

Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective

— Keith E. Johnson —

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In recent years a debate has emerged among conservative evangelicals over the “eternal functional subordination” (EFS) of the Son. At the center of this dispute is the question of how we are to understand scriptural teaching regarding the nature of the Son’s *eternal* relationship to the Father. Is the obedience of the Son to the Father limited merely to the incarnation, or does it also extend to the Son’s *eternal* relationship with the Father?¹ The trinitarian teaching of the church fathers plays a central role in this dispute. Proponents and opponents of EFS accuse one another of “tampering with the Trinity,” and they appeal to past theologians to substantiate (or deny) this claim.²

One of these theologians is Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Consider the contrasting interpretations of the Father/Son relationship in Augustine’s trinitarian theology that are offered by Bruce Ware (who affirms EFS) and Kevin Giles (who denies EFS):

As Augustine affirmed, the distinction of Persons is constituted precisely by the differing relations among them, in part manifested by the inherent authority of the Father and inherent submission of the Son.³

¹It is important to distinguish the submission of the Son to the Father in his human nature (in the incarnation) from the claim that the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father in his divine nature from all eternity. Both sides in the EFS debate affirm that the Son lived a life of obedience to the Father in his “state of humiliation” (cf. Phil 2:5–8). Proponents of EFS (e.g., George Knight, Bruce Ware, Wayne Grudem, John Dahms) make the additional claim that an eternal relation of submission and authority exists between the Father and the Son but insist that this subordination is “functional” and not “ontological.” Opponents of EFS (e.g., Gilbert Bilezikian, Millard Erickson, Kevin Giles) deny that the Son is, in any way, eternally subordinate to the Father.

²Compare the following assertions: “It cannot be legitimately denied that the eternal subordination of the Son is an orthodox doctrine and believed from the history of the early church to the present day” (Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm Jr., “A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” *JETS* 42 [1999]: 464). “‘Tradition,’ rather than being on their [i.e., EFS proponents] side, is their strongest opponent” (Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* [Downers Grove: IVP, 2002], 106).

³Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Roles, Relationships, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 79–80.

Augustine likewise gives no support whatsoever to the idea that Christ is eternally set under the Father's authority.⁴

The purpose of this essay is to explore the nature of trinitarian agency in Augustine's theology and to consider the implications that Augustine's position might have for the EFS debate.⁵ By "trinitarian agency" I simply mean the way in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in creation, providence, and redemption. Understood in this way, trinitarian agency is directly related to the EFS dispute inasmuch as supporters and opponents of EFS offer differing accounts of the manner in which the Father and Son work together.

Why Augustine? First, Augustine's teaching on the Trinity by far the most influential in the history of the West.⁶ Second, despite popular portrayals to the contrary, his trinitarian doctrine shares much in common with the Greek-speaking theologians of the East (e.g., the Cappadocians: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus).⁷ In turning to Augustine, one draws upon what is arguably the most representative version of trinitarian doctrine in the history of the church among Catholics and Protestants.⁸ Finally, as we have seen above, both sides in the EFS dispute appeal to Augustine's teaching on the Trinity.

⁴Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 190.

⁵It should be noted that some diversity of perspective exists among evangelical proponents of EFS. For example, some EFS proponents affirm the eternal generation of the Son (e.g., John Dahms) while others deny it (e.g., Bruce Ware). In addition, some prefer to speak of the "eternal *relational* subordination" of the Son to the Father (e.g., Robert Doyle).

⁶Not everyone views Augustine's influence as positive. According to critics like Colin Gunton, Cornelius Plantinga, and Catherina LaCugna, Augustine's theology "begins" with a unity of divine substance (which he allegedly "prioritizes" over the divine persons); his trinitarian reflection is over-determined by neo-Platonic philosophy; his psychological "analogy" tends toward modalism; and he severs the life of the triune God from the economy of salvation by focusing on the immanent Trinity. Lewis Ayres and Michel Barnes, however, have convincingly demonstrated that these criticisms are based on fundamental misreadings of Augustine's trinitarian theology. See Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); idem, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 363–83; and Michel R. Barnes, "Rereading Augustine's theology of the Trinity," in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity* (ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 145–76. See also Neil Ormerod, *The Trinity: Retrieving the Western Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005).

⁷Many contemporary narratives of the history of trinitarian doctrine assume without warrant that significant differences exist between early "Western" approaches (which emphasize divine unity) and early "Eastern" approaches (which emphasize a trinity of divine persons). This problematic assumption can be traced to the work of a nineteenth-century Jesuit, Théodore de Régnon. Trenchant criticisms of this polarizing paradigm can be found in Michel R. Barnes, "De Régnon Reconsidered," *AugStud* 26 (1995): 51–79; and idem, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *TS* 56 (1995): 237–50.

⁸Because of his status as "Doctor of the Church" (*doctor ecclesiae*), medieval theologians treated Augustine as a reliable authority whose teaching on the Trinity may be employed as foundational elements in theological argumentation because they are seen as faithful expressions of Scripture and conciliar teaching. This is not to suggest that Augustine's doctrinal statements possessed the same kind of authority as Scripture. Rather they possessed a "probable" authority—something less than the ultimate authority of Holy Scripture but certainly much more than untested theological opinions. This medieval practice offers an apt analogy for my engagement with Augustine's trinitarian theology in this essay.

Because Augustine's account of trinitarian agency can be understood only in the broader context of the relations among the divine persons, I begin by examining the divine relations as presented in *De trinitate*.⁹ Next, I outline his account of trinitarian agency. For Augustine, the working of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is indivisibly the work of the three *ad extra* (i.e., in creation, providence, and redemption). At the same time, in this single act, the divine persons work in an ordered and irreversible manner according to their relative properties *ad intra*. I close by considering the implications of Augustine's account for the EFS debate.

1. *The Relations of the Divine Persons in De trinitate*

In Book I of *De trinitate*, Augustine helpfully summarizes the Latin pro-Nicene teaching on the Trinity.¹⁰ His summary contains four themes arranged in chiastic fashion:

- A—Inseparable equality of the divine persons
- B—Real distinctions among the divine persons
- B'—Distinction of persons in the economy of salvation
- A'—Inseparable action of the divine persons in the economy of salvation¹¹

It will be helpful to quote Augustine at length:

[A] The purpose of all the Catholic commentators I have been able to read on the divine books of both testaments, who have written before me on the trinity which God is,¹² has been to teach that according to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God; [B] although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, and therefore he who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and therefore he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, himself coequal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the threefold unity. [B'] It was not however this same three (their teaching continues) that was born of the virgin Mary, crucified and buried under Pontius Pilate, rose again on the third day and ascended into heaven, but

⁹All citations of *De trinitate* are taken from Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn: New City, 1991).

¹⁰Pro-Nicene theology is not merely a simple reassertion of the teaching of Nicaea. It represents an interpretation of Nicaea that emerged in the second half of the fourth century. Ayres (*Augustine and the Trinity*, 43) writes, "By this term [pro-Nicene] I refer to that *interpretation* of Nicaea and of earlier Nicene theologies which formed the context for the establishment of Catholic orthodoxy under the emperors Theodosius and Gratian through the actions of the councils of Constantinople and Aquileia, through imperial decree, and through the slow mutual recognition of a number of different pro-Nicene parties. This theology is not sufficiently defined by reference to Nicaea alone, but only by reference also to a number of the key principles within which Nicaea was interpreted as teaching a faith in three coordinate divine realities who constitute one nature, power, will and substance."

¹¹Augustine, of course, does not explicitly say that he intends to arrange these in "chiastic" form. This judgment is my own.

¹²In this summary, Augustine speaks about the "Trinity which God is" (*de trinitate quae Deus est*). This phrase is not used by any of Augustine's predecessors and represents an important alternative to merely affirming the Father as *Deus*. See Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 100.

the Son alone. Nor was it this same three that came down upon Jesus in the form of a dove at his baptism, or came down on the day of Pentecost after the Lord's ascension, with a roaring sound from heaven as though a violent gust were rushing down, and in divided tongues as of fire, but the Holy Spirit alone. Nor was it this same three that spoke from heaven, *You are my Son*, either at his baptism by John (Mk 1:11), or on the mountain when the three disciples were with him (Mt 17:5), nor when the resounding voice was heard, *I have both glorified it (my name) and will glorify it again* (Jn 12:28), but it was the Father's voice alone addressing the Son; [A'] although just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably. This is also my faith inasmuch as it is the Catholic faith (*De trin.* I.7, 69–70).¹³

First (A), Augustine discusses the divine relations from an intra-trinitarian standpoint. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit exist in an “inseparable equality of one substance.” Thus, we must speak of *one* God. Second (B), real distinctions exist among the persons that are grounded in unique relations that obtain among them. Third (B'), real distinctions exist among the divine persons in the economy of salvation. Finally (A'), the divine persons act inseparably.

It is important to observe how A/A' and B/B' mirror one other in such a way that A (inseparable nature) constitutes the basis for A' (inseparable action) while B (intra-trinitarian distinction) constitutes the basis for B' (distinction in the economy of salvation). With this background in mind, I will examine Augustine's teaching on the divine relations in greater detail following the order above (A, B, B', A').¹⁴

1.1. Unity and Equality of the Divine Persons *ad intra* (A)

Following a theological tradition that can be traced to Tertullian, Augustine locates the equality of the divine persons in a unity of divine substance.¹⁵ Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “are of one and the same substance or essence” (*De trin.* I.4, 67).¹⁶ Although he frequently speaks in terms of one “substance” (*substantia*), Augustine's vocabulary is somewhat flexible in that he also speaks of one *essentia*, one *divinitas*, and one *deitas*.¹⁷

¹³ For further discussion of this summary, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 95–114. Whereas Ayres sees this text as divided into three sections, I follow other commentators in seeing four sections—especially because of the thematic structure highlighted above.

¹⁴ In the discussion that follows, my goal is simply to present Augustine's teaching on the divine relations without examining the biblical and theological arguments that ground these claims. Augustine offers biblical arguments for each of the elements that will be discussed below.

¹⁵ For Augustine there is an important sense in which the equality of the three divine persons can be traced to the Father. As Ayres explains, the Father is the “cause and source of the Trinitarian communion” (*Augustine and the Trinity*, 264). This is discussed below.

¹⁶ Contra many contemporary narratives, the fact that the divine essence constitutes the principle of unity should not be viewed as a distinctive of “Western” theologies over and against “Eastern” theologies. Moreover, as we see below, Augustine is quite clear that the Father is the *principium*.

¹⁷ Augustine explains that the Latin term *substantia* has the same meaning as *ousia* in Greek: “By ‘being’ (*essentia*) I mean here what is called *ousia* in Greek, which we more usually call substance (*substantia*)” (*De trin.* V.9–10, 195–96).

1.2. Distinction of Divine Persons *ad intra* (B)

If Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one substance, then no inequality may exist among them. Although this affirmation eliminates all ontological subordination, it leaves an important question unanswered. If the divine persons possess one nature, in what sense, and on what basis, are they distinct? According to Augustine, real distinctions exist among the divine persons that are grounded in relations of origin. Because the Father has *begotten* the Son, the Father is not the Son. Because the Son is *begotten* by the Father, the Son is not the Father. Similarly, because the Spirit *proceeds* from the Father and the Son, the Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son.

1.2.1. Generation of the Son

Augustine was not the first to articulate a doctrine of eternal generation as a way of explicating the relationship of the Son to the Father. To the contrary, eternal generation is a central feature of pro-Nicene theology (both Latin and Greek).¹⁸ Augustine's account of eternal generation includes several important elements.¹⁹

First, the generation of the Son is incorporeal and should not be understood in the manner of human generation. Unfortunately, some people make the mistake of “transfer[ing] what they have observed about bodily things to incorporeal and spiritual things . . .” (*De trin.* I.1, 65).

Second, the Father “timelessly” (eternally) begot the Son (*De trin.* XV.47, 432). Thus, the generation of the Son is eternal.²⁰

Third, the Son is begotten by the Father in an equality of nature. Through generation the Son receives the “life”—that is, the nature or substance—of the Father. Commenting on John 5:26 (“As the Father has life in himself, so he has given the Son to have life in himself”), Augustine explains that the Father “begot [the Son] timelessly in such a way that the *life* which the Father gave the Son by begetting him is co-eternal with the *life* of the Father who gave it . . .” (*De trin.* XV.47, 432, italics mine).²¹ Thus, we should not think of the generation of the Son 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).²² The Son’s “light” is equal in its radiance to “light” of the Father.

Fourth, the generation of the Son is “necessary” in the sense that the Son is begotten not by the *will* of the Father but rather of the *nature* of the Father (*De trin.* XV.38, 425).²³

¹⁸ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 236.

¹⁹ “Augustine places Latin Nicene emphasis on the Son’s being generated from the substance of the Father at the heart of his theology” (Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 180).

²⁰ Some pre-Nicene theologians like Tertullian understand the generation of the Son to be temporal (immediately prior to creation) rather than eternal.

²¹ Similarly, in Book I, Augustine explains that John 5:26 teaches that the Father “begot the Son to be unchangeable life, that is to say eternal life” (Augustine, *De trin.* I.26, 85). For further discussion and defense of Augustine’s account of eternal generation, see Keith E. Johnson, “What Would Augustine Say to Evangelicals Who Reject the Eternal Generation of the Son?” (unpublished paper presented at the 62nd meeting of Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, November 17, 2010).

²² Patristic writers frequently employ “light radiating from light” as an analogy for the generation of the Son by the Father. The ubiquity of this metaphor is reflected by its inclusion in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381).

²³ To say that the Son is generated by the “will” of the Father is to assert that the Son is a “creature.”

Finally, the generation of the Son is incomprehensible.²⁴

1.2.2. *Procession of the Holy Spirit*

Although earlier theologians recognized that the procession of the Holy Spirit differed from the generation of the Son (such that it would be inappropriate to speak of the Spirit as a second “Son”), many were at a loss to offer a theological rationale for this distinction.²⁵ Augustine made an important contribution by suggesting that the Holy Spirit proceeds jointly from the Father and the Son. Augustine succinctly summarizes his position in the following statement:

And just as for the Holy Spirit his being the gift of God means his proceeding from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to proceed from him. Nor, by the way, can we say that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son as well; it is not without point that the same Spirit is called the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. (*De trin.* IV.29, 174)

Although he affirms that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son,²⁶ Augustine offers an important qualification. He notes that John 15:26 does not say, “whom the Father will send from me,” but rather “whom I will send from the Father.” By this, Christ “indicated that the source (*principium*) of all godhead (*divinitatis*), or if you prefer it, of all deity (*deitatis*), is the Father. So the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is traced back, on both counts, to him of whom the Son is born” (*De trin.* V.29, 174). Thus, although Augustine clearly speaks of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as one substance, he also affirms that the source and origin of deity (*principium deitatis*) is the Father.²⁷

²⁴The incomprehensibility of God is major theme in Augustine’s theology.

²⁵Notice how Gregory of Nyssa expresses the distinctiveness of the Spirit merely in terms of being neither ungenerate nor only-begotten: “The Holy Spirit by the uncreatedness of his nature has contact with the Son and Father, but is distinguished from them by His own tokens. His most peculiar characteristic is that He is neither of those things which we contemplate in the Father and Son respectively. His is simply, neither as ungenerate (ἀγεννήτως), nor as only-begotten (μονογενῶς): this it is that constitutes His chief peculiarity” (Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” I.22 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series [ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 5:61).

²⁶The *filioque* clause was inserted into the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed at the Third Council of Toledo in 589—over one hundred and seventy years after Augustine wrote *De trinitate*. Thus, the question regarding the formal legitimacy of the insertion of the *filioque* clause into the creed must be distinguished from substantive theological question of whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. These two issues are frequently (and wrongly!) conflated. In other words, one might argue that the Western church was wrong unilaterally to insert the filioque into the creed while, at the same time affirming, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. For an explanation and defense of Augustine’s position, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 263–68.

²⁷The Father’s status as *principium* is a core element of Augustine’s trinitarian theology. As Ayres explains (*Augustine and the Trinity*, 248), “the Father’s *monarchia*, his status as *principium* and *fons*, is central to Augustine’s trinitarian theology. . . . For Augustine, the Father’s status as *principium* is eternally exercised through his giving the fullness of divinity to the Son and Spirit such that the unity of God will be eternally found in the mysterious unity of the *homoousion*.” Augustine’s account of trinitarian communion holds in tension the Father’s status as *principium* with full divinity and equality of the Son and Holy Spirit with the Father. Ayres summarizes this reality when he explains that “Augustine’s mature account of the Trinity” involves “an ordered communion of equals established by the Father” (197).

1.3. Distinction of Divine Persons *ad extra* (B')

Having examined the divine relations *ad intra*, I will now turn to the relations among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *ad extra* by examining the central “economic” concept in *De trinitate*—the divine “missions.”²⁸ Augustine links the “sending” of the Son to the incarnation: “[W]hat constituted the sending of the Lord was his being born in the flesh, his issuing, so to speak, from the hidden invisibility of the Father’s bosom and appearing to the eyes of men in the form of a servant. . .” (*De trin.* III.3, 129). Augustine insists that the sending of the Son represents a unique moment in salvation-history such that one cannot properly speak of the Son being “sent” prior to the incarnation.

The sending of the Holy Spirit differs from the sending of the Son in that the Spirit did not join a created reality “to himself and his person to be held in an everlasting union” (*De trin.* II.11, 104). At the same time, the sending of the Spirit (which Augustine links to Pentecost) did involve the physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit through created forms (*De trin.* II.11, 104).

Augustine’s opponents—probably Latin Homoian theologians²⁹—argued that the sending of the Son by the Father reveals the “inferiority” of the Son to the Father on the grounds that the one who sends must, of necessity, be “greater” than the one who is sent (*De trin.* II.7, 101). Augustine’s response has important implications for the EFS debate. He labors to show that “being sent” does not imply any inferiority on the part of the Son. It simply reveals that the Son is eternally *from* by the Father:

If however the reason why the Son is said to have been sent by the Father is simply that the one is the Father and the other the Son, then there is nothing at all to stop us believing that the Son is equal to the Father and consubstantial and co-eternal, and yet that the Son is sent by the Father. Not because one is greater and the other less, but because one is the Father and the other the Son; one is the begetter, the other begotten; the first is the one from whom the sent one is; the other is the one who is from the sender (*De trin.* IV.27, 172).

In short, because sending reveals merely the generation of the Son, the Son is not in any way inferior to the Father.³⁰ One of Augustine’s central insights is that the economic missions of the Son and the Spirit both reflect and reveal the nature of their eternal relation to the Father. The temporal sending of the Son reveals his eternal generation by the Father while the temporal sending of the Spirit from

²⁸ It is through the divine missions that the distinction of persons is most evidently manifested in the economy of salvation.

²⁹ Augustine’s opponents, whom he calls “Arians,” were most likely Latin Homoian theologians. See Michel R. Barnes, “Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* I,” *AugStud* 30 (1999): 43–52; and idem, “The Arians of Book V, and the Genre of ‘*de Trinitate*,’” *JTS* 44 (1993): 185–95. Latin Homoian theologians (e.g., Palladius and Bishop Maximinus) emphasized the Father as “true God” over and against the Son (particularly because of the Father’s unique status as *ingenerate*).

³⁰ Although he is commenting on a different passage in Book II, Ayres’s comments are apropos to this text as well (*Augustine and the Trinity*, 183): “Thus we can say that the Son was ‘sent’ without implying that one has the authority to send, while the one sent is merely subordinate, because that the Son will be sent is intrinsic to the Son’s generation from the Father. The visible life and ministry of the Incarnate Word is thus founded in the ‘interior ordering’ of the Trinity.”

the Father and Son reveals his eternal procession from the Father and Son.³¹ In this sense, the missions ultimately reveal Father.³²

Because the temporal missions correspond to and reflect the generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit, the intra-trinitarian taxis represents one of the keys to understanding the interrelationships among the divine persons in the economy of salvation.³³ Indeed, this is precisely what one discovers: the Father (*principium*) is the one who sends the Son and Spirit, while the Son and the Spirit (who proceed from the Father) are the ones who are sent.

1.4. Unity of Operation of the Divine Persons *ad extra* (A')

Having discussed the distinction of persons *ad extra*, I will now consider the divine persons in their unity of operation. According to Augustine, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit act “inseparably” (*De trin.* I.7, 70). As this will play an important role in my “Augustinian” assessment of the EFS debate, it will be helpful to examine this in some detail. The inseparable action of the divine persons represents a fundamental axiom of Augustine’s trinitarian theology.³⁴ He inherited this axiom from pro-Nicenes including Ambrose and Hilary.³⁵ Anti-Nicenes argued that the distinct activity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicated that the divine persons were separate beings with the Father being superior.³⁶ In response, pro-Nicenes argued that Scripture shows the activity of the divine persons to be one (i.e., all three persons are involved in acts of creation, providence, and redemption). Thus, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one nature.

What does Augustine mean when he affirms that the divine persons act “inseparably”? First, inseparable operation means that all three persons are involved in *every* action of creation, providence, and redemption.³⁷ As Augustine explains, while it was only the Son who became incarnate, the incarnation of the Son was the inseparable work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Second, it means that that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share one will and execute one power. Inseparable operation is a direct

³¹ The distinction Augustine draws between “mission” and “generation/procession” corresponds to the contemporary distinction between the economic Trinity (mission) and the immanent Trinity (generation/procession).

³² Augustine believes that the economy of salvation is not merely a record of the divine acts of salvation but that it also teaches us about God. Thus, the missions of the Son and Spirit are merely salvific but also revelatory.

³³ As Ayres (*Augustine and the Trinity*, 247) explains, “all operations *ad extra* [for Augustine] are founded in the ordering of the divine life.”

³⁴ See Michel R. Barnes, “The Logic of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology” (unpublished paper presented at Aquinas the Augustinian Conference, Naples, Florida, February 4, 2005), 7–11.

³⁵ Lewis Ayres, “The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (ed. Dodaro and George Lawless; New York: Routledge, 2000), 55–56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁷ According to Augustine (and all pro-Nicenes), one cannot formally assign different external works to the divine persons as distinct agents. The divine persons enact a single agency in creation, providence, and redemption. Thus, when a biblical text mentions one divine person, this should not be seen as excluding the others: “It is to make us aware of the trinity that some things are even said about the persons singly by name; however, they must not be understood in the sense of excluding the other persons, because this same three is also one, and there is one substance and godhead of Father and Son and Holy Spirit” (Augustine, *De trin.* I.19, 79).

implication and economic expression of intra-trinitarian unity (i.e., monotheism).³⁸ This can be seen clearly in Augustine’s summary of Latin pro-Nicene teaching on the Trinity: intra-trinitarian ontological unity (A) constitutes the basis for inseparable economic operation (A’).

Augustine’s mature account of inseparable operation can be found in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*.³⁹ I will briefly examine his exposition of John 5:19 in Tractate 20.⁴⁰ “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.’”⁴¹ After reviewing the context of John 5, Augustine identifies an interpretive key that must guide one’s reading of v. 19: “The Catholic faith, made firm by the Spirit of God in its saints, holds this against every heretical depravity: The works of the Father and the Son are inseparable. . . . Just as the Father himself and the Son himself are inseparable, so also the works of the Father and Son are inseparable” (*Tract.* 20.3, 166).⁴² The Catholic faith does not teach that the Father does one thing while the Son does something else. Whatever the Father does, the Son does as well.

According to Augustine, when Jesus explained to the Jews that he could do nothing of himself but only what he saw the Father doing, he was basically saying, “Why were you scandalized because I said, God is my Father, and because I make myself equal to God? I am equal in such a way that he begot me; I am equal in such a way that he is not from me, but I am from him” (*Tract.* 20.4, 167). Why then does the Son’s ability to work come from the Father? Simply because the Son himself is from the Father. Hence, his power (in this case, to heal) comes from the Father as well.⁴³

Augustine recognizes that some see the Son as “less” than the Father in ability, power, and honor when they read John 5. This arises from a “carnal understanding” of Christ’s words (*Tract.* 20.5, 168). To help those who struggle to see the equality of the Son to the Father, Augustine provides a concrete example. From the Gospels, we know that Jesus walked upon water. Where, in the Gospels, do we see the Father walking on water? If the Son only does what he “sees” the Father doing, then must it not be the

³⁸Inseparable action should *not* be confused with “modalism,” which denies the hypostatic distinction of person.

³⁹English citations from Augustine’s *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* are taken from Saint Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 11–27, vol. 79 of *Fathers of the Church* (trans. John W. Rettig; Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988).

⁴⁰Written after *De trinitate*, Tractate 20 contains Augustine’s mature account of trinitarian agency. See Barnes, “The Logic of Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology,” 8. For a discussion of Augustine’s exegesis of John 5 in Tractate 20, see Keith E. Johnson, “Augustine’s ‘Trinitarian’ Reading of John 5: A Model for the Theological Interpretation of Scripture?” *JETS* 52 (2009): 799–810.

⁴¹Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV Bible (*The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Unless otherwise noted, emphasis in Scripture quotations is added.

⁴²Among medieval Latin theologians, this reality is expressed though the classical axiom *opera ad extra sunt indivisa* (“the external works are undivided”). Although this axiom is faithful to his theology, Augustine prefers to say that works (*opera*) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “inseparable” (*inseparabilia*). For example, in the passage cited above, Augustine uses the language *patris et filii opera inseparabilia sunt* (“the works of the Father and Son are inseparable”).

⁴³A reciprocal relationship exists between nature and power for Augustine (*Tract.* 20.4, 168): “Therefore, because the Son’s power is from the Father, for that reason the Son’s substance also is from the Father; and because the Son’s substance [is] from the Father, for that reason the Son’s power is from the Father.”

case that the Father walked on water as well? The “Catholic faith” has a simple solution to this problem: the eternal Son walked on the water with the “flesh” walking and the “divinity” guiding its steps (*Tract.* 20.6, 169–70). When this took place, was the Father absent? By no means! John 14:10 reminds us that the Father *abiding in the Son* does his works.⁴⁴ Thus, the Son’s water-walking is the work of the Son *and Father*.⁴⁵ This, Augustine explains, is precisely the point Jesus makes in John 5:19.

Augustine offers another example of inseparable action. Genesis 1 teaches that God created light. What light did the Son create? It certainly cannot be a different light. On the contrary, it must be the same light: “Therefore, we understand that the light was made by God the Father, but through the Son” (*Tract.* 20.7, 170). Similarly, the Father created the earth. The Son did not create another world by “watching” the Father. On the contrary, the world was created by the Father *through* the Son. Thus, the reason the Son can do nothing of himself (John 5:19) is simply because “[t]he Son is not of himself” (*Tract.* 20.8, 171). Summarizing his discussion of the creative agency of the Trinity, Augustine explains, “The Father [made] the world, the Son [made] the world, the Holy Spirit [made] the world. If [there are] three gods, [there are] three worlds; if [there is] one God, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, one world was made by the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit” (*Tract.* 20.9, 172). This summary nicely captures the core elements of Augustine’s understanding of trinitarian agency.

Augustine’s mature account of trinitarian agency involves two elements. On the one hand, the working of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is inseparably the work of the three *ad extra*. On the other hand, in this single act, the divine persons work according to their relative properties *ad intra*.⁴⁶ The Father acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being “from no one” (unbegotten). The Son acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being “from the Father” (generation). The Spirit acts with the other divine persons according to his mode of being “from the Father and the Son” (procession). Combining these two elements we might say that the divine persons act inseparably through the intra-trinitarian *taxis*: from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

2. Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son

Before exploring the implications of this investigation, we must consider an important question: *Do any good reasons exist for accepting Augustine’s explanation of trinitarian agency?* One’s response to this question has direct bearing on how seriously one will consider the implications that follow.

⁴⁴“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works” (John 14:10).

⁴⁵Of course, the Holy Spirit would be included as well.

⁴⁶Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 244: “[T]he manner in which the divine three act together reflects their eternal relationships: the Father acts as the source, the Son acts as the one who is from the Father, the one in whom all things are planned and through whom all things are, and the Spirit acts as the one in whom all things find their stability and rest (although as with so many themes here Augustine never articulates this as a general principle).”

⁴⁷It is important to recognize that “inseparability” for Augustine does not mean interchangeability: “Divine action has to be attributed inseparably to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but not as if it was carried out through the distribution of tasks to three equal sources of action. *In reality, the unique divine action has its source in the Father and is performed through the Son, in the Holy Spirit*” (Luigi Gioia, *The Theological Epistemology of Augustine’s De trinitate* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 162–63 [italics original]).

2.1. Theologians Who Share Augustine's Understanding of Trinitarian Agency

The account of trinitarian operation outlined above is in no way unique to Augustine. That the divine persons act inseparably *ad extra* according to their relative properties *ad intra* is an assumption Augustine shares not only with the entire Latin pro-Nicene tradition but also the Greek-speaking theologians of the East (e.g., the Cappadocians).⁴⁸ For example, in his "Answer to Ablabius," Gregory of Nyssa offers an account of trinitarian agency virtually identical to that of Augustine:

We do not learn that the Father does something on his own, in which the Son does not co-operate. Or again, that the Son acts on his own without the Spirit. Rather does every operation which extends from God to creation and is designated according to our differing conceptions of it have its origin in the Father, proceed through the Son, and reach its completion by the Holy Spirit. It is for this reason that the word for the operation is not divided among the persons involved. For the action of each in any matter is not separate and individualized. But whatever occurs, whether in reference to God's providence for us or the government and constitution of the universe, occurs through the three Persons, and is not three separate things.⁴⁹

Similarly, in his *Letters to Serapion*, Athanasius explains,

[The Trinity] is consistent in itself, indivisible in nature, and its activity is one. The Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit; and thus the unity of the Holy Trinity is preserved; and thus there is preached in the Church one God, "who is over all, and through all, and in all." He is *over all* as Father, as beginning, as source; and *through all*, through the Word; and *in all*, in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁰

Hence, if one chooses to dismiss Augustine's explanation, one must also dismiss the entire Pro-Nicene tradition.

Furthermore, medieval theologians like Thomas Aquinas deploy Augustine's grammar of trinitarian agency (albeit in a more sophisticated form). For example, in his discussion of creation Aquinas explains, on the one hand, that to create is not proper to any of the divine persons but is a common work of the whole Trinity. On the other hand, Aquinas points out that the creative act is inflected through the two processions (generation and spiration):

As the divine nature, although common to the three Persons, still belongs to them in a kind of order, inasmuch as the Son receives the divine nature from the Father, and the

⁴⁸ Ayres, "The Fundamental Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," 56: "Although this doctrine is fundamental to late fourth-century, orthodox, Latin theology, it is important that we do not think of 'inseparable operation' as a peculiarly Latin phenomena. The inseparable operation of the three irreducible persons is a fundamental axiom of those theologies which provide the context for the Council of Constantinople in AD 381 and for the reinterpretation of Nicaea, which came to be the foundation of orthodox or catholic theology at the end of the fourth century. It is a principle found in all the major orthodox Greek theologians of the later fourth and fifth centuries, and enters later Orthodox tradition through such figures as John of Damascus in the eighth century."

⁴⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, "An Answer to Ablabius: That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods," in *Christology of the Later Fathers* (ed. Edward R. Hardy; LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 261–62.

⁵⁰ Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* I.28 in *The Faith of the Early Fathers: A Source Book of Theological and Historical Passages from the Christian Writings of the Pre-Nicene and Nicene Eras* (ed. William A. Jurgens; Collegeville: Liturgical, 1970), 1:336.

Holy Ghost from them both: so also likewise the power of creation, whilst common to the three Persons, belongs to them in a kind of order. For the Son receives it from the Father and the Holy Ghost from them both.”⁵¹

Moreover, similar “Augustinian” explanations of trinitarian agency can be found among post-Reformation theologians.⁵² For example, commenting on the work of the Trinity in redemption, John Owen explains, “The agent in, and chief author of, this great work of our redemption is the whole blessed Trinity; for all the works which outwardly are of the Deity are undivided and belong equally to each person, their distinct manner of subsistence and order being observed.”⁵³ To cite a more recent example, Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck explains,

Granted, all God’s outward works (*opera ad extra*) are common to the three persons. “God’s works *ad extra* are indivisible, though the order and distinction of the persons is preserved.” It is always one and the same God who acts both in creation and recreation. In that unity, however, the order of the three persons is preserved. The “ontological” Trinity is mirrored in the “economic” Trinity.⁵⁴

The consistent pattern in the above examples is difficult to miss.

2.2. Implications for the EFS Debate

Augustine’s account of trinitarian agency has at least four implications for the dispute over the eternal subordination of the Son.

⁵¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, Q. 45, a. 6, ad. 2 in *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica*, vol. 1 (trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province; repr., Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1981). For an incisive analysis of trinitarian agency in Thomas Aquinas, see Giles Emery, *Trinity, Church and the Human Person: Thomistic Essays* (Naples: Sapientia, 2007), 115–53. As Emery explains, “The three persons act in one same action, but each perform this action in the distinct mode of his personal relation, that is, according to his proper ‘mode of existing’ in accordance with the Trinitarian order. The Father acts as the source of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, the Son acts as Word of the Father, the Holy Spirit acts as Love and Gift of the Father and Son” (138). For a contemporary discussion of trinitarian agency that builds upon Aquinas, see John Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010): 4–19.

⁵² Among Lutheran theologians, examples would include Philip Melancthon, Martin Chemnitz, John Andrew Quenstedt, and John Gerhard. For citations from these theologians, see Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs; 3d ed.; 1899; repr., Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 129–59. Among Reformed theologians, examples would include Peter Vermigli, Herman Witsius, Johannes Heidegger, William Perkins, Amandus Polanus, Gisbertus Voetius, Johannes Wollebius, John Owen, and Francis Turretin. See Richard A. Muller, *The Triunity of God*, vol. 4 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 255–74; and Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set out and Illustrated from the Sources* (trans. G. T. Thomson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950), 105–32.

⁵³ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 26.

⁵⁴ Herman Bavinck, *God and Creation*, vol. 2 of *Reformed Dogmatics* (trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 318. Similarly, “Corresponding to these distinctions, we also find ‘economic’ distinctions in the works *ad extra*. All of these works are accomplished by the one God, yet in them each of the three persons fulfills the role that corresponds to the order of his existence in the divine being. The Father works *of himself through* the Son *in* the Spirit” (319).

2.2.1. Distinguishing the Son from the Father

First, it must be recognized that Augustine's theology is at odds with elements of the trinitarian doctrine on *both sides* in the EFS debate. According to Augustine, the Father is distinct from the Son because the Father eternally "begot" the Son, and the Son is distinct from the Father because the Son is eternally "begotten" by the Father. Augustine is not alone in holding this position. As we saw above, the assumption that "eternal generation" constitutes the Father/Son relationship represents one of the core elements of trinitarian doctrine embraced by all pro-Nicene theologians.⁵⁵ By way of contrast, Millard Erickson (who rejects EFS) and Bruce Ware (who affirms EFS) both reject eternal generation on the grounds that this doctrine is speculative and unbiblical.⁵⁶ This move represents a substantive departure from Augustine's teaching on the Trinity. This not to suggest that everyone in this debate rejects eternal generation,⁵⁷ but simply to draw attention to substantive differences that exist between Augustine's teaching and the trinitarian doctrine of leading proponents on both sides—differences that fuel misreadings of Augustine.⁵⁸

2.2.2. The Inseparable Work of the Father and Son

Second, because the divine persons act inseparably, we must think about the "sending" of the Son by the Father in the context of inseparable operation. At stake in affirming inseparable action is nothing less than the unity of God. One *cannot* reject inseparable operation at the economic level and still affirm

⁵⁵ Core elements of pro-Nicene theology include the inseparable action of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; an assumption that there are no degrees of divinity; the notion that the divine persons are distinct yet possess the same nature apart from any ontological hierarchy; and that the generation of the Son by the Father takes place within the being of God and involves no division of being. See Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 236, 434. Representatives of pro-Nicene theology include Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Hilary of Poitiers, Marius Victorinus, Ambrose of Milan, and (of course) Augustine.

⁵⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 309: "I would propose that there are no references to the Father begetting the Son or the Father (and the Son) sending the Spirit that cannot be understood in terms of the temporal role assumed by the second and third persons of the Trinity respectively. They do not indicate any intrinsic relationships among the three. Further, to speak of one of the persons as unoriginate and the others as either eternally begotten or proceeding from the Father is to introduce an element of causation or origination that must ultimately involve some type of subordination among them." Cf. idem, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity: An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 179–84. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 162: "The conceptions of both the 'eternal begetting of the Son' and 'eternal procession of the Spirit' seem to me highly speculative and not grounded in biblical teaching."

⁵⁷ By way of contrast, Kevin Giles (who rejects EFS) and John Dahms (who affirms EFS) both affirm eternal generation. See John V. Dahms, "The Generation of the Son," *JETS* 32 (1989): 493–501; and Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son and the Doctrine of the Trinity: An Exercise in Doing Evangelical Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, forthcoming).

⁵⁸ Another area of departure from Augustine's trinitarian theology concerns the status of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as "persons." For Augustine, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are *not* three distinct centers of consciousness and will. On the contrary, they share one will and execute one power. In contrast to Augustine, Erickson (explicitly) and Ware (implicitly) adopt a post-Enlightenment understanding of "person" and construe Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct centers of consciousness and will. See Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 331; and Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 43–130. Ware's notion of authority and obedience as the means of distinguishing the Father and Son seems to require understanding the divine persons as three distinct centers of consciousness and will.

a unity of nature at the intra-trinitarian level.⁵⁹ Augustine insists that the Father and Son—who “have but one will and are indivisible in their working” (*De trin.* II.9, 103)—were both involved in sending the Son:

What we are saying may perhaps be easier to sort out if we put the question this way, crude though it is: 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* (*De trin.* II.9, 103, emphasis mine).⁶⁰

Inseparable action, therefore, intrinsically qualifies all the working of the Father and Son, including the “sending” of the Son by the Father. EFS proponents, therefore, misread Augustine when they sever his comments about the Father “sending” the Son from Augustine’s unequivocal affirmation that the divine persons act inseparably.

For example, in making a case that the Son was subordinate to the Father *prior* to the incarnation, Bruce Ware quotes a passage from Book IV of *De trinitate* in which Augustine explains that the Son is said to have been sent not merely because he became incarnate “but that he was sent in order for the Word to become flesh . . .” (*De trin.* IV.27, 172).⁶¹ This passage, says Ware, constitutes proof that Augustine believed that the Son was “obedient” to the Father in eternity past. Ware, however, misunderstands Augustine. As we have seen above, the sending of the Son was not merely the work of the Father but the inseparable work of the Father and the Son. As Augustine explains elsewhere, “So it is that the invisible Father, together with the jointly invisible Son, is said to have sent this Son by making him visible” (*De trin.* II.9, 103). Augustine is on solid biblical ground in affirming this point.⁶² Alongside texts relating the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ to the purpose of the Father (John 3:16; Rom 8:32; Gal 4:4–6), there are also passages that relate the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ to the decision of the Son: “he made himself poor” (2 Cor 8:9); “he emptied himself” (Phil. 2:6–7); “who gave himself” (Gal 2:20); “I lay [my life] down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). Ware’s reading takes only the former category of texts into account and not the latter.⁶³

⁵⁹ Remember from Augustine’s summary of trinitarian doctrine (cited earlier) that A (inseparable ontological unity) constitutes the basis for A’ (inseparable operation) while B (intra-trinitarian distinction among the persons) constitutes the basis for B’ (distinction of person in the economy of salvation).

⁶⁰ Commenting on this passage, Ayres explains (*Augustine and the Trinity*, 182), “The Father’s sending of the Son is intrinsic to the Father’s eternal ‘speaking’ of the Word and Wisdom: there can be no importation of the language of ‘command’ because the Son eternally comes into existence as one who eternally shares in the decisions of the Father as the Father’s Wisdom.” As a result, “common ‘decisions’ are not the result of a deliberative and temporal process, but rooted in the eternal generation of Son and [spiration of] Spirit.”

⁶¹ Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, 80–81.

⁶² For a discussion of the biblical basis of the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ as the inseparable work of the Father and Son, see Sermon 52 in Saint Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. III/3, *Sermons III (51–94) on the New Testament* (ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn: New City, 1991), 54–56.

⁶³ To state this problem in theological terms, Ware’s reading of Augustine (specifically his appeal to the “sending” of the Son as evidence that Augustine believes that the Son is eternally under the Father’s authority)

Moreover, Ware's reading of Augustine, if correct, undermines the very point Augustine is trying to make in response to his Homoian opponents who argued that one who sends is "greater" than one who is sent. As Augustine explains, "For [the Word] was not sent in virtue of some disparity of power or substance or anything in him that was not equal to the Father, *but in virtue of the Son being from the Father, not the Father being from the Son*" (*De trin.* IV.27, 172, emphasis mine).⁶⁴ The "sending" language in Scripture does not reveal that the Son is somehow eternally subordinate to the Father (which would undermine Augustine's response to Homoian theologians) but simply reveals that the Son is eternally "from the Father" (i.e., eternal generation).

2.2.3. *The Ordered Relationship between the Father and Son*

Third, an ordered and irreversible relation exists between Father and Son that necessarily shapes their agency.⁶⁵ Although the divine persons act inseparably, they do so in an "ordered" way. The Son always acts with the Father according to his "filial" mode of being "from the Father."⁶⁶ On this point, Augustine is misinterpreted by theologians on both sides in the EFS dispute.

On the one hand, some EFS opponents ignore or subtly deny this reality.⁶⁷ For example, in a five point summary of Augustine's trinitarian theology, Millard Erickson identifies inseparable action as a key element of Augustine's trinitarian theology but fails to acknowledge the ordered and irreversible relation that shapes the *agency* of the divine persons.⁶⁸ Erickson does acknowledge that the Son is "from the Father" (which he rightly relates to eternal generation); however, he does not acknowledge the fact that "from the Father" names both the Son's relationship to the Father in eternity (i.e., his manner of subsistence) and his action in the economy of salvation (i.e., manner of operation). Moreover, Erickson also fails to acknowledge a core element of Augustine's trinitarian hermeneutic that grounds this ordered relationship. According to Erickson, Augustine employs "two" rules in reading Scripture. The first rule concerns a distinction between the Son in the "form of a servant" (human nature) and the Son "in the form of God" (divine nature).⁶⁹ A second rule concerns the inseparable action of the three

works only if one ignores what Augustine says about the inseparable operation of the Father and Son.

⁶⁴Ware cites this passage as proof that Augustine combined ontological equality with functional eternal subordination (Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, 80), but he misreads Augustine on this point. When Augustine says that the Son has his "being from the Father," this does not mean, as Ware says, that the Son has "the responsibility of carrying out the will of the Father" (*Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, 81). Augustine is referring to eternal generation—not eternal (functional) subordination.

⁶⁵That the Father/Son relationship is ordered and irreversible can be seen clearly in the generation of the Son. Whereas the Son is *from* the Father, the Father is not *from* the Son.

⁶⁶For more on this theme in John's gospel, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (New Studies in Biblical Theology; Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 111–33.

⁶⁷This problem can be found in Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *JETS* 40 (1997): 57–68. Although he (rightly) notes that the church fathers consistently reject any kind of "hierarchical order" among the divine persons, Bilezikian fails to acknowledge that the church fathers also consistently affirm an *order* among the persons both in subsistence and operation. By way of contrast, Kevin Giles recognizes the ordered and irreversible relationship among the divine persons. See Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 48–50, 228, 311.

⁶⁸Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity*, 158–59.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 155–57.

divine persons.⁷⁰ He represents Augustine well on these two points; however, what he fails to mention is that Augustine has a third rule that he brings to bear on passages that “show not that one person is less than the other, but only that one is *from* the other” (*De trin.* II.3, 99, italics mine).⁷¹ Augustine’s “from-another” rule receives extensive attention in *De trinitate* and represents a core element of Latin pro-Nicene trinitarian hermeneutics. This rule (discussed earlier in this essay), relates directly to the ordered and irreversible relation that shapes the agency of Father and Son.

Proponents of EFS also misinterpret this ordered and irreversible relationship. From the fact that an ordered and irreversible relationship exists between the Father and the Son, it does not follow for Augustine that “authority” and “obedience” are what constitute the Father *as Father* and Son *as Son*.⁷² Bruce Ware falls into this error when he asserts that Augustine affirmed that “the distinction of Persons is constituted precisely by the differing relations among them, *in part manifested by the inherent authority of the Father and inherent submission of the Son*.”⁷³ Ware claims that “inherent authority” and “inherent submission” constitute the Father/Son relationship; however, this misreads Augustine.⁷⁴ “Authority” and “submission” are not “personal properties” for Augustine. To the contrary, “eternal generation” is what *constitutes* the Son as Son. Augustine is unequivocal on this point.⁷⁵ Ware, as we saw above, rejects eternal generation as the distinguishing property of the Son. In Ware’s theology, “submission” effectively replaces “eternal generation” as the distinguishing property of the Son.⁷⁶ Augustine is then read through the lens of this alternative understanding of personal properties.

2.2.4. The Immanent Trinity as a Blueprint for Human Relations

Finally, Augustine’s account of trinitarian agency must be viewed within the context of the creator/creature distinction, which has important implications for how human relations “imitate” divine relations. In a sermon on the baptism of Jesus, Augustine devotes extensive attention to the inseparable action of the divine persons.⁷⁷ After explaining the biblical basis for this theological principle, he inquires whether any suitable likeness might exist for the inseparable operation of three separable things. To find

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 157–58.

⁷¹ For more on this rule, see Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 177–98.

⁷² Notice how Ware construes the trinitarian “order” in terms of a hierarchy of authority (*Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 72 [italics mine]): “A word often used by early church theologians for *the evident authority structure of the Father-Son relationship* in the Godhead is *taxis*, which means ‘ordering.’ There is an ordering in the Godhead, a ‘built-in’ structure of authority and submission that marks a significant respect in which the Persons of the Godhead are distinguished from one another.”

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 80 (italics mine).

⁷⁴ At the same time, one must not fall into the opposite error of insisting that Augustine’s account of divine agency necessarily precludes the possibility of any analogy existing between the Son’s filial mode of being “from the Father” and his obedience to the Father in his state of humiliation. See the conclusion.

⁷⁵ In the summary of Latin pro-Nicene trinitarian doctrine we examined earlier, Augustine explains, “although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, *and therefore he who is the Father is not the Son*; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and *therefore he who is the Son is not the Father*” (*De trin.* I.7, 69 [italics mine]).

⁷⁶ For Augustine, and all pro-Nicene theologians, eternal generation grounds both *equality* of the Son to the Father (on the assumption that like begets like) and the hypostatic *distinction* of the divine persons. It is difficult to see how “authority” and “submission,” functioning as “distinguishing properties,” accomplish this same work.

⁷⁷ Sermon 52 in Saint Augustine, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, 50–65.

three things that act inseparably, Augustine suggests we turn inward to the divine image in the human mind/soul (*mens*)—specifically to the triad of memory, understanding, and will (the same triad he explores in *De trinitate*). Right before he explores this triad as a dim reflection of inseparable operation, Augustine underscores the creator/creature distinction in order to remind his readers that no created reality can adequately reflect God’s immanent nature.⁷⁸ The creator/creature distinction disallows direct movement from immanent relations to human relations. This is because human beings can imitate the triune God only in a *creaturely* way.⁷⁹

Although it is rather common in contemporary theology to treat the immanent Trinity as a blueprint for everything from ecclesial structures to gender relations,⁸⁰ this use of the immanent Trinity is problematic and does not reflect the emphasis of the NT. Scripture directs us to imitate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *as they relate to us in the economy of salvation* (i.e., the economic Trinity).⁸¹ When Paul exhorts Christians to imitate the triune God, he points them to the *incarnate* Son (economic Trinity): “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1–2). The model for Christian love is the self-giving of the Son on the cross (economic Trinity). The model for Christian marriage in Eph 5 is not the love of the Father for the Son apart from creation and redemption but the love of Christ for the church (economic Trinity). The clearest model for Christian submission to authority is the obedience of the incarnate Son to the Father as displayed on the cross (Phil 2:8). In other words, when Scripture invites us to imitate the Trinity, it directs us toward our experience of and relation with the Trinity.⁸² That is to say, it is a covenantal relation with the triune God that provides model, motivation, and ground for human imitation.

These references to the cross highlight an additional reason that our relationship with the Trinity in the economy of salvation must constitute the focal point for Christian imitation: in this life, we “imitate”

⁷⁸ See Augustine, *Serm.* 52.16, 57.

⁷⁹ See Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 199.

⁸⁰ As Kathryn Tanner explains (*Christ the Key* [Current Issues in Theology; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009], 207), “When contemporary theologians want to form judgments about social and political matters they often turn immediately to the trinity for guidance. Rather than Christology, a theology of the trinity is enlisted to support particular kinds of human community. . . . What the Trinity is like is thought to establish how human societies should be organized.”

⁸¹ Direct appeals to the immanent Trinity can support only the most general claims. We can say, “God is one; therefore, the church should be one,” and this is true (cf. John 17). But what specific ecclesial structures can we say legitimately reflect (or do not reflect) divine unity? Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann frequently argue that hierarchical political and ecclesial structures are incompatible with the “perichoretic” unity and equality of the three divine persons. But why not argue that the “threeness” of God constitutes the blueprint for governmental structures with three “equal” yet “distinct” branches of authority: an executive branch (corresponding to the Father), a legislative branch (corresponding to the Word), and a judicial branch (corresponding to the Spirit who is described in John’s gospel as “Counselor”)? On this basis one could claim that the American government is an image of the Trinity! We can say, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit love each other; therefore, Christians should love each other,” and this is true. But how do we know what this love should look like? The answer is found in observing how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *relate to human beings in the economy of salvation*.

⁸² To make this claim is not to drive a wedge between the economic and the immanent Trinity. It is simply to highlight the epistemic priority of God’s economic self-revelation as the means through which we come to know God as Trinity. See the following note.

God under the condition of sin; however, no “sin” marks the immanent life of the God. How do we know what it looks like to imitate God under sin? The answer is found by observing how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to rebellious human beings. It should not surprise us, therefore, that Eph 5:1 exhorts believers to imitate the love of God expressed in the cross because it is precisely in the cross that we observe God’s love displayed under the condition of sin. When we forgive those who sin against us we are imitating the Trinity, but not by *directly* imitating the intra-trinitarian relations among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (as no forgiveness marks these relationships). Instead we are imitating the forgiveness we ourselves have experienced from the triune God in the economy of salvation (i.e., the economic Trinity). The model for Christian compassion is not some type of immanent “mercy” among the divine persons, but the mercy rebellious human beings experience from their heavenly Father: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). In the immediate context, Jesus has in mind the mercy God expresses toward those who have rebelled against him. Christians are to love their enemies specifically because God “is kind to the ungrateful and the evil” (Luke 6:35). Thus we might say that a proper *imitatio Trinitatis* proves to be an *imitatio Christi*.⁸³ As Kathryn Tanner explains, “Jesus’ relations with other people constitute the sort of human relations that the economy of the trinity itself specifies. Jesus’ way of life toward other people as we share in it *is* the trinitarian form of human social life.”⁸⁴ Notice how Augustine emphasizes modeling our lives after Christ (*De trin*, VII.5, 223): “Thus, to conclude, it is not surprising that scripture should be speaking about the Son when it speaks about wisdom, on account of the model which the image who is equal to the Father provides us with that we may be refashioned to the image of God; for we follow the Son by living wisely.” Although we cannot explore this issue further and it is distinct from the main concerns of this essay,⁸⁵ this fourth point is important because of the way the EFS debate is fueled by the debate over gender relations.

3. Conclusion

So where does Augustine stand on the EFS debate? We have seen that Augustine is misread by proponents and opponents of EFS alike. Moreover, important differences exist between Augustine’s trinitarian theology and the theology of some representatives on both sides in the debate. There is no evidence that Augustine believed that the hypostatic distinction between the Father and the Son is constituted by eternal “authority” (on the part of the Father) and eternal “submission” (on the part of the Son). To the contrary, this element of EFS is incompatible with his account of trinitarian agency. At the same time, Augustine does not explore the speculative question of whether any analogy might exist

⁸³The themes we have been discussing come together nicely in 1 John 3:16: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.” From an epistemological perspective John reminds us that the cross (i.e., the economic self-revelation of the triune God) enables us to comprehend the nature of true love. From an ontological perspective, it is clear, in the broader context, that the love we experience in the cross reflects the immanent life of God. John tells us, “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and this should be read as a metaphysical claim. Nevertheless, we know about this love and see it displayed under conditions of sin only through the cross. Finally, John’s ethical injunction (“we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers” [1 John 4:8]) is explicitly grounded in our experience of Christ laying down his life for us.

⁸⁴Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 236–37.

⁸⁵Elsewhere I discuss in some detail methodological problems with employing the immanent Trinity as a blueprint for human relations. See Keith E. Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IVP: forthcoming), ch. six.

between the Son's filial mode of being eternally "from the Father" and his obedience to the Father in his state of humiliation.⁸⁶

"Are you for us or for our adversaries?" asked Joshua when he encountered an imposing stranger bearing a sword outside the city of Jericho. "Neither," said the stranger, "I am the commander of the Lord's army." Perhaps we can learn a lesson from Joshua's encounter. In our quest to answer a speculative theological question, we can become so preoccupied with the question of whose side Augustine is on that we no longer let one of the church's leading theologians speak on his own terms. At the beginning of *De trinitate*, Augustine reminds his readers, "[N]owhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous" than in the study of the Trinity (*De trin.* 1.5, 68). As we seek to understand scriptural teaching about the Trinity, the church fathers represent an invaluable resource. However, if we engage the fathers simply to determine whose "side" they are on—like pawns in a chess match—not only will we misinterpret them, but we may also fail to hear the ways in which they rightly challenge and correct our thinking about the Trinity.

⁸⁶ Thomas Aquinas, who builds on Augustine's trinitarian doctrine, does not explore this question either. Several twentieth-century theologians, however, do explore this possibility. Two notable examples include Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Barth's discussion of the eternal obedience of the Son (see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* [trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956], esp. 195–203) has been the subject of extensive debate. Receiving almost no attention in the EFS debate, however, is an important Catholic contemporary of Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar. Von Balthasar's theology is profoundly trinitarian and quite speculative at points (owing in part to the influence of the Catholic mystic, Adrienne von Speyr). In his five-volume *Theo-Drama*, von Balthasar labors to show how key facets of the economy of salvation—especially the cross—are grounded in God's immanent life. For example, von Balthasar claims that the economic self-emptying (*kenosis*) of the Son in the incarnation reflects a kind of super-*kenosis* in the divine life in which the Father gives himself away wholly and without remainder in the begetting of the Son. In relation to the present discussion, von Balthasar claims that the human obedience of Jesus reflects something fundamental about the Son's eternal relationship to the Father: "For [the Son] simply expresses in the *oikonomia* what he has always expressed anew in the eternal, triune life: his complete readiness to carry out every one of the Father's wishes" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Last Act*, vol. 5 of *Theo-Drama Theological Dramatic Theory* [trans. Graham Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998], 513; see also 86–89). [Editor's note: Cf. Stephen M. Garrett, "[The Dazzling Darkness of God's Triune Love: Introducing Evangelicals to the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar](#)," *Them* 35 (2010): 413–30.]