



**Erickson, Millard J.**

***Who's Tampering with the Trinity?: An Assessment of the Subordination Debate***

Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009. Pp. 272. Paper. \$19.99. ISBN 9780825425899.

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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After having read a number of books on the so-called “subordination debate” (i.e., the debate over the Son’s temporal/eternal functional subordination to the Father) I’ve come to the conclusion that I’ll never be satisfied with the way that the debate is carried out. In most of the books I’ve read the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity has been related to male-female relationships in the home and church, but not in Millard Erickson’s *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?: An Assessment of the Subordination Debate*, which was cause for celebration. I thought that Erickson’s focus on the Trinity with little consideration of the so-called “gender debate” would provide a book that I wouldn’t be frustrated with. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and in some ways Erickson’s contribution is more frustrating than them all.

The book is divided into eight chapters not including introduction and summary. The introduction introduces the reader to the debate over the Son’s subordination to the Father. Proponents of temporal incarnational subordination (TIS) are called “equivalentists” and proponents of eternal functional subordination (EFS) are called “gradationists.” Erickson summarizes the views of “gradationists” and equivalentists (chapters 1 and 2 respectively) before highlighting some criteria (e.g., consistency, coherence applicability, and adequacy) for evaluating the evidence for each case (chapter 3). He then examines the Biblical (chapter 4) and historical (chapter 5) evidence for each position before addressing the philosophical (chapter 6) and theological (chapter 7) issues and discussing the practical implications of each position

(chapter 7). The book is concluded with a summary of each chapter and a plea for “gradationists” to really think through their view and recognize the dangers that it logically leads to (i.e., some form of Arianism!).

My problems with this book are legion but they’re not anything that I haven’t enumerated elsewhere. For example, in my review of Nancy Hedberg’s *Women, Men, and the Trinity: What Does It Mean to Be Equal?* I noted how she focuses on views of eternal functional subordination that are not universally held by all “gradationists” (to use Erickson’s problematic term). In short, she focused her attention mostly on Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem, both of whom are vocal proponents of EFS, but certainly not the only ones. Erickson gives a brief summary of Robert Letham’s position on the subject (49-50) but then fails to engage it at all throughout the rest of the book. This is extremely problematic because Letham’s more balanced and nuanced views nullify a great deal of Erickson’s criticisms, criticisms that apply most significantly to Ware and Grudem.

In the same review of Hedberg’s book I noted that the early Church was struggling with the issue of the Son’s relation to the Father *and* creation so when we read of equality, power, etc., it’s in reference to how the Son, as eternal Son of God, relates to creation. It’s not an issue of the inner-Trinitarian dynamics of authority/submission. Erickson acknowledges that different questions are being asked now than were being asked then (23, 140) and he warns against anachronistic readings that seek to answer modern questions from ancient texts while suggesting that we should look for certain applicable principles. In searching for these principles Erickson has effectively negated his concern about anachronism.

In my review Tom McCall’s *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* I noted the problem with the argument that the Son must be essentially different (i.e., of a different nature/substance) from the Father by virtue of being eternally functionally subordinate. McCall’s reasoning suggests that for a person to possess the property eternally he therefore possesses it necessarily which then entails its essentiality. Erickson takes up this very argument and dismisses out of hand the counterargument that notes distinctions between personal properties and essential attributes (173) but he does so without real argument. On Erickson’s reading there can be no eternal distinctions within the Trinity (which is the picture that he paints in his discussion of the names of the Persons of the Trinity [218-21]); at best there can be eternal emphases where one Person is perhaps more in the forefront than the others. The problem of course is that Trinitarian theology from the beginning of time has been based on making such distinctions, whether they’re termed substance/subsistence, essential attribute/personal property, or being/person, they need to be made.

I also have issues with the manner in which Erickson conducts his historical investigation. Apart from seeking out applicable principles for a debate no one was having before the 1970s, he's quite selective in the sources he examines and his examinations are quite shallow. For example, he only covers eight theologians (Origen, Novatian, Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, Augustine, Aquinas, Martin Luther, and John Calvin along with the Apostles', Niceno-Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds) in his historical considerations. No one can deny the importance of these figures but they're hardly representative of all the Church's tradition and teaching. There's also the issue of Erickson's choices. Athanasius and Augustine are understandable but Aquinas is just a newer and more Aristotelian Augustine and Erickson admits that Luther didn't have much to say about the Trinity (160) to begin with so one wonders why he'd even be consulted. And one also wonders why Erickson would include the Athanasian Creed in the "The First Period: To the Year 400" when it shows clear Augustinian influence and was not drafted until probably the sixth century. This is, admittedly, a minor detail, but I think it's cause to question Erickson's aptitude in historical theology.

Another problem I had with this book is the way that Erickson framed it. He starts off as if he simply wants to present both cases and let the reader decide whose it strongest. That would be admirable if that's what he was doing. It would even be admirable to start off by saying, "Look, I'm an equivalentist and here's why..." but he doesn't do that either. It becomes evident early on that Erickson is a proponent of TIS and not EFS and the book grows increasingly polemical. It becomes less about presenting both views and more about defending one against the other (which would be fine if that's how we expected it to be from the beginning). The closing plead to "gradationists" to reconsider their position because the future generations of "gradationists" might become some sort of Arians (yeah, the sort that maintain the Creator-creature distinction and place Christ on the Creator side of the divide) is ridiculous.

But I think my ultimate problem with Erickson's presentation as well as with the presentations of all who agree with him is that it's speculative at best. The fact is that the only picture we have of the Father-Son relationship in Scripture is one of the Son doing the will of the Father out of love for the Father but never of the Father doing the will of the Son or the Spirit. The Father sends the Son and the Father and Son send the Spirit yet this is never reversed. Erickson appeals to B. B. Warfield repeatedly to say that such actions (such as sending or electing to salvation) *may be* the result of divine consultation resulting in a covenant (57, 187, 207, 252) agreed upon by all three Persons of the Trinity, but the fact remains that we have no evidence of this. There's nothing to suggest that the Son's coming into the world was the decision of the entire Trinity making such a decision with each person having an equal say in what was to occur. Erickson's examination of the Biblical evidence highlighted that all three Persons act together but this is not something that "gradationists" deny; all three can act together with varying levels of authority if authority even needs to be discussed at all. It's nice to sit around and think in hypotheticals about what *may*

*have* been the case or what the case *could possibly be* in another world, but in the end, when dealing with the evidence that we *do have* we have to side with the “gradationists.” Now what some “gradationists” want to do with the Trinity may be deplorable, but that’s really a separate issue.

Perhaps I’m jaded at this point, I don’t know, but I don’t think that I’d recommend Erickson’s work to anyone interested in the debate. For someone looking for a nice introduction to the debate I’d recommend Hedberg’s work over Erickson’s. For someone interested in the view of significant theologians on related issues (since they admittedly never broached this one) I’d recommend going to the sources themselves. Nothing can substitute for letting people speak for themselves. For the philosophical issues involved the reader would be better served by McCall’s book. And if you’re looking for unapologetic (in the sense of not saying “sorry”) polemic then Kevin Giles’ *Jesus and the Father* is the way to go. In the end, everything that Erickson does in this book has been done better by other people elsewhere.