

*A note to the teacher: We designed this manuscript as a resource for you, but you do not have to read it verbatim at delivery. You may find more lucid explanations and illustrations than seen here. If so, feel free to adapt the material as long as you communicate the truths outlined here. Furthermore, the footnotes serve as references and additional information of interest but are not necessary to the content itself. They make this document appear longer than it actually is.

LESSON TWO ON THE TRINITY

Christ commissions Christians to baptize “*in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,*” teaching us that the one God *is* a Triune communion. The distinct Person of Father is God, the distinct Person of Son is God, and the distinct Person of the Holy Spirit is God. **But what distinguishes them as ‘other’ Persons?** The Bible distinguishes the Three by their distinctive personal relations. **The Belgic Confession of 1561 puts it this way, “The Father is not derived from anyone, neither begotten nor proceeding. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.”** The 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith also affirms these truths.

FOUNDATIONAL TRUTH 4: THE ETERNAL DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN THE FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT ARE FOUND IN THEIR PERSONAL RELATIONS WITH ONE ANOTHER (UNBEGOTTEN, BEGOTTEN, PROCEEDING).¹

The Apostle John tells us twice in his first epistle that “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). God *is* love in his inner, eternal being, so **Augustine** employed ‘love’ as an analogy of the Trinity. **The Father (the lover) eternally loves the Son (Matthew 3:16-17). The Son (the beloved) loves the Father (John 14:31) and is eternally beloved of the Father. The Holy Spirit is the bond of love between the Father and Son’s fellowship (1 John 4:13).²** These unique processions of love differentiate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

¹ These relations demonstrate that the divine names of ‘Father, Son, and Spirit’ exist from eternity and are not something new introduced at the incarnation.

² Of course, the Spirit is not a mere ‘quality’ like human love, but He is a Divine person.

THE UNBEGOTTEN FATHER

The Father, by virtue of his divine Fatherhood, eternally begets and loves the Son. The Father's Fatherhood is eternal, so there was never a time when the 'Father' was not 'Father.' In other words, **God eternally exists in the communion of Father and Son.** God's Fatherhood and begetting is not a "choice" but *who he is as Father*.³ **His begetting is somewhat closer to a tree that, as a consequence of its nature, buds with flowers.**⁴ So likewise, it is in the Father's proper nature to beget His Son.

Therefore, the Father's unique personal property is that of being 'unbegotten' because He *is* Father. But, as Augustine said, "when the Father is said to be unbegotten, it is not said what He *is*, but what He *is not*."⁵ **'Unbegotten' means that the Father is not a son.** Being unbegotten, the Father is "principal," or "the source from which everything that goes forth (proceeds)." Thomas Aquinas explained, "in all kinds of causes, there is always to be found between the cause and the effect a **distance of perfection or power.**" However, we use the term 'principle' for "things which have **no such difference**, but have only a **certain order** to each other; as when we say that a point is the principle of a line; or also when we say that the first part of a line is the principle of a line."⁶ He fountain spring, the source from which the Trinity proceeds.⁷

THE ETERNALLY BEGOTTEN SON

³ At least, in the way we think about 'choice.' The Gospel Coalition, *The Trinity*. Christine Thornton, (Accessed on January 9, 2023).

⁴ Yet, of course, outside of time and from all eternity.

⁵ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, Book V, Chapter 6.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa* 1a.33.1. (things that are seen to form a line are seen as being together).

⁷ The Father is 'principle' in *order* of relations, not in rank or order of time.

Jesus is the Father's only begotten Son (note the contextual language that emphasizes His 'origin' or where He is 'coming from,' and not *just* His uniqueness).

- John 1:14 *And **the Word** became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of **the only begotten of the Father**, full of grace and truth;*
- John 1:18 *No one has seen God at any time. **The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father**, He has declared Him.*
- John 3:16 *For God so loved the world that **He gave His only begotten Son**, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*
- John 3:18 *“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of **the only begotten Son of God**.*
- 1 John 4:9 *In this the love of God **was manifested** toward us, that God **has sent His only begotten Son** into the world, that we might live through Him.⁸*

The Son is eternally beloved and begotten of the Father—one in being with him but distinct as a Son (and not a Father). “Begotten” means ‘to come forth or proceed from,’ and describes their divine and eternal Father-Son relationship. **The Son is ‘eternally from’ the Father.**⁹

⁸ NKJV Translation. Charles Irons persuasively for translating these texts with “only Begotten” since the context surrounding these verses utilizes the language of derivation, offspring, and begetting. See: [Let's Go Back to 'Only Begotten'](#). See also Ps. 2:7; John 5:25-25; Acts 13:13; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3. He says, “First, a search of *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*—a comprehensive database of ancient, Koine, and medieval Greek—reveals that the word’s... fundamental meaning is “only begotten” or “only child” in the sense of having no siblings... Three times, Luke uses *monogenēs* to describe various “only begottens” whom Jesus healed: Luke 7:12, Luke 8:42), and Luke 9:38... Second, careful examination of the word list of *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* reveals at least 145 other words based on the *-genēs* stem, and fewer than a dozen have meanings involving the notion of genus or kind... Both *genos* and *gennao* derive from a common Indo-European root, *gēnh* (“beget, arise”), and this root produces a fair number of Greek words having to do with biological concepts of begetting, birth, and offspring (In Hebrews 1:17, Isaac can still be called “only begotten” to highlight the fact that he is Abraham’s sole heir.” Keith Johnson adds, “According to Augustine, New Testament references to the person of Christ can be grouped into three categories: (1) texts that refer to Son in the “form of God” (divine nature) in which he is equal to the Father (e.g., Phil 2:6; John 10:30); (2) texts that refer to the Son in the “form of a servant” (human nature) in which he is “less” than the Father (e.g., John 14:28); and (3) texts that suggest that the Son is “from” the Father. This third category is crucial to Augustine’s case for eternal generation. He argues that a distinction between the Son in the “form of God” and the “form of a servant” cannot encompass the rich way that Scripture speaks about the person of Christ.” The Gospel Coalition, *Is the Eternal Generation of the Son a Biblical Idea?* Keith Johnson, (Accessed on February 8, 2023).

⁹ Or, “in an eternal relationship with the Father.” This describes the Son’s ‘origin.’ But again, we must be careful not to think that having an ‘origin’ applies to God the same exact way it applies to humans. Humans have a beginning in time and space, but the Son never ‘began’ to exist.

John 5:26 states, "*For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.*" The Father possesses self-existence, i.e., "life in himself." The Son also possesses self-existence, a "life" identical to that of the Father (v. 26b). But each possesses this 'life in himself' in distinct, personal ways. The Father gives the Son life in Himself, but no one gives the Father life in Himself. **The Father eternally communicates the divine 'life' (or essence) and the distinguishing relational properties of Sonship to the Son.**¹⁰

But the Son never "began" to exist, just as the Father never "began" to exist; there was never a time when the Father was without His Son, nor the Son without His Father. **Human begetting and sonship begin at a point in history. For example, I was born on September 29, 1982, to my parents. And there *was a time* when my father was not a 'father' and without a son.** But divine begetting does not require "creation," nor is it susceptible to the limitations of time. **However, human begetting and divine begetting are alike in just one mode: just as I share the exact human nature as my father, since I am begotten from my earthly father, the Son shares the same divine, eternal nature His Father, since He is begotten from Eternal God.**¹¹

Basil, an early church father, supplies us with a helpful illustration:

"However, in a case such as fire and the light shining from it, the fire is certainly first, as the cause (or source), and the light second, as the effect, but there is no "interval" [of time] separating the two: they are "first" and "second," not by an arrangement [in time], but as a consequence of their nature. So, in the case of the Father and the Son, in relation to causality, the Father is [classified] before the Son, but neither according to a difference of nature nor by a temporal preeminence."¹²

¹⁰ 'Communicates:' to cause to pass from one to another without division or change. However, the Giver mysteriously never loses any element of what is passed, and the Receiver mysteriously never lacked what He receives. It is like perfect love between perfect lovers; they already possess each other's love and are perfected in it, yet they continually give and receive love to and from one another.

¹¹ This is what the authors of the Nicene Creed meant when they penned, "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father." Since God is eternal, the relation between the Father and the Son is eternal. Augustine provided a helpful analogy: *it's not like "water flowing out from a hole in the ground or in the rock, but like light flowing from light"* (*De trin.* IV.27, 172).

¹² Though the light takes time to reach its target (human eyesight), there is no interval of time between the fire and light within themselves.

As a flame cannot exist without its brightness. Likewise, the Father ‘never’ existed without His Son. Hebrews 1:3 describes the Son as: "the *radiance* of [the Father's] glory, the exact imprint of his being."¹³ Thus, the Son *IS* "Light from Light, True God from True God," with the same essence as God the Father.¹⁴

THE ETERNAL PROCESSION OF THE SPIRIT

- John 14:26 “*But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name.*”
- John 15:26, “*But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father.*” **Jesus says that His sending of the Spirit is one and the same as the Father’s.**
- Jesus, in John 20:22, “*breathed on [the apostles] and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*¹⁵

The Holy Spirit eternally "*proceeds from the Father*" and the Son.¹⁶ ‘Proceeds’ means the Holy Spirit ‘comes from, is eternally breathed out’ by the Father and the Son. *Proceeding from*

¹³ Keith Johnson lists a helpful catalogued of verse compiled by Augustine. “There are at least five areas where Augustine sees patterns in the economy of salvation offering a window into the unique nature of the Son’s eternal relationship to the Father. The first group includes the numerous passages affirming that the Son was “sent” by the Father (e.g., Matt 10:40; Luke 4:43; 10:16; Gal 4:4-6; John 4:34; 5:23-24, 30-47; 6:38-44, 57; 7:16, 28-29, 33; 8:16-18, 26-29, 42; 9:4; 12:44-50; 13:16; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5, 28; 17:3, 18; 20:21). A second line of evidence includes passages that speak of the Father “giving” and the Son “receiving” (e.g., John 5:19, 22, 26, 27, 36; 10:18; 17:2, 8, 11, 22; 18:11). A third group includes passages that reflect an ordered equality that constitutes the working of the Father and Son—the Father works all things *through* the Son (John 1:1-3, 10; 5:19, 21; 14:6; Rom 5:1, 11; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph 1:3-14; 2:18; 4:6; Col 1:16; 3:17; Heb 1:1-2; Jude 25). A fourth group of passages includes those that use the names “Father” and “Son” (e.g., Matt 11:27; 24:36-39; 28:18; Gal 4:4-6). A final group of texts supporting the eternal generation of the Son comes from an unlikely source—parallel passages about the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Son and Father (e.g., John 15:26; 16:13-14).” The Gospel Coalition, *Is the Eternal Generation of the Son a Biblical Idea?* Keith Johnson, (Accessed on February 8, 2023).

¹⁴ The Nicene Creed

¹⁵ Augustine claims this is a symbolic demonstration that the Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as the Father. See also Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 33:6; John 3:6-8.

¹⁶ The Eastern tradition says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, and this was one factor that led to a split between the Eastern and Western churches in AD 1054. The East asserts that, if the Spirit proceeds from the Son *and* the Father, then the Spirit would only represent the unity between Father and Son, not of all Three Persons. Therefore, the Father alone must be the basis/origin of the Spirit’s essence and personal property. Otherwise, the Spirit is of a different essence than the Son, whose essence comes from the Father *alone*. In other words, this double procession from the Father *and* the Son (called ‘filioque’) makes the Holy Spirit subordinate in essence (not equal) to the Father and the Son, creating a diad of divinity instead of a Triad. However, the Son’s essence is the exact same as the Father’s. Therefore, the Spirit’s essence is the exact same as the Father’s and Son’s (simplicity). The double procession makes the Spirit’s personal property of procession distinct from being ‘unbegotten’ or ‘begotten.’

them both, He participates in the loving communion of the Father and the Son and shares the one divine, eternal essence. In Augustine's analogy of love, He described the Spirit as the eternal communion of love between the Father and the Son. The Bible closely associates the Holy Spirit with God's love.¹⁷

- Romans 5:5 states, "*God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*" **The Spirit Himself is poured into us by the pouring out of God's love.**¹⁸
- 1 John 4:12-13 "*No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*" **God is love; if we abide in love, we abide in God; we know we abide in God's love because He has given us the Spirit.**¹⁹

However, He is not unbegotten like the Father or begotten like the Son. The Father and Son eternally breathe out (spirate) the Holy Spirit, eternally communicating the divine essence and the distinguishing relational property of procession (or spiration) to Him. The Bible sometimes gives the Spirit the title of "breath" since the word 'spirit' in the Bible can also be translated as 'breath.' It is not an accident, then, that Jesus illustrates the Spirit with the wind in John 3:8: "*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*"

God comes to us from the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit. They are all equally divine, but these relations cannot be transferred to the other divine persons.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

¹⁷ The Spirit, unlike human love, is not a mere quality, but a divine Person. Also, the Father and the Son love the 'love' that they love each other with, and therefore love the Holy Spirit. Likewise, love, being a divine Person, loves its subject and object.

¹⁸ See also 1Cor. 2:12-16, 5:5; Gal. 5:22; 1Thess. 4:8; 1John 4:7-13.

¹⁹ Matthew Barrett. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, 176-177

First, the Son's eternal begottenness and Spirit's eternal procession ensure that They share the exact nature as God the Father.²⁰ The Son's eternal 'begottenness' makes Him uniquely qualified and capable to grant "*the right to become children of God*" to those who believe (John 1:12). If Jesus is not the eternal, only begotten Son of God, then there is no predestination of us "*for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ*" (Ephesians 1:5). The Father predestines us for **adoption** through his Son because Jesus the Son is the Son of the Father **by nature**. The **begotten Son** of the Father gives **us adopted children** the hope and right to call God our Father.²¹

Second, the Son ascended back to the Father and, with Him, sent the Spirit of adoption into newborn spiritual children (John 3:8-15). Because He is **generated** from all eternity, the Father could send Him to be born as a man and ensure our being **regenerated** and adopted as sons.²²

Third, the Spirit of the Son (and 'of adoption') that dwells in us **enables** us to cry out, "*Abba, Father.*" This is because He proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son (Gal. 4:6). *Because He **eternally proceeds** from the Father and the Son, He is **the seal** that certifies God's ownership over us and guarantees our eternal inheritance.* Fourthly and finally, **the Spirit's enteral relations** with the Father and the Son enable **us to commune** with the Trinitarian God and ensure our union with Christ.²³

²⁰ The Son is both one with the Father and yet distinct from the Father. The doctrine of the "eternal generation" affirms and secures both truths. The Spirit is both one with the Father and Son and yet distinct from them. The doctrine of the "eternal procession" affirms and secures both realities.

²¹ As Hilary of Poitiers says in *On the Trinity*, Book III, "For He is God's true and own Son, by origin and not by adoption, not by name only but in truth, born and not created." "The Father, through his Son, has accomplished our redemption, and we, as a result, are the recipients of his Son's grace a thousand times over" (Matthew Barrett).

²² We are indebted to Matthew Barrett for these implications. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, 176-177.

²³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*. Vol. 2. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 2:312.

IS THE SON ETERNALLY SUBORDINATE TO THE FATHER?²⁴

Eternal Submission of the Son (ESS) claims that Jesus is equal to the Father in essence but submissive to the Father in role or function.²⁵ Therefore, Jesus' obedience is not limited to the incarnation but extends to the Son's eternal relationship with the Father. Bruce Ware, a beloved professor at Southern Seminary, goes further and claims the Father exercises the utmost divine authority and enjoys supreme glory over the Son and the Spirit.²⁶ From a human perspective, even the names "Father" and "Son" signify authority and submission, supplying further evidence that God the Father has eternally had primary authority among the members of the Trinity and that the Son has eternally been subject and obedient to the Father's authority.²⁷ Theologians often appeal to (among many other texts)²⁸:

- John 4:34 "*Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."* The Son does the Father's will, indicating a primacy of the Father's willing.
- John 8:28 "*I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me."*
- John 14:28 "*You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I."* Some theologians teach that the Father's authority and glory are greater than the Son's.
- Matthew 26:42 "*Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done."*

²⁴ It is unjust to label those who hold to ESS (EFS) as heretics as long as they still hold to the complete equality of essence between the Father, Son and Spirit, the eternal generation and uncreated origin of the Son, the eternal procession of the Spirit, and the one will of God. While believe this to be an error, an error that could lead to worse error, it is not heresy.

²⁵ Also known as *Eternal Functional Subordination* (EFS).

²⁶ Ware, Bruce A. *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004. And ——. *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005.

²⁷ WayneGrudem.com, *Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father*. Wayne Grudem, (Accessed on January 31, 2023).

²⁸ Psalms 2, 40:8, 110; Daniel 7:13-14; Matthew 11:27, 20:20-21; Mark 14:62; Luke 22:69; John 3:16-17, 5:18-27, 6:37-39, 10:17-18, 14:31, 15:9-10; Acts 1:6-7, 4:27-28, 10:38-42, 17:30-31; Romans 8:34; 1Corinthians 8:6, 11:3; Galatians 4:4-6; Ephesians 1:3-10, 1:20, 3:9-11; Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 3:1; 2Timothy 1:9; Hebrews 1:1-3; 7:23-26, 12:2; 1Peter 3:22; 1John 4: 9-10; Revelation 1:1, 2:26-27, 3:21, 7:17, 22:3.

- 1 Corinthians 15:28 “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.”²⁹

IMMANENT AND ECONOMICAL TRINITY

What is the problem? Many of these theologians read all the works of the *economic Trinity* back into the *immanent Trinity*. The *immanent Trinity* refers to who the Triune God is in Himself (internally) and in eternity, **apart from the created and redemptive order**. The *economic Trinity* refers to how this Triune God **acts toward His created order** (external operations) in creation, providence, and redemption.³⁰ Many who hold this doctrine take Jesus’ human qualities of submission and obedience, project them back into the Godhead, and create a hierarchy within the eternal Trinity.

Scripture certainly teaches that the economic acts of the Trinity (creation, providence, redemption, etc.) **reveals** truths about the immanent Trinity (the inner, eternal life of God). For example, the Father’s predestination reflects that He is the source, the sending of the Son reflects the eternal generation of the Son, and the sending of the Spirit reflects the eternal procession of the Spirit.³¹ But, as one theologian states, “it is altogether different to say that the economic **constitutes** the immanent, or that anything and everything in the economic (suffering, submission) is to be projected back into the immanent.”³² **The Trinity’s work in creation and**

²⁹ Owenstrachan.substack, *The Danger of Equating Eternal Authority & Submission with Arian Heresy*. Owen Strachan, (Accessed on January 30, 2023). As of January 2023, theologians such as Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, and Owen Strachan hold this teaching.

³⁰ Augustine defined the 'Mission of God' as the visible manifestations in time of the persons sent, the Son and the Spirit, revealing to the world that they proceed from the Father in eternity. 'Proceed from' means they have an eternal relationship with the Father. In other words, we know the Father-Son-Holy Spirit distinction because the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit into time and space (Gal. 4:4-6). *On the Trinity*, Book II.

³¹ The “sending” and “being sent” do not imply subordination. Aquinas helpfully notes that this was a sending of ‘origin,’ “as a tree sends forth its flowers, according to equality” and not one of command, “as a master sends a servant.” Butner, D. Glenn. *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2022), 171.

³² Matthew Barrett. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, 115-116. This section is indebted to Matthew Barrett.

redemption truly manifests the Trinity to us but does not exhaustively reveal everything about the Trinity. In other words, the immanent Trinity constitutes the economic, but the economic does not constitute the immanent.³³

The difference is that begetting and proceeding are eternal and internal. *In contrast*, sending the Son and Spirit into our world is temporal and external and for a “specific purpose of accomplishing our redemption once and for all.”³⁴ The Trinity is an ordered communion of equals, and They arrange their relationships with each other according to a precise pattern. But ‘order’ does not automatically imply ‘hierarchical authority,’ meaning-the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience.³⁵ **Why?** Because the Trinity makes decisions inseparably with one shared will.³⁶ **Puritan John Owen wrote**, “The Father, Son and Spirit have not distinct wills. They are one God, and God’s will is one, as being an essential property of His nature.”³⁷ If God is one in nature, then He is one in will.

³³ The whole Trinity willed to redeem fallen humanity by sending the Son and Spirit and by the *incarnate* Son pledging His obedience to guarantee the payment of the debt of sin (sometimes called, the Covenant of Redemption). This eternal plan is understood as a ‘movement’ from the immanent to economic Trinity because it involves how they relate to Themselves for our sake. John 16:28 “*I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.*” To be sent, is to come forth from the Father (origin), and to come into the world. Augustine said in *On the Trinity*, Book II Chapter 5.9, “In what manner did God send his Son? Did he tell him to come, giving him an order, he complied with by coming, or did he ask him to, or did he merely suggest it? **Well, whichever way it was done, it was certainly done by word. But God’s Word is his Son. So, when the Father sent him by word, what happened was that he was sent by the Father and his Word. Hence it is by the Father and the Son that the Son was sent, because the Son is the Father’s Word.** Would anyone adopt so blasphemous an opinion as to suppose that it was by a word in time that the Father sent the eternal Son to appear in the course of time in the flesh?”

³⁴ Matthew Barrett. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, 117.

³⁵ Though, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with hierarchal authority because it is part of God’s order in creation.

³⁶ See also the last point. The other dangers of this doctrine are: tritheism. Submission implies multiple wills in the Godhead, one for each Person. So, does that mean they are three gods? Theologically, philosophically, and historical, Christian theologians located the ‘will’ in a person’s nature. So, Christ, as the God-man, possesses two wills because He has a truly Divine nature and truly human nature. God, being one in nature, essence, and being, shares one will between the Three Persons. Subordinationism: The Son and the Spirit possess lesser authority, power, and glory.

³⁷ John Owen, *Works* 19:87.

Why does this matter?³⁸ Well, without understanding who God is apart from us, we risk somewhat diminishing the magnitude of what God has done for us.³⁹

AMAZING GRACE

Jesus, during His time on earth, was unquestionably subject to the authority of God the Father. Furthermore, the Scriptures speak of the Father directing, initiating, and sending the Son for our redemption. But consider Philippians 2:6-9:

⁶ Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.

The “*form of God*” means Jesus possesses the very nature and characteristics essential to God (“*equality with God*” is another way of saying the same thing).⁴⁰ This passage reflects on the marvel of *God’s* humility in becoming a man, as Jesus now exists with two distinct and complete natures in one person.

In the Trinity, God exists as Three divine Persons and one divine Being. *Since the Being of this Holy Trinity of Persons is one, God's will can only be expressed as that of the Father,*

³⁸ Note that the Bible leaves room for a distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity *because of the incarnation*. The Son has not existed as the God-man for all eternity apart from redemption history. There is no mutability with the Son, however, because, as David Larson states, “the divine Son “becomes” not in his divine nature, but according to the coming-into-existence of his human nature.” *Desiring God, Did the Incarnation Change God?* David Larson, (Accessed on February 2, 2023).

³⁹ Matthew Barrett. *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, 121. This sentence makes an important distinction. There is a difference between how God relates to Himself for His own sake and how He relates to Himself or us for our sake, to the praise of His glory. Confusing these risks making the incarnation as a necessary part of the Son’s essence and begottenness. Christ’s mission reveals the Trinity but does not define it. Furthermore, it risks blurring the distinction between God and His creation, and eliminates some divine attributes like aseity and immutability.

⁴⁰ In taking the form of a servant, he did not lose the form of God but likewise *added* the very nature and characteristics essential to humanity. He emptied Himself of His rights, and added humanity to himself in order to take the form and function of a servant.

Son, and Spirit, together, in the perfect loving interpersonal unity of a single will. He is not like three human persons that each have their own centers of consciousness and wills, thus making a submission, obedience, agreement, and collaboration necessary.

Therefore, we will see how Philippians 2:6-8 teaches that *obedience and submission* were not virtues that the Father, Son, or Spirit had ever expressed in eternity. There is no need for them in their relations with one another, as in human relations. So, this text teaches that obedience was something the Son did by virtue of the incarnation, not something he did before the incarnation! Let's take a closer look at the text.

Because of the Son's self-conscious status as an equal with God, He has *nothing to prove* and *needs nothing* from us. So, He doesn't take advantage of His rights as an equal with God to 'take' for Himself, but instead gives Himself.⁴¹ **How does he give Himself?** He ⁴⁷ *he emptied himself (How? —>), (by) taking⁴² the form of a servant (what is taking the form of a servant? —>), being born⁴³ in the likeness of men ('being born,' i.e. His humanity; the Son could only become a servant by taking up humanity). ⁸ *And being found in human form, he humbled himself (How? —>) (by) becoming⁴⁴ obedient to the point* (Starting from conception, 'being found⁴⁵ in human form,' **to the point/in rising degrees/as far as/up to⁴⁶ 'death'**) of death"*

⁴¹ Even if we interpret verse six 'causally,' i.e., "*Because* he was in the very nature God...He took the form of servant," it only implies that emptied Himself of Divine rights of being served because He is eternally secure in His status as God. He does not need anything from us. But His servanthood (and obedience), his existence as a slave, and the emptying of His rights came by *adopting a human form/becoming human*. The Son could only *become* a servant (and obey) by taking up humanity. This text does not indicate that there may be some possible characteristics of servanthood in His divinity. That goes entirely against the current of the text, which asserts His eternal equality with God and portrays the astonishing act of humility in the incarnation, life, and death of Christ.

⁴² This is 'circumstantial participle': it "express the conditions, or circumstances, under which either an action occurs or a substantive exists in the relevant clause" (*References: BDF*).

⁴³ Another circumstantial participle.

⁴⁴ Another circumstantial participle.

⁴⁵ Another circumstantial participle.

⁴⁶ This is a preposition of 'degree' (BDAG). His obedience intensified and extended in scope through His life and ministry. The measure of His obedience, that came into being with the incarnation, advanced and escalated to even include (to the point of) a death on a cross (Hebrews 5:8).

(Philippians 2:8). Christ emptied himself *by* being born as a man (His incarnation is the instrumental means). From then on, He humbled Himself ***by becoming obedient!*** He never had to submit to anyone, learn anything, or be taught anything in eternity. **Obedience is possible for the Son of God only in His humanity!**

So, if the Son was somehow eternally subordinate in the Godhead, then His obedience is not quite as *shocking* in its humility. He simply fulfilled His role as a subordinate. **But, since He is eternally equal with and to God, the humility of putting himself in a position of learning, and obeying anything, is such an amazing and extraordinary expression of grace!**

ANCIENT RULES OF INTERPRETATION

The Athanasius Creed states, “[The Son is] Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and [lesser] to the Father, as touching his manhood.” Scripture speaks of Christ in two ways: it says some things of Him concerning His divine nature (2:6 - “in the form of God”), and it says other things about Him referring to His human nature (2:7 - “taking the form of a servant”). Scripture upholds the divine and human natures of Christ without confusing or dividing Him. Some texts refer to the Son in His divine nature (2:6 - “equality with God”), and some texts primarily refer to the Son in His human nature, which He became for the sake of accomplishing our salvation (2:8 - “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient”). This is the most fundamental problem with the ESS position. **It does not properly apply this Scriptural and ancient rule of hermeneutics when it deals with Christological texts.**

So, in His divinity, He is omniscient and as great as the Father. But in His humanity, “*He learned obedience through what he suffered*” (Hebrews 5:8), and the “*Father is greater than [He.]*” In His divinity, He shares the one will of the Triune God. But in His humanity, He

submits His human will to His Heavenly Father, saying, “*not my will, but your will be done.*” In 1 Corinthians 15:26-28, Christ, as the God-man, completed his mission by bringing the kingdom to consummation. That passage emphasizes Christ as the *Adamic mediator*, and He is subjected to the Father through eternity *in His Adamic mediatorial role* (1Corinthians 15:45-49).

In the Divine Trinity, no Person is greater or lesser than another. Jesus is co-eternal and co-equal in power and glory with the Father and the Spirit “in the form of God.” The Son submits to the Father only “in the form of a servant,” pertaining to His manhood. **Therefore, read Scripture in such a way that you discern these two different manners in which Scripture speaks of Christ without confusing, dividing, or diminishing Him.**

THE UNITY OF GOD’S ACTIONS: INSEPARABLE OPERATIONS⁴⁷

As God is one and attributes are one, His actions are likewise one. When Jesus said, “*The Father is in me and I am in the Father*” (John 10:38), He simultaneously claimed that He shares the Father’s essence and that they *mutually indwell* one another. The same is true for the Spirit so that the Three persons of the Trinity are all fully in one another (Co-inherence). We never have one Person of the Trinity without having the other Two, yet without confusion.⁴⁸ **So, inseparable operations mean that when God acts outside of Himself, He works in a way consistent with the unity of His nature—all is from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. All Three Persons work in everything God does because the One God is Triune.**

⁴⁷ Gerald Bray writes: “The revelation of the Trinity, as opposed to the implied unitarianism of Judaism, can be explained only by the transformation of perspective brought about by Jesus. The Trinity belongs to the inner life of God, and can be known only by those who share in that life. As long as we look at God on the outside, we shall never see beyond his unity; for, as the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine realized, the external works of the Trinity are undivided. **This means that an outside observer will never detect the inner reality of God, and will never enter the communion with him which is promised to us in Christ. Jews may recognize God’s existence and know his law, but without Christ they cannot penetrate the mystery of that divine fellowship which Christians call the Holy Trinity.**” Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁴⁸ Or, as Augustine put it: “Each are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all are one.”

EVIDENCE FROM SCRIPTURE

John 5:19 is crucially important here: *“So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.”* This text actually asserts more about the equality of the Son with the Father than His submission. First, He sees the Father, whom no man can see (John 1:18). Secondly, Jesus claims He does the same works as the Father. Third, the acts of the Father and Son are shared. There is nothing *the Father* does without the Son.

Likewise, 1Corinthians 12:4-6 states, *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”* This triadic pattern indicates that each member of the Trinity works to achieve the same goal. We also see this with Christ’s resurrection. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead, *“just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father”* (Romans 6:4). Jesus rose Himself from the dead, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”* (John 2:19). And, the Spirit raised Jesus from the dead, *“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies...”* (Romans 8:11).⁴⁹

⁴⁹ We can add a plethora of other examples that teach inseparable operations: 1 Cor. 8:4 & Deut. 6:4; Is. 45:23 & Phil. 2:10-11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:18-20, 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; Rom. 8:9-11; Matt. 9:5-6, Mark 2:1-12, Matt. 12; Mark 4:35-41; Matt. 8:23-27; Luke 8:22-25; The Spirit sanctifies (1Cor. 6:11), the Father sanctifies (John 17:17), and the Son sanctifies (Hebrews 10:10). [Augustine, in On the Trinity, Book II Chapter 5.9, said](#), “How then, he wants to know, can the Father have sent him if he sent himself? I answer first by asking him to tell me, if he can, how the Father can have sanctified the Son if he sanctified himself. Both are affirmed by one and the same Lord: *Do you say of him, he asks, whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, that he is blaspheming, because I said I am God’s Son* (Jn 10:36)? And elsewhere he says, *For them do I sanctify myself* (Jn 17:19). Again, I ask him how the Father can have delivered him up if he delivered up himself. The apostle Paul says both: *Who did not spare his own Son, he says, but delivered him up for us all* (Rom 8:32); and elsewhere he says of the savior, *who loved me and delivered himself up for me* (Gal 2:20). I trust our friend will answer me, if he has a just appreciation of these matters, that Father and Son have but one will and are indivisible in their working. Let him therefore understand the incarnation and the virgin birth in the same way, as indivisibly wrought by one and the same working of Father and

APPROPRIATIONS

However, while they work inseparably, they do not manifest themselves inseparably. For instance, though the Trinity creates and energizes the incarnation, only the Son's Person is joined to human nature (only the *Spirit* descended as a dove and tongues of fire). Furthermore, while a specific action or work appropriately belongs to one Person, it nevertheless is the creative effect of all Three because of Their inseparable operations. Theologian Robert Letham explains it this way: "While all Three persons are engaged in every aspect of our creation, preservation, and salvation, each action is most appropriate to one of the three rather than the others." For example, only the Son (in his human nature) died on the Cross, not the Father or the Spirit.⁵⁰

This divine way of working is called *appropriation*, which means assigning an action to a particular Person suitable in the circumstances, though the action may belong to all Three. All Three divine Persons work in each divine action, having **one will** and executing **one power**. Yet God is an **ordered** communion of equals, acting in an orderly way. All is *from* the Father, who works *through* the Son and *in* the Spirit.

Professor Adonis Vidu provides a helpful analogy using the activity of a magnet.⁵¹ "A whole magnet draws a needle to itself, but it becomes attached to just one of the poles. Similarly,

Son, not leaving out, of course, the Holy Spirit, of whom it is said in so many words that *she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit* (Mt 1:18)."

⁵⁰ Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 110.

⁵¹ He also helpfully answers, "*Why couldn't the three persons cooperate and thus collectively create? We can easily imagine two people pushing a piano up the stairs. Neither person can fully account for the whole effect. But what might it mean for two omnipotent beings to push a piano up the stairs? In what might their cooperation consist, since they seem to make each other redundant? Each of these alternatives—creation by delegation or by cooperation—sits ill with the Jewish and Christian idea of a Creator. This idea demarcates very clearly between reality and the single source of this reality... If Jesus is but a delegate—if his operations are exclusively his, and not those of the whole Trinity—then YHWH has not returned to his people after all.*"

while the whole Trinity is involved in the incarnation, but the human nature, analogous to the needle, is attached specifically to the Son.”⁵²

Inseparable operations mean first, we, as believers, return to God by the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father, and our salvation takes the work of the whole Trinity. Second, the divine Son *never left* the Trinity in His incarnation or propitiatory sacrifice, not even when he descended into the realm of the dead. The Trinity was never broken, even on the cross. Third, Vidu adds, “In the indwelling Spirit we do not have a second-best to the Son, just as in Christ we do not have second-best to the Father (as Philip in [John 14] wrongly implies).” We have the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of the Son, and the Father. Fourth, our salvation is from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit. All Three Persons secure our salvation. Therefore, our salvation, is secure as God, Himself. Fifthly and finally, because Their operations are inseparable, we can participate in the Divine nature and share in the Triune life (2 Peter 1:4). In Christ Jesus, we are genuinely and wholly united to God forever!

⁵² The Gospel Coalition, *How the Doctrine of Inseparable Operations Unlocks the Gospel*. Adonis Vidu, (Accessed on February 1, 2023).