alleged) “incompleteness” of the Nicene Creed.
57. W. Lee, *Crucial Words of Leading in the Lord’s Recovery, Bk. 3: Future of the Lord’s Recovery...*, Ch. 7, St. 1

58. W. Lee writes, “The essential Trinity refers to the essence of the Triune God for His existence. In His essence, God is one, the one unique God (Isa. 45:18b; 1 Cor. 8:6a). *In the essential Trinity*, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist and coinhere at the same time and in the same way with *no succession*. *There is no first, second, or third.*” [W. Lee, *Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery*, Ch. 1, Sect. 3 (emphasis added)] Here the key term is “*succession*,” Witness Lee is refuting modalism—the notion that that the Father, Son & Spirit existed sequentially, in succession, as the 3 modes of the One God. This statement, by W. Lee, doesn’t directly address the question of whether there’s a hierarchy of authority within the essential Trinity.
59. Watchman Nee, *Authority & Submission*, Ch. 5, Sect. 2 (1988) pp. 41-42
60. W. Nee, *Authority & Submission*, Ch. 5, St. 1 (1988) p. 40
61. Thomas McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical & Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology*, p. 178 (emphasis original)
62. Damon W.K. So, *The Forgotten Jesus and the Trinity You Never Knew*, p. 203
63. R. Scott Clark (ed.) *Covenant, Justification, & Pastoral Ministry*, p. 168
64. Obbie Tyler Todd, *Jonathan Edwards & Eternal Functional Subordinationism*, Edwardsian (Blog), March 16, 2017 (emphasis added)
65. It takes some “fancy footwork” in interpretation of the *pactum salutis* to preserve orthodoxy on this issue. [See Appendix A (below)]
66. “What we have here is *not diversity but error – Trinitarian error.*”—Mark Jones, “*Biblicism, Socinianism, and ‘Arid’ Scholasticism*,” June 14, 2016, newcitytimes.com (emphasis added). Mark Jones’ comment was directed (in the first instance) against Owen Strachan.
67. W. Nee, *Authority & Submission*, Ch. 2, Sect. 2
68. W. Nee, *Collected Works, Vol. 57*, Ch. 25, St. 3
69. W. Lee, *Vision of the Building of the Church*, Ch. 10, St. 6
70. Watchman Nee, *Authority & Submission* (LSM, 1988) p. 24
71. Witness Lee, *Life-Study of Genesis*, p. 448. Subsequent page references in this paragraph are to the same publication.
72. Watchman Nee writes, “What happens if the authority makes mistakes?...Whether or not the authority makes mistakes has nothing to do with us...Whether the deputy authority is right or wrong is a matter for which he has to be responsible directly before the Lord. Those who submit to authority need only to submit absolutely. Even if they make a mistake through submission, the Lord will not reckon that as sin. The Lord will hold the deputy authority responsible for that sin. To disobey is to rebel.” [W. Nee, *Authority and Submission*, Ch. 7, Sect. 3]
73. W. Lee says, “Noah's failure was a test to his sons. From the same test, one received a curse & two received a blessing.” [W. Lee, *Life-study of Genesis*, #33, p. 445] Later, he repeats, “One of Noah's sons was cursed & the other two were blessed.” [W. Lee, *Genesis*, #33, p. 448] W. Lee identifies Ham as the one cursed, saying, “Why was Ham cursed? Because he touched God's authority and became involved with God's government.” [W. Lee, *Genesis*, #33, p. 445]
74. Fred Sanders, “*We Actually Don't Need a Trinitarian Revival*,” Christianity Today, May 23, 2017
75. Darren Sumner, “*Some Observations on the ‘Eternal Functional Subordination’ Debate*,” Theology Out of Bounds, JUNE 10, 2016 (emphasis added)
76. Thomas H. McCall, “*THE TRINITY: AN EVANGELICAL RELATIONAL PROPOSAL*,” Jan. 2013
77. “*The Trinity & Gender: The Recent Debate among Evangelicals*,” at Biola University (Dec. 12, 2012) YouTube.
78. Anne Hunt, “*Trinity & the Church: explorations in ecclesiology from a Trinitarian perspective*,” Irish Theological Quarterly, Vol. 70, #3 (Sept. 2005)
79. “Jackson Wu,” “*Authority in a Collectivist Church: Identifying Crucial Concerns for a Chinese Ecclesiology*,” p. 2 in “*Contemporary Practice*” of www.GlobalMissiology.org Oct. 2011
80. Dennis McCallum, *Watchman Nee & the House Church Movement in China*, www.xenos.org (emphasis added)
81. G. Wright Doyle, *Cultural Factors Affecting Chinese Church Leaders*, Global China Center, Oct. 7, 2006
82. “Jackson Wu,” “*Authority in a Collectivist Church: Identifying Crucial Concerns for a Chinese Ecclesiology*,” p. 10 in “*Contemporary Practice*” of www.GlobalMissiology.org Oct. 2011
83. Darren Sumner, “*Some Observations on the ‘Eternal Functional Subordination’ Debate*,” Theology Out of Bounds, JUNE 10, 2016
84. Watchman Nee says: “With Christ there is the *principle of submission*. Those who accept submission are accepting the *principle of Christ*. Hence, those who are filled with Christ will be filled with submission.” [W. Nee, *Authority & Submission*, Ch. 5, Sect. 1b (1988) p. 40] Plus he also asserts: “There are two principles in this universe. One is

- the *principle of God's authority*, and the other is the principle of Satan's rebellion.” [W. Nee, *Collected Works*, Vol. 59 Ch. 13, Sect. 4 *Spiritual Authority*, (1972) p. 16]
85. Teresa Zimmerman-Liu, “*Divine & Mystical Realm: Removing Chinese Christianity from the Fixed Structures of Mission Church & Clergy*,” *Social Sciences & Missions*, Vol. 27, #1-2 (2014) pp. 239-266
 86. It is reported that LSM’s first edition of W. Nee’s *Authority & Submission* (Dec. 1988) was rushed into print in order to confront the (alleged) rebellion of John Ingalls (US), Bill Mallon (US), John So (Germany), & Joseph Fung (HK). In succeeding “turmoils” the authority-submission dogma was regularly invoked against “divisive” & “rebellious” saints.
 87. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, Ch. 9, Sect. 2
 88. Dr. R. C. Sproul & Ligonier Ministries, Dec. 22, 2016. <http://www.heartandmouth.org/2017/01/28/subordination-of-the-son-ligonier-and-the-economic-trinity/>
 89. W. Nee, *Collected Works*, Vol. 59: Ch. 19, St. 4
 90. “Jackson Wu,” “*Authority in a Collectivist Church: Identifying Crucial Concerns for a Chinese Ecclesiology*,” pp. 8-9 in “*Contemporary Practice*” www.GlobalMissiology.org Oct. 2011

Appendix A: Reformed Theology’s *Pactum Salutis* & Trinitarian Orthodoxy

Reformed theology’s *Pactum Salutis* or ‘Covenant of Righteousness’ has been challenged as inconsistent with the orthodox tenets regarding the essential Trinity in eternity. Scott “Swain notes that because the *pactum* occurs in eternity before the incarnation, the doctrine has been criticized as undermining the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity...Robert Letham argues that the doctrine ‘opens the door to heresy’ because it divides the singular divine will of God and amounts to tri-theism. Letham writes: “The construal of the relations of the three persons of the Trinity in covenantal terms is a departure from classic Trinitarian orthodoxy” (Allen & Swain, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 121).” [Denny Burk, *Son’s willing submission to the Father in pactum salutis*, July 28, 2016]

It takes some “fancy footwork” in interpretation to preserve orthodoxy on this issue. Mark Jones observes that “If we speak of ‘agreement’ we might imply a multiplicity of wills...But these ‘wills’ are truly the will (singular) of God...” [Mark Jones, “*SOME PROPOSITIONS ON GOD, DIVINE ESSENCE, TRINITY, & COVENANT OF REDEMPTION*,” 15 Jun. 2016, Calvinist International] Moreover, he warns that “In the *pactum* we are not to somehow think of God as now having three distinct wills. That is error. A very bad error. We are to think of God, in his one essential and undivided will (which is synonymous with his essence), as freely determining that the Son would become man according to the fittingness of relation between the three persons (or befitting the eternal taxis [order] of persons). *Nowhere do we need to posit ‘submission’ or ‘subordination.’*” [Mark Jones, *Subordination in the Pactum? (And the irony of ESS)*, June 16, 2016 (emphasis added)]

Brad Mason reports that “For [Dutch theologian, Hermann] Witsius [1636-1708], the eternal covenant [of redemption] does not imply an eternal subordination...[since it] includes maintaining the equal authority of the Persons in eternity while maintaining the temporal condescension of the Persons toward their [various] works of redemption in time and in space...We may say that there is indeed...subordination of the Son to the Father, as well as the Spirit to the Father, *but not in eternity...*” [Brad Mason, “‘Economic’ Subordination of the Son? Part 2: the *Pactum Salutis*,” April 10, 2017 (emphasis added)] Thus Brad Mason maintains that any subordination involved in the *Pactum Salutis* is in time (not in eternity) and in the ‘economic Trinity’ (not in the ‘essential Trinity’). Hence, these writers argue that subordination here is not ‘eternal.’