

William Perkins & the Official Subordination of the Mediator

By Derrick E. Brite

INTRODUCTION

How are we to understand the subordination of the Son? Despite a large amount of proverbial ink being spilled over the past decade on this subject, there are still questions surrounding the nature of the Son's relationship to the Father. This discussion has become only more pertinent with the recent emphasis from many who are focused upon the retrieval of classical theism. Primarily, advocates of eternal subordination (Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission, hereafter ERAS) locate the subordination of the Son in His divine nature; thus, seeing subordination as something definitional to the

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1. For example, see the excellent work done by D. Glenn Butner Jr., *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

2. *The Works of William Perkins*, 10 vols. gen. ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W.H. Thomas (Grand Rapids, Reformation Heritage Books, 2014–2020). References to Perkins's works in this article relate to this set and will include a short title of the book along with the volume and page numbers.

3. I was originally introduced to this term in Richard Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 166.

4. A similar project was undertaken by Benedict Bird. Bird effectively answers the objections of Bruce Ware by way of the great Puritan theologian, John Owen. Though I did not rely upon Bird's essay for content, I do credit him for the idea. His article is worth consulting for those interested in this debate or in John Owen studies. See Benedict Bird, "John Owen and the Question of the Eternal Submission of the Son," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 80, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 299–334.

ontological identity of the Son. As will be shown, in order to affirm ERAS, the catholic doctrine of the Trinity must be either outright rejected or reworked to fit this paradigm. Conversely, some have argued against an eternal subordination and opted for a more orthodox approach—that of placing the subordination of the Son exclusively in His human nature.¹ However, this position comes with its own questions and problems.

Thus, the question remains: how are we to understand the subordination of the Son? Furthermore, how can we affirm a type of subordination that avoids the pitfalls of an incarnation-only approach, while also upholding classical theism? It is the contention of this article that the theology of William Perkins (1558–1602) properly and effectively answers these questions.² Perkins answers the question of where to locate the subordination of the Son not in nature, but in Christ's office as mediator. It is here that Perkins lays forth the "official subordination of the Son as mediator."³ By placing the subordination of the Son in His office as mediator, Perkins is able to uphold classical theism, a robust doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, as well as avoid the pitfalls of the incarnation-only approach. What follows is an exercise in retrieval, as the writings of a past theologian will be brought into dialogue with modern theologians and modern theological debates.⁴

ERAS AND CLASSICAL THEISM

Divine Simplicity

Before the writings and doctrine of William Perkins can be shown, it is imperative that the writings of his theological interlocutors are (briefly) laid forth, beginning with ERAS. Though a critic of ERAS, Stephen J. Wellum helpfully lays forth the position. ERAS: 1. attempts to agree with the classical position of the doctrine of divine simplicity, and the singularity of the will of God

among the divine persons. 2. However, it differs with the classical view in that it teaches that the personal properties are *not* the only thing which distinguish the persons of the Trinity. In so doing, advocates of ERAS redefine the catholic meaning of “person.” 3. Given the second contention, ERAS advocates unintentionally undermine the first contention (one divine will), and are unable to hold to a right doctrine of inseparable operations, opting instead for a harmony of operations and different expressions of the will. 4. Lastly, due to the redefinition of “person,” ERAS requires that “authority” is an attribute that is not common to all three persons.⁵

At heart, ERAS is a system that seeks to show that the operations *ad extra* of the divine persons are univocally reflective of the *ad intra* life of the Trinity. This is not simply as a form of taxis where the order of the persons or missions are revealed, but rather a revealing of a true hierarchy that exists within ontological Trinitarian life. Therefore, according to Ware, “the external works of the trinitarian persons are always expressive of their eternal modes of subsistence or eternal relations of origin.”⁶ Thus, “The Father is supreme over all (creation), and in particular, he is supreme within the Godhead as the highest in authority and the one deserving of ultimate praise.”⁷ This is not merely about economic roles, but a statement of ontology. Note Ware again when he says that “The Father has ontological primacy as the Father who eternally begets his Son.”⁸ For Ware, the Father is not first in a taxis, but in rank among the persons.

Put another way, what we see in the economic unfolding of redemption is an exact representation of the ontological nature of the Trinity. So, to see the Son as submissive in his economic mission is to see him as He truly is: as one eternally subordinate to the Father. For proponents of eternal subordinationism, this is non-negotiable. For the Son to be eternally subordinate is definitional for the personhood of the Son. Owen Strachan makes this clear when he writes, “The Father is the Father because He sends the Son. The Son is the Son because He submits to the Father’s will. The Spirit is the Spirit because the Father and the Son send Him. There is no Holy Trinity without the order of authority and submission.”⁹ To remove eternal functional subordination then, would be to “lose the doctrine of the Trinity, for we would not have any eternal personal distinctions between the Father and the Son, and they would not eternally be Father and Son.”¹⁰

This places authority as a necessary and essential attribute of the Father, but submission as a necessary and essential attribute of the Son. ERAS critic Kevin Giles

states it clearly: “If the Son is eternally submissive to the Father, always bound to obey him, because this is what indelibly and eternally distinguishes him from the Father, then he is a subordinate. Subordination in authority defines who he is, his being/nature; submission describes how he functions. The latter follows from the former. His being prescribes his eternal submissive role.”¹¹ It is impossible to uphold the classical doctrine of divine simplicity at this point.

The doctrine of God’s simplicity states that:

God is not made up of parts; he is not composite or a compounded being. He is his attributes. His essence is his attributes and his attributes his essence; all that is in God simply is God. Each person of the Trinity is a subsistence of the one, simple divine essence. The persons, therefore, are not parts in/of God.¹²

Thus, for the Father—but neither the Son nor the Spirit—to possess the attribute of authority is to predicate something to the Father that is not equally as proper to the other persons of the Godhead. Considering the maxim that “all that is in God is God,” to place authority with one person but not the others defies any notion of simplicity.¹³

5. Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept*, vol 1 (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), pp. 713–717.

6. Bruce Ware, “Unity and Distinction of the Trinitarian Persons” in *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Applications*, ed. Keith S. Whitfield (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), p. 36.

7. Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), p. 67.

8. Ware, “Unity and Distinction,” p. 36.

9. Owen Strachan and Gavin Peacock, *The Grand Design: Male and Female He Made Them* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), p. 67. Kindle.

10. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 244–245.

11. Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), p. 230.

12. Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), p. 324. Kindle.

13. Readers need to consult the seminal work of James E. Dolezal, *All That is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017). Simplicity has long been held as both a catholic and reformed doctrine. Consider the words of the prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, William Twisse, who remarked that: “God’s attributes are not really distinguished, we all confess.” *A Discovery of D. Jacksons Vanitie* (London: N.p., 1631), p. 74. Also cited in James E. Dolezal, *All that is in God*, p. 74n29. Aquinas similarly states that “God is whatever He has.”

Pactum Salutis

Naturally, this view of authority and submission within the immanent Trinity has an effect on ERAS advocates' doctrine of the *pactum salutis*. Since these men claim to hold to a Reformed soteriology, this is vital to understanding their position. For Ware, the role of the Son and the Spirit in the eternal planning of redemption is seemingly non-existent. Only in the execution of redemption is the Son (and the Spirit) present. Yet, even this is viewed as optional for the ERAS system. The Father, had he chosen to do so, could have acted alone without the Son. Ware makes this abundantly clear:

Though the Father is supreme, he often provides and works through his Son and Spirit to accomplish his work and fulfill his will. I am amazed when I consider here the humility of the Father. For, though the Father is supreme, though he has in the trinitarian order the place of highest authority, the place of highest honor, yet he chooses to do his work in many cases through the Son and through the Spirit rather than unilaterally. Rather than saying to the Son and Holy Spirit, "Just stand aside and watch me as I do all the work," it is as if the Father, instead, says to us, "I want you to see my work accomplished through my Son. Look at my Son! Notice my Son! Look at the marvelous obedience he has given to me. Look at the greatness of his grace extended to those who misunderstand and mistreat him. Look at his wisdom and power manifest in creation and in redemption. Look at my Son, for with him I am well-pleased."¹⁴

And again, "It is not as though the Father is unable to work unilaterally, but rather, he chooses to involve the Son and the Spirit."¹⁵

Ware recognizes that two objections may arise from his view: 1. submission is not eternal but takes place within the *pactum salutis*, or 2. submission takes place at the incarnation of Christ. Yet, neither potential objection satisfies all the biblical or theological

requirements. To those who would argue the former, he asks:

But then one faces this very important question: why does the authority and submission relation in the economic eternity past take the precise shape that it does? That is, why is it that the one we call "Father" turns out to be the one who designs, plans, commands, and sends; and why is it that the one we call "Son" embraces, yields, obeys, and prepares to be sent? Is the assigning of authority and submission here in the economy to particular persons arbitrary and ad hoc such that it just so happened that the one we call "Father" is assigned authority, and the one we call "Son" is assigned submission, yet it may have been different? Could it have been that the one we call "Son" sends, and the one we call "Father" is sent to become incarnate? If not, just where would these expressions of authority and submission be rooted? Might it not rather be that there is no "assigning" of authority and submission at the point of the *pactum salutis* since authority and submission are embedded already (eternally) in the hypostatic identities of the divine persons?

Ware is at least consistent on this point, that the *pactum salutis* takes the shape it does because the Father is supreme, which is why He sets the terms for the covenant and the Son submits to those terms.

For Ware, there is a clear binary that exists in the relationship between Father and Son:

Consider that the relation of authority and submission we see among the trinitarian persons is either eternal or it is not. The binary precision here is helpful; there is not a third option. If it is not eternal, then it starts. Binary again. And if it starts, one must inquire, just when, why, and how does it start? Some might say that it starts (and finishes) in the earthly life and ministry of Christ. Others might include also his submission to the Father in eternity future since the Son remains the incarnate Son forever.¹⁶

We must recognize that Ware brings up an interesting point. If the Son's submission is only tied to his incarnation, then does his submission carry on into eternity future? As he would argue, the answer is yes. Texts such as 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 clearly affirm the eternal future submission that is completely consistent with the eternal past submission.¹⁷ Not only that, but according to Ware, this view "makes a mockery of the Father's sending of the Son, his motive of love, and his purpose

Summa Contra Gentiles, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns Oats and Washbourne, 1924), 1.58.

14. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, p. 55.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

16. Ware, "Response to Malcolm B. Yarnell III, Matthew Y. Emerson, and Luke Stamps" in *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Application*, ed. Keith S. Whitfield (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), p. 135.

17. See Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, chapter 4. For an explanation of why 1 Corinthians 15:20–28 does not affirm any type of eternal subordination, see Derrick E. Brite "Second in Order but Not in Rank: An Evaluation of 1 Corinthians 15:20–28," *The Puritan Reformed Journal* 14, 1 (2022): 5–12.

to save, that he—the Father—has willed in his Son.”¹⁸ One can see why he would be hesitant to throw off eternal past submission since many who argue against him have failed to contend with eternal future submission.¹⁹ The issue of the hypostatic union carrying on into eternity is one reason that some reformed theologians have argued that the incarnation should not be considered part of the state of humiliation.²⁰

Furthermore, locating authority or submission as an attribute of the nature and not the person brings us to “conclude the person’s nature changed when they were granted authority they did not have previously or were divested of authority they had just had. Yet we know that this is not the case. Both authority and submission are properties of personal relationships and not of one’s nature.”²¹

Although much can be and has already been said about the problems ERAS poses pertaining to theology proper, the Christological consequences of the position need also to be addressed. It is here that ERAS theologians want to have their cake and eat it too. Ware, Grudem, et al. claim commitment to Nicene orthodoxy, which affirms that the Father and the Son are of the same substance—*homoousious*. Yet, their commitment to the categories of authority and submission as being personal properties or essential attributes that are not tied to nature betrays their creedal confession, and in some cases their commitments take primary position over their Nicene commitments. For example, Bruce Ware says, “I fully agree with the pro-Nicene doctrine of appropriations and find it biblical and right to depict the divine trinitarian operations as expressive of their eternal modes of subsistence. Yet, while what I affirm in this chapter fully accords with this pro-Nicene understanding, I believe that the appeal to divine appropriations falls short of expressing fully what Scripture indicates regarding the functional relations and operations of the trinitarian persons.”²²

Millard Erickson helpfully summarizes the problem.

The problem is this: If authority over the Son is an essential, not an accidental, attribute of the Father, and subordination to the Father is an essential, not an accidental, attribute of the Son, then something significant follows. 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 *homoousious*.²³

This is the unavoidable consequence of ERAS.

No doubt, this view has direct bearing upon the doctrine of simplicity. It seems that ERAS demands a functional denial of simplicity, or at the very least a reworking of the traditional understanding. We see this problem when Ware argues that every “essential attribute of God’s nature is possessed by the Father, Son, and Spirit equally and fully. We cannot look at aspects of the *nature of God* as that which distinguishes the Father from the Son or Spirit; rather we have to look at the *roles and relationships* that characterize the Father uniquely in relation to the Son and Spirit.”²⁴ Yet, he fails to reckon that statement with his belief that the Father has a “supreme” monarchy.²⁵ Is having a supreme monarchy an attribute? If so, is it an essential property or attribute? Once again, there are more questions than answers with ERAS.

Ware responds to this objection by highlighting the personal properties of the divine persons. The Son does indeed have a property that the Father and the Spirit do not have—that of being eternally begotten by the Father. Ware writes, “his being begotten is not merely contingent (*de dicto*) and hence not necessary; rather, his being begotten is eternal and is absolutely necessary (*de re*). Hence, the Son’s being eternally begotten is essential to his being the eternal Son of the Father.”²⁶ However, this argument fails to make an important category distinction between properties that are common

18. Ware, “Response,” p. 135

19. In a lecture arguing against ERAS, Michael Riccardi appeals to 1 Corinthians 15:28, stating that “we have no problem with *everlasting* functional subordination, because the incarnation is everlasting.” Unity and Trinity and Trinity in Unity: A Case against the Eternal Subordination of the Son <https://www.thegracelife.org/pulpit.com/sermons.aspx?code=2023-03-12-MR>. Access date: September 6th, 2024.

20. For example, see: Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service, Volume 1: God, Man, and Christ*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, repr. 2020), p. 576. He says, “Furthermore, the union of the divine and human natures will continue in His state of glory—yes, to all eternity. Thus, the incarnation itself, without these humiliating circumstances (which should not be considered here at all), was not a humiliation. It was rather a qualifying of His Person, enabling Him to be Mediator.” Other reformulations of the two natures are gaining ground as well, such as: Jeremy Treat, “Exaltation in and Through Humiliation,” in *Christology, Ancient and Modern: Explorations in Constructive Dogmatics*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), pp. 96–114.

21. Ware, “Response,” p. 134.

22. Ware, “Unity and Distinction,” p. 24.

23. Millard Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel 2009), p. 172.

24. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, p. 45.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

26. Bruce Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission

and how those properties are received. As Scott Swain helpfully points out, ERAS theologians have confused what the divine persons have in common and how those persons have it.²⁷

Divine Aseity

This leads us to the next issue at hand, which is the doctrine of the aseity of the Son. If we are to believe that the Son's submission to the Father is eternal in this way, then what is the purpose of His submission? Jules A. Martinez-Olivieri sums up the concern well:

One might ask: The Son is submitted to do what? Submission is a notion that has meaning when it is referencing a command. What is the content of the Son's submission when conceptualized before the creation of the world? Is there a salvific obedient role without an economy of salvation? Would not this thesis make the cosmos logically necessary for the Son? Is the Son, in his very nature, dependent upon the created order to be who he is? If so, this would be a tectonic-level departure from the Nicene Tradition.²⁸

The creation and salvation of mankind was not a necessary but optional and free act. Chapter four of the Westminster Confession says of creation that it "pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create..." This does not entail obligation, but rather out of God's mere pleasure, this includes the Son's pleasure! Regarding salvation, chapter seven of the confession says that God making a covenant with man was a "voluntary condescension." Although the

proponents of ERAS theologians are almost exclusively Baptist, it is worth noting that the London Baptist Confession of 1689 is in full agreement with these statements.

Rather than this being a nuanced debate surrounding whether the Son is *autotheos*, ERAS theologians have now unwittingly made the Son's very personhood dependent upon his mission. All of God's works *ad extra* are now essential and not optional. This blends the internal and external operations of the Trinity in an unhealthy and unorthodox way and must be rejected. Ultimately, the commitment of ERAS theologians to their hermeneutic of human relations has caused them to completely redefine Christ and the Trinity. One could argue that this is a consequence of a Christology "from below" that focuses on the humanity of Jesus and seeks to reason back to His divinity. For example, Bruce McCormack in arguing for a modern Reformed kenoticism argues that Christology must inform theology proper. Thus, "Nothing will be said of the immanent life of God that does not find a firm and clear root in the economy."²⁹ Though Ware and others are not outwardly committed to kenoticism, the root fallacy is the same. The economic informs the immanent.

Historically, Ware and others are not the only Protestant theologians to argue for a type of eternal subordination. Karl Barth in his *Church Dogmatics* argues that obedience must be pre-temporal. According to Barth, there are three inalienable presuppositions that demand us to believe that obedience in Christ is proper to his being: 1. The acting subject of the reconciliation of the world with God is Jesus Christ. This work is that which can only be God's own work. 2. For a true atonement, God Himself must act and intervene in the world. He must affect the world from within. 3. The one God who is both the reconciler and subject of the act of the atonement must be identical with the existence of the humiliated and lowly and obedient man Jesus of Nazareth.³⁰ In other words, obedience is something that must be proper to God in order for it to be something that he can rightly take to himself to accomplish the work of reconciliation and atonement. Here we see similarities with the ERAS position, as Barth states that "His divine unity consists in the fact that in Himself he is both one who is obeyed and Another who obeys."³¹

Barth grounds the obedience of the Son in the inner life of God and the relationship of the one who obeys and is obeyed serves as the basis for all of God's works *ad extra*.³² This position clearly has similarities

Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of Homooousios?" in *One God in Three Persons*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), p. 241

27. Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), p. 118.

28. Jules A. Martinez-Olivieri, "There Is a Method to the Madness," in *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology*, ed. Michael F. Bird & Scott Harrower (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019), p. 227.

29. Bruce Lindley McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 19.

30. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume IV: The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 1*, trans. G.W. Bromiley, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2004), pp. 197–199.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

32. For a traditional Thomistic critique of this position, see Thomas Joseph White, OP, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press 2015), pp. 277–307.

with Eternal Functional Subordination. Both positions see the relationship of the Father and the Son as one of authority and obedience. This relationship is the foundation for creation, incarnation, and even human relationships. Two important points regarding Barth's position must be mentioned. First, with Barth's three presuppositions, he is attempting to exclude both modalism and traditional subordinationism (as would ERAS proponents). Secondly, Barth still seeks to hold to traditional language regarding eternal generation and begetting. This is integral for his theology of obedience and submission. He says clearly that "The One who eternally begets is never apart from the One who is eternally begotten."³³

Inseparable Operations

By virtue of functionally denying the doctrine of divine simplicity, as well as aseity, ERAS theologians are unable to hold to a traditional view of inseparable operations.³⁴ In response to Glenn Butner, Wayne Grudem says that he affirms the doctrine, as long as it means that:

by virtue of the one nature or essence in God, all three persons of the Trinity are in some way involved in every action of any one of the persons, then I am happy to affirm this doctrine. But if it is taken to mean that all three persons in the Trinity act in exactly the same way in every action (so that the Son does not submit to the Father any more than the Father submits to the Son), then it is contrary to many of the passages of Scripture cited above.³⁵

However, Grudem has misunderstood the doctrine. As Stephen Wellum rightly points out, for ERAS advocates, inseparable operations mean simply a harmonious unity or that the content of the divine will is the same, "which is not exactly the same as the classical view."³⁶ Rather, inseparable operations mean not simply a harmony in the works among the persons, but that "the persons of the Trinity are indivisible in essence, they are also indivisible in their external operations. Having the one, simple will in common, they perform a singular act in any external operation."³⁷ Each work then, is appropriated to a specific divine person. As Robert Letham has observed, inseparable operations "was a major theme of Augustine, but it was a view also held by the Cappadocians."³⁸ But, as has been covered already, Bruce Ware teaches that the Father could have acted unilaterally without the Son or the Spirit. So, at the very least, inseparable operations

are optional, but not required by virtue of the persons being indivisible in essence.

WILLIAM PERKINS AND CLASSICAL THEISM

For Perkins, affirming the orthodox and catholic doctrine of God was of great necessity. Perkins labored to defend the Reformed faith against the Roman Catholic Church, showing that it was not an accretion, but rather, that it was the Reformed who were truly catholic. A Reformed catholic, according to Perkins, is "anyone that holds the same necessary heads of religion with the Roman Church; yet so as he pares off and rejects all errors in doctrine whereby the said religion is corrupted."³⁹ This meant—among other things—defending the doctrine of God that is revealed in the Scriptures and held in common with the church fathers. Examining Perkins's views on the doctrine of God before laying out his doctrine of the subordination of the mediator is imperative.

Divine Simplicity and Inseparable Operations

Though Perkins did not publish a treatise exclusively on the doctrine of God, his theology proper can still be found throughout his writings.⁴⁰ Perkins defines simplicity as that truth whereby God's nature is "void of all logical relation in arguments."⁴¹ Perkins comes to this conclusion by examining texts such as Exodus 3:14, Acts 17:24–25, and a number of texts in John. Thus, for God "it is manifest that to have life and to be life, to be in light and to be light in God are all one.... Therefore, whatever is in God is His essence; and all that He is, He is by essence."⁴²

Though he believed simplicity to be a profoundly biblical doctrine, Perkins also recognized its historical acceptance:

33. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, p. 209.

34. For the best current work on this doctrine, see Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

35. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), p. 313. Kindle.

36. Wellum, *Systematic Theology*, p. 715. Cf. Ware, "Unity and Distinction," pp. 23 and 49.

37. Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, p. 321.

38. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2019), p. 457.

39. Perkins, *A Reformed Catholic*, 75.

40. Perkins's most robust formulations on the doctrine of the Trinity are found in *An Exposition of the Creed* and *A Golden Chain* in volumes 5 and 6, respectively.

41. Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 6.12.

42. *Ibid.*, 6.12–13.

The saying of Augustine is fit to prove this: “In God,” says he, “to be and to be just or mighty are all one; but in the mind of man, it is not all one to be and to be might or just. For the mind may be destitute of these virtues and yet be a mind.”

This means that the divine persons are distinguished by their personal properties. Speaking of eternal generation, Perkins argues that there are three properties that must be observed. First, the one who is begotten and the one who begets “are together and not one before another in time.” Secondly, the Father who begets “does communicate with Him that is begotten not some part but His whole essence.” Thus, there is nothing in the Son that is substantially different than the Father. Lastly, “the Father begot the Son not out of Himself, but within Himself.”⁴³ This means that there is absolutely “no temporal or ontological gap between the Father and the Son.... The Son is coessential or consubstantial with the Father.”⁴⁴ Yet “every person is one and the same perfect God.” Nevertheless, “by reason of the infinite greatness of that most simple essence” the persons are undivided.⁴⁵

Perkins explains:

We must know that that which the Son receives of the Father, He receives it by nature and not by grace; and He receives not a part but all that the Father has, saving the personal property. And the Holy Spirit receives from the Father and the Son by nature and not by grace. And therefore, though both the Son and the Holy Spirit receive from the Father, yet they are not inferior to Him but equal with Him.⁴⁶

Thus, contra Bruce Ware, it is an impossibility that the Father would possess any kind of ontological supremacy over the Son or the Spirit.

This pure doctrine of simplicity necessarily leads to a robust doctrine of inseparable operations. Citing

Proverbs 8:22, 30; John 1:1, John 5:19, and others, Perkins is led to recognize that “each one is in the rest and with the rest by reason of the unity of the Godhead. And therefore, every each one does possess love and glorify another and work the same thing.”⁴⁷

This is not merely a throwaway statement by Perkins, but comes up even when he discusses such a vital and practical topic as the Lord’s Prayer:

Some may say this prayer is a perfect platform of all prayers, and yet we are taught to direct our prayers to the Father, not to the Son or Holy Spirit. I answer, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct persons, yet they are not to be severed or divided, because they all subsist in one and the same Godhead or divine nature. And further, in all outward actions, as in the creation and preservation of the world and the salvation of the elect, they are not severed or divided; for they all work together – only they are distinguished in the manner of working. Now, if they be not divided in nature or operation, then they are not to be severed in worship.⁴⁸

All outward actions are united. This will prove to be important when discussing the doctrine of the mediator.

OFFICIAL SUBORDINATION OF THE MEDIATOR

As we turn to the doctrine of Christ the mediator, and His official subordination, it must begin by examining his doctrine of predestination. Perkins’s supralapsarian theology takes a Christologically focused approach to the ordering of the decrees. According to Perkins, Predestination has two parts: election and reprobation. Three things are necessary for the execution of election: the foundation, the means, and the degrees.⁴⁹ The foundation of the decree, is Christ, who is “called of His Father from all eternity to perform the office of the Mediator, that in Him all those which should be saved might be chosen.”⁵⁰ It is this focus upon the office of mediator that, according to Richard Muller, “has become a fully realized structure.”⁵¹ For Perkins, to consider election without regard to Christ as mediator “is against all sense, because He is the foundation of election to be executed in regard of the beginning, the means, and the end.”⁵²

Just as predestination has two parts, election likewise has two acts: the first act being the beginning of the divine purpose whereby God chooses certain men for salvation and excludes others. The second act has five degrees. Each degree is centered around the mediatorial office of Christ. They are as follows: the

43. Ibid, 6.21.

44. Wyatt Graham, “The Triune God,” in *Faith Working Through Love: The Theology of William Perkins*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, Matthew N. Payne, and J. Stephen Yuille (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2022), p. 20.

45. Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 6.20.

46. Perkins, *Exposition of the Creed*, 5.26.

47. Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 6.20.

48. Perkins, *Exposition of the Lord’s Prayer*, 5.430.

49. Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 6.47.

50. Ibid.

51. Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, p. 166.

52. Perkins, *The Manner and Order of Predestination*, 6.309.

ordaining of a mediator, the promising of him being ordained, the exhibiting of him being promised, the applying of him being exhibited, and the accomplishment of the application.⁵³ His appointment or being ordained as mediator is itself an act of predestination. Drawing upon texts such as 1 Peter 1:20 as well as the writings of Augustine, Perkins affirms that Christ was Himself predestined. Being the eternal Son, Christ is both subject to and partakes in the predestination of Himself. Perkins goes on to state that “For Howsoever as He is, the substantial Word (λόγος) of the Father, or the Son, He does predestinate with the Father and the Holy Ghost; yet as He is the Mediator, He is predestinated Himself.”⁵⁴

Muller is correct, this is an important distinction in Perkins’s position and what can be rightly termed as an “official subordination of the Son as mediator.” Perkins parallels the eternal workings of God and the economy of salvation in a way that centers upon Christ as mediator.⁵⁵ Christ Himself is the object of and subject to predestination and election. This means, that Christ not only submits to execution of the work of mediator but takes part in the designing of the mediatorial role. Thus, Perkins will say that “though it be true that Christ is set apart to the work of mediation, as He is a mediator or as He is man, yet as He is God He does design and set Himself apart to the same work. For to design the mediator is a common action of the three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”⁵⁶

Perkins’s recognition of Christ’s divinity as it pertains to His acting in predestination in accord with the Father and the Spirit serves as a strong polemic against the traditional subordinationist error. However, this argument also serves to combat an error of eternal functional subordination. ERAS advocates argue for a unilateral decision by the Father to predestine the Son. As Ware says, “one finds the Father, who in ontological relation is eternally Father of the Son, acting, then, in a manner befitting his paternal hypostatic identity by planning, designing, commanding, sending, purposing, willing, and so forth, all that takes place through the Son and the Spirit.”⁵⁷ According to Ware, it is of the Father exclusively to plan, design, purpose and will.

One may rightly ask then, in what sense is there a subordination since He with the Father decreed all things? Perkins answers thusly: “Christ, as He is a mediator, is not subordinate to the very decree itself of election, but to the execution thereof only.”⁵⁸ Perkins locates the submission of Christ in the execution of the office, not in the decree itself. This maintains balance and allows for both the full divinity of Christ who is

homoousious with the Father yet is submissive as the agent of redemption. He has predestined Himself, along with the Father and the Spirit, to this role, therefore His equality of authority is preserved.

Perkins does not deny that the Father sends the Son, yet this does not require a differentiation in authority or imply a supreme monarchy in the Father. Perkins writes that although the Son took part in predestinating Himself to be mediator, nevertheless, “considering the Father is first in order and therefore has the beginning of the action, for this cause He is said especially to design....”⁵⁹ This does not ignore texts such as John 6:27, but rather it seeks to rightly interpret them in light of the truth of Christ’s fully divinity—his *autotheos*. Building upon Calvin’s doctrine of the Son’s aseity, Perkins writes:

For the thing itself, it is Christ, who must be considered two ways: as He is a son, and as He is God. As He is a son, He is not of Himself, but the Son of the Father, begotten of Him. Nevertheless, as He is God, He is of Himself: neither begotten or proceeding. For the essence or Godhead of the Father is of itself without all beginning; but the Godhead of the Son is one and the same with the Godhead of the Father, because by what Godhead the Father is God, by the same and no other the Son is God. Therefore, the Son, as He is God, He is God of Himself without beginning even as the Father. Whereupon it follows that the Son is begotten of the Father as He is a son, but not as He is God.⁶⁰

For Perkins, Christ being *autotheos* is a necessary component to understand his role as mediator.⁶¹ Elsewhere, Perkins states that “Now Christ as He is Mediator, is inferior to His Father and in that regard is not advanced to equal glory with His Father, though He sits with Him. So, the members of Christ, being inferior unto Him may sit with Him in His throne, though their glory be unequal.”⁶²

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid., p. 310.

55. Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, p. 166.

56. William Perkins, *An Exposition of the Creed*, 5.103–104.

57. Ware, “Unity and Distinction,” p. 26.

58. Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 6.48.

59. Perkins, *An Exposition of the Creed*, 5.104.

60. Ibid., p. 108.

61. Richard Muller admits these distinctions are difficult to uphold, but they are necessary as we move forward in our discussion. Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 4: The Trinity of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), p. 523.

62. Perkins, *Exposition of Revelation 1–3*, 4.626.

Perkins connects these ideas as he answers objectors who say that Christ, who is the offended party, cannot serve as mediator:

Now the Word is middle between the Father and the faithful (1) in regard of order, because the Word was begotten of the Father and by it we have access to the Father. This subordination which is of the Son to the Father is not in the divine essence severally and distinctly considered, but in the relation or manner of. Having the essence. And those things which are subordinate after this manner cannot be unequal if they have one and the same singular essence. (2) In regard of His office, the which being imposed on Him by his Father, He did willingly undergo and of His own accord.⁶³

His full equality prevents a true subordination; therefore, it must be a subordination of office which he willingly undertook.

Naturally, the Christ's role as mediator is carried into the actual work itself. Here, Perkins takes a fairly typical orthodox reformed approach. Perkins argues that "the whole person compounded of God and man, according to both natures, is the beginning of all the operations of the God-man."⁶⁴ This is where Perkins would clearly depart from those who would argue that Christ's mediatorship (and thereby, his subordination) is relegated exclusively to His incarnation as some early church fathers have argued. Perkins calls this a "fiction of the schoolmen."⁶⁵

Although Christ was considered in His office of mediator in eternity past, yet it was not until His baptism that He was formally installed into the office.⁶⁶ Once installed, the mediator is able to execute that which is necessary for our redemption. Perkins attributes our salvation to both natures, writing, "For in His human nature He wrought our salvation by suffering, dying satisfying and in His divine nature, by giving strength

unto His humanity to endure the death of the cross, and perfect His satisfaction."⁶⁷ Accordingly, every act in His incarnation is a "compound work, arising of the effects of two natures concurring in one and the same action, namely the Godhead and the manhood. And therefore, to the effecting of the said work, there is required an infinite power which far exceeds the strength of any created nature."⁶⁸

Compare this with a statement made by Francis Turretin:

For since to redeem us, two things were most especially required – the acquisition of salvation and the application of the same; the endurance of death for satisfaction and victory over the same for the enjoyment of life – our mediator ought to be God-man (*theanthropos*) to accomplish these things: man to suffer, God to overcome; man to receive the punishment we deserved, God to endure and drink it to the dregs; man to acquire salvation for us by dying, God to apply it to us by overcoming; man to become ours by the assumption of the flesh, God to make us like himself by the bestowal of the Spirit... Both natures, therefore, should be associated that in both conjoined, both the highest weakness of humanity might exert itself for suffering and the highest power and majesty of the divinity might exert itself for the victory.⁶⁹

Turretin and Perkins agree, the conjoined natures of the God-man, not just His humanity, are required.

By locating Christ's submission in the office of mediator, Perkins nuanced position has thus far answered the issues brought up earlier by ERAS. However, how does a position like this answer the dilemma of the relationship between Christ's mediatorship and His handing the Kingdom over to the Father? The basis for this text is 1 Corinthians 15:20–28. In this text, we are told that in the eschaton, Christ will hand over the Kingdom to the Father (vv. 24) and that the Son will "also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (vv. 28). At first glance, ERAS advocates seem to have answers for this difficult text. Ware lists this among various texts that prove that the authority the Father has over the Son is not limited to the incarnation, but to eternity future.⁷⁰ As James Hamilton sees it, this passage clearly affirms fixed roles and teaches an eschatological functional subordination of the Son.⁷¹

This would be true, if subordination is exclusively located in the incarnation as-such. The humanity of Christ extends forever. He will never return to a one nature

63. Perkins, *A Golden Chain*, 6.55.

64. Perkins, *The Problem of Forged Catholicism*, 7.236.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Perkins, *An Exposition of the Creed*, 5.111; William Perkins, *The Combat between Christ and the Devil Displayed*, 1.93.

67. Perkins, *The Problem of Forged Catholicism*, 7.236.

68. Perkins, *A Reformed Catholic*, 7.130.

69. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994), 2.302–303.

70. Ware, "Unity and Distinction," p. 32.

71. James M. Hamilton Jr., "That God May Be All in All" in *One God in Three Persons*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), p. 103.

form; the hypostatic union is permanent. Therefore, it follows that if the incarnate Christ is submissive and His humanity last forever, then his submission would last forever, giving ERAS theologians credence for their interpretation of the text in 1 Corinthians. Even a noted critique admits that this interpretation is the “plainest and most obvious.”⁷² Much has been made of this text and the Reformed have not always agreed. Take for example the exegetically grounded argument of Charles Hodge:

The subjection here spoken of is not predicated of the eternal Logos, the second person of the Trinity, any more than the kingdom spoken of in v. 24 is the dominion which belongs essentially to Christ as God. As there the word Christ designates the Theanthropos, so does the word Son here designate, not the Logos as such, but the Logos as incarnate ... so is the subjection here spoken of consistent with his eternal quality with the Father. It is not the subjection of the Son as Son, but as of the Son as Theanthropos of which the apostle here speaks.⁷³

Here, it is not just his incarnation that is in view, but the Son as the mediator. Therefore, contrary to what some have tried to argue, Hodge’s form of submission is not an eternal functional subordination, but one that considers Christ’s work as the mediator. A work which will end in the eschaton.

Perkins expands on this idea further with the doctrine of the mediator and gives a clear answer to eternal subordinationist objections. Note Perkins:

He which gives up his kingdom is not God. Christ gives up His kingdom. “Then,” says Paul, “shall be the end, when he hath delivered up his kingdom to God, even the Father” (15:24). Answer. Christ is King two ways: as He is God; as He is Mediator. As He is God, he reigns eternally with the Father and the Holy Ghost. But as He is Mediator in the end of the world when all the company of the elect are gathered, His kingdom shall cease, not simply, but in respect of the outward manner of administration; for the execution of civil and ecclesiastical functions shall cease. And whereas in the same place it is said that Christ shall be subject unto God eternally after the end (v. 28), it must be understood partly in regard of the assumed manhood, partly in respect of His mystical body, the church, most nearly joined unto Him in heaven.⁷⁴

Christ’s mediatorial work will no longer be needed and “there we reign with Christ, in whom and through

whom God Himself becomes honor, peace, health, food, raiment, and all things needful to the perfection of felicity.”⁷⁵

Perkins is by no means alone in his handling of this text. Witsius concurs:

It is here usual to inquire, whether Christ, as Mediator, is inferior to the Father and subordinate to him. But this controversy, it seems, may be easily settled among the orthodox: if the Mediator be considered in the state of humiliation and the form of a servant, he is certainly inferior to the Father, and subordinate to him. It was not of his human nature only, but of himself in that state, that he himself said, John 14:28. “The Father is greater than I.” Nay, we may look upon the very mediatorial office in itself, as importing a certain economical inferiority or subordination; as being to be laid down, when all things shall be perfectly finished, and “God himself shall be all in all,” 1 Cor. 15:28. Nevertheless this undertaking and mediation, and the bringing of fallen man to God, to grace, and glory, is not so much beneath the excellency of the Deity, but we may, without the least hesitation, affirm, that this glory of mediation is incommunicable to any creature. It is the glory of Jehovah to be the righteousness of Israel. This glory he gives to none who is not God: to be Mediator does not merely denote a servant of God, but the great God and Saviour; who, as the first and principal cause of saving grace, equal to the Father, works by his own power, our reconciliation with God, by means of the subjection and obedience of his human nature, without which the co-equal Son could neither perform his service, nor obey the Father.⁷⁶

It is the office itself which imports an economical subordination that will eventually be laid down.

By approaching the mediatorial role in this manner, Perkins guards against a future subordination that is based on Christ’s incarnate state. Only in the economic missions is Christ considered submissive, which includes but is not exclusively tied to the incarnation. The act itself of a terminative assumption of a human nature does not in and of itself necessitate humiliation. Rather, the terminative assumption qualifies Christ to

72. Millard Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, p. 115.

73. Charles Hodge, *I & II Corinthians* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), p. 333.

74. Perkins, *An Exposition of the Creed*, 5.111.

75. Perkins, *An Exposition of Christ’s Sermon on the Mount*, 1.444.

76. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank (London: T. Tegg & Son, 1837), 1.155.

be the mediator of the elect. This ensures that Christ’s work will eventually conclude, where He will receive all the equal glory and honor due to Him as God.

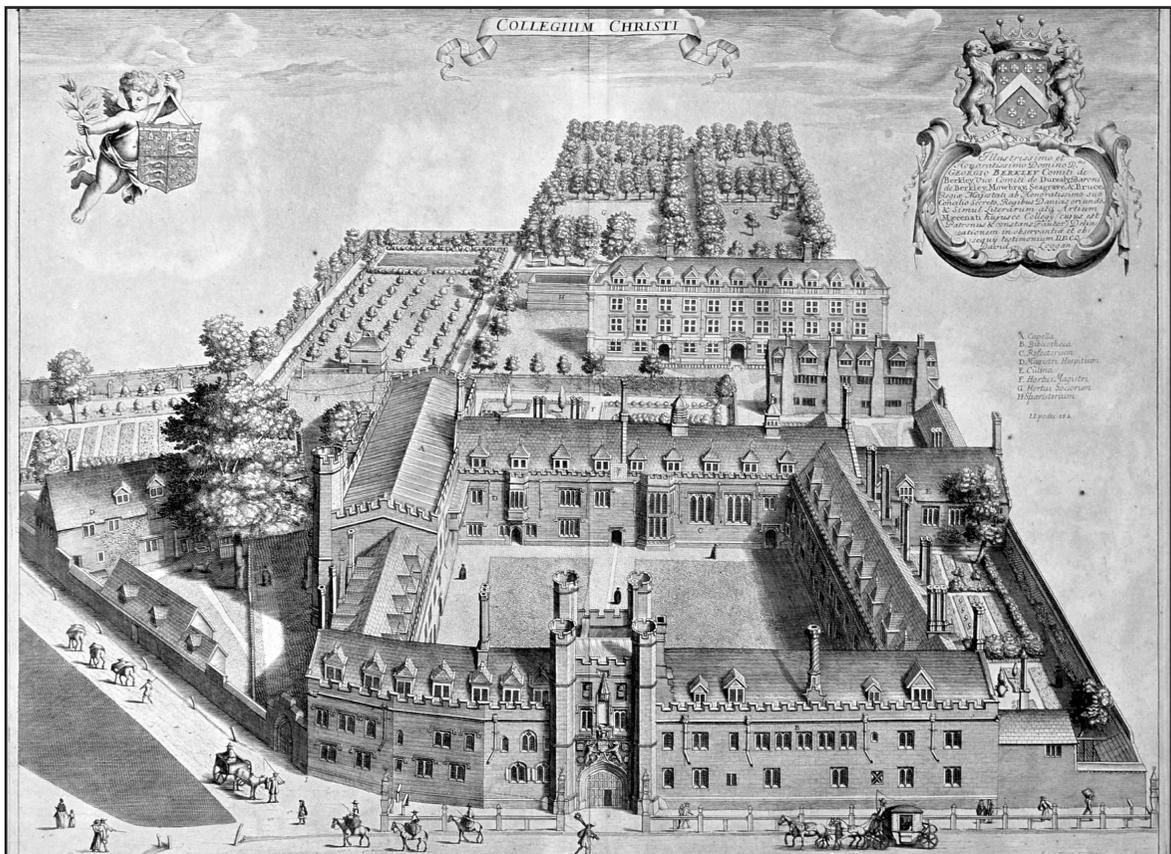
CONCLUSION

In evaluating the eternal subordinationism of scholars such as Bruce Ware above, it has been shown that one cannot hold simultaneously to classical theism as affirmed by the church catholic and eternal subordination. The bedrock doctrine of simplicity is necessarily impugned in the denial that the Triune God possesses a singular will. Such denial leads to an imbalanced view of the *pactum salutis*, making the Father ontologically greater than the Son and the Spirit, and the *pactum* an optional approach. This then leaves the Son as an optional (i.e., lesser) partner in the plan of redemption. The works of the Triune God then, cannot be inseparable, but must be construed as varied and in some sense (at least potentially) disharmonious.

However, in responding to the errors of ERAS, other questions must be answered, and key doctrinal formulations must be rightly developed and placed in proper

perspective. The unfortunate tendency in theological discussion is to allow the pendulum to swing so far in reaction to error, that other deficient propositions are made. Thus, in responding to ERAS, one must not make the mistake in simply relocating the subordination error into some future situation. As the examination of Ware’s published thoughts has shown above, there is a short line from articulating a future subordination based upon the incarnation and traditional ERAS positions.

It is imperative that the integrity of the doctrine of Christ, especially as articulated at Nicaea is preserved. This means that a properly biblical conception and location of the category of submission is imperative for understanding Christ and the Scriptures. Rather than falling into either a subordinationist trap which weakens primary doctrines and fails to give an account for its Christological consistencies, or an incarnation-only subordination view which fails to do justice to the mediatorial role of Christ and leaves the door open for potential eternal future submission, let us adopt a better alternative. The better alternative is found articulated by William Perkins, who brings forth a robust doctrine of an official subordination in the office of mediator. ■



Christ’s College, Cambridge (1690), where William Perkins taught. Engraving by David Loggan (1634–1692).