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ETERNAL FUNCTIONAL SUBORDINATION IN THE WORK OF WAYNE GRUDEM AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO CONTEMPORARY ADVENTISM

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of an *eternal functional subordination* believed to be existing among the members of the Trinity as held by one of its main contemporary proponents, evangelical systematic theologian Wayne Grudem. Further, the article briefly explores the relationship of Adventist theology to Grudem’s view, noting that some Adventist scholars seem to embrace Grudem’s thought, while others reject it. The article suggests that understanding *eternal functional subordination* as a relevant trend within contemporary evangelicalism can facilitate ideas and context that are helpful in understanding the relationship of Adventist thinkers to such a view.

Keywords: trinity, subordination, evangelicalism, Adventism.

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity, regarded by many as the most foundational doctrine of Christianity, has been under theological development almost since Christianity’s origins. Yet, in recent times, there has been a trend within evangelical Christianity—including Adventism—toward a belief in an *eternal functional subordination* (hereafter EFS)¹ existing among the members of the Trinity. This theological trend, which holds that the Son has been eternally subordinate to the Father (and the Spirit has been subordinate to both) stands in contrast with the

¹Grudem himself does not use the terminology eternal functional subordination; instead he uses the phrase economic subordination to refer to the same concept. I use the phrasing eternal functional subordination (EFS) to refer to his views because this is the phrasing more frequently used among theologians in general. A more recent term has surfaced for the same concept, namely, eternal relations of authority and submission (ERAS). Again, for the purposes of this paper I will retain the EFS terminology. Additionally, I want to clarify that the terms “function” and “role” seem to be virtually interchangeable in the work of the authors featured in this paper, and therefore I will also use them interchangeably as I discuss their work in this research.

belief that the three members of the Trinity serve limited functions in subordination to each other only temporarily for soteriological purposes. Recently, EFS has been discussed within evangelical theology mainly because of its application to gender roles. One of EFS' main contemporary voices is evangelical theologian Wayne Grudem, professor of theology and biblical studies at Phoenix Seminary, AZ.² Thus, the primary focus of this research is to present the basic tenets of EFS as they are proposed by Grudem. Because Grudem's EFS view has also marginally surfaced within Adventism, the secondary focus of this research is to briefly present how contemporary Adventist thinkers are relating to it. But let us first turn to Grudem.

Wayne Grudem's Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS)³

In a section of his well-known *Systematic Theology* entitled "All Analogies Have Shortcomings," Grudem states, "Scripture nowhere uses any analogies to teach the doctrine of the Trinity," and that "no analogy adequately teaches about the Trinity" since "all are misleading in significant ways."⁴ However, in spite of these precautionary statements, Grudem understands the Trinity largely through the Father-Son analogy. He defends this approach partly by arguing that "in the Bible a person's name is a description of his or her character" and that "likewise, the names of God in Scripture are various descriptions of his character."⁵ As he sees it, "the closest we come to an analogy [for the Trinity] is found in the titles "Father" and "Son" themselves, titles that clearly speak of distinct persons and of the close relationship that exists between them in a human family."⁶ Although Grudem acknowledges the distinction of persons as well as the relational closeness portrayed by the Father-Son analogy, he also goes on to argue that this

²For more information on Grudem, see www.waynegrudem.com. Although Grudem is an important representative, he is not the only one holding the views that will be expounded in this article. For an excellent survey and historical background of the key thinkers, issues, and controversies involved around EFS, see Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009).

³Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 240–241. Although he has written elsewhere on the topic, I will mainly focus on Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, for two reasons: first, it is in this particular work that he has developed his view of EFS at greatest length. Second, *Systematic Theology* includes some chapters and sections where Grudem addresses his Trinitarian views somewhat in isolation from his views on gender roles, unlike most of his other works.

⁴Ibid., 240–241.

⁵Ibid., 157.

⁶Ibid., 241.

analogy predominantly refers to distinctions in roles of authority and subordination.

Distinctions in Roles of Authority and Subordination

Grudem emphatically asserts that the three persons of the Trinity are fully divine and share all the attributes of God.⁷ And yet he believes that in order for the Trinity to be composed of three legitimate individual persons, there must be a distinction between the three in at least one other aspect.⁸ In identifying this necessary distinction, Grudem makes reference to the “different functions” of each person “both in creation and redemption.”⁹ In this regard he writes: “The only difference between them is the way they relate to each other and to the creation. The unique quality of the Father is the way he *relates as Father* to the Son and Holy Spirit. The unique quality of the Son is the way he *relates as Son*. And the unique quality of the Holy Spirit is the way he *relates as Spirit*.”¹⁰

Furthermore, according to Grudem, these relational distinctions between the members of the Trinity have to do specifically with authority and subordination. As he sees it, the role or function of God the Father is to “plan, and direct and send the Son and the Holy Spirit,” and the Son has “the role of obeying, going as

⁷Ibid., 248.

⁸See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 248. In this regard, philosopher of religion Keith Yandell (Affiliate Professor of Philosophy at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL) has argued that Grudem’s eternal functional subordination presupposes the philosophical concept known as *indiscernibility of identicals*, which states that things that exactly resemble one another cannot be distinct. On a very informative debate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (TEDS), Yandell suggests that in embracing this concept Grudem is departing from a philosophical assumption and imposing it on the biblical data. See Bruce Ware et al., “Do relations of authority and submission exist eternally among the Persons of the Godhead?” (Trinity Debates: January 1, 2008, <http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/resource/do-relations-of-authority-and-submission-exist-eternally-among-the-persons-of-the-godhead/>, accessed March 12, 2014). Further on, Yandell argues that the persons of the Trinity do not have to be necessarily different in roles (functions) or any other attribute in order to be distinguished as different persons, since “the fundamental difference could be in the bearers of the properties even if the bearers are identical in properties.” He also argues that, given the uniqueness of God, we need a concept different than the Greek philosophy concept of substance in order to define Him.

⁹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 248. He connects these to the “economy of the Trinity.”

¹⁰Ibid., 254. Grudem clarifies that we “should not think that the personal distinctions are any kind of additional attributes added on to the being of God.” Thus, when it comes to identifying a necessary distinguishing element among the persons of the Trinity, he argues that “the only way it seems possible to do this is to say that the distinction between the persons is not a difference in ‘being’ but a difference in ‘relationships.’” Ibid., 253.

the Father sends, and revealing God to us.” In short, the Father has “the role of commanding” and the son “the role of obeying.”¹¹ Thus, for Grudem, the Father-Son analogy suggests relations of authority and subordination among these divine beings. Although Grudem’s main focus is the Father-Son analogy, he also speaks briefly of the role of the Holy Spirit. About the Holy Spirit he writes:

We may say that the role of the Father in creation and redemption has been to plan and direct and send the Son and Holy Spirit. . . . The father directs and has authority over the son, and the son obeys and is responsive to the directions of the father. The Holy Spirit is obedient to the directives of both the Father and the Son.¹²

In this, Grudem identifies the role of the Holy Spirit by analogy and not by direct reference to specific Bible texts, unlike in his treatment of the Father and Son. He further explains it thus: “If the Son together with the Father sends the Spirit into the world, *by analogy* it would seem appropriate to say that this reflects eternal ordering of their relationships.¹³ He seems to be comfortable with this interpretive procedure, concluding that in their roles “the Father eternally is first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third.”¹⁴ Having argued for these Trinitarian roles, Grudem goes on to distinguish them from what he identifies as the ontological Trinity.

Role-Being Dichotomy

Grudem argues that while “the Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father,” they are still “subordinate in their roles”¹⁵ to the Father. The distinction of these concepts—“equal in deity” and “subordinate in roles”—calls for clarification. On one hand, Grudem identifies the Trinity’s divine being, nature or essence, as “ontological equality.”¹⁶ Thus he states, “it may be said that there are no differences in deity, attributes, or essential nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God and has all the attributes of God.”¹⁷ Yet despite their “ontological equality,” Grudem still considers the roles of each member of the Trinity to be different in terms of subordination. For him, the members of the Trinity have “ontological equality but economic subordination”;

¹¹Ibid., 249.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., 246 (emphasis supplied).

¹⁴Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 214.

¹⁵Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249.

¹⁶Ibid., 251.

¹⁷Ibid, 250.

they are “equal in being but subordinate in role.”¹⁸ Therefore, Grudem argues that the differences that he attributes to the members of the Trinity are at the level of divine roles of subordination (functions) but not at the level of divine being (ontology).

Eternal Roles of Authority and Subordination

While most evangelical theologians would argue for a temporary or limited subordination of the Son for the purpose of fulfilling the plan of salvation, Grudem believes that Trinitarian roles of authority and subordination “are not temporary”¹⁹ but eternal, and that these govern “the different ways the three persons act as they relate to the world and . . . to each other for all eternity.”²⁰ He explains this in more detail as follows:

If we do not have economic subordination,²¹ then there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another, and consequently we do not have the three distinct persons existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for all eternity. For example, if the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally “Father” and the Son is not eternally “Son.” This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed.²²

Thus, Grudem argues that EFS is necessary in order for the very idea of the Trinity to be sustained, maintaining that the distinctions between Father, Son and Holy Spirit “are essential to the very nature of God himself, and they could not be otherwise.”²³

A presupposition undergirding Grudem’s view of EFS is “the immutability of God.”²⁴ In fact, he explicitly argues that eternal relationships of authority and submission within the Trinity can partly be concluded “from the unchangeableness of God.”²⁵ Grudem asserts that, since God is unchangeable, his

¹⁸Ibid., 251.

¹⁹Ibid., 249.

²⁰Ibid., 248.

²¹See footnote 1 of this article.

²²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251.

²³Ibid., 250.

²⁴Ibid. A short but informative section on this topic can be found also in Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 46.

²⁵Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 250. See “f. The Importance of God’s Unchangeableness,” *ibid.* 168. He defines the term thus: “We can define the unchangeableness of God as follows: God is unchanging in his being, perfections, purposes, and promises, yet God does act and feel emotions, and he acts and feels differently in response to different situations. This attribute of God is also called God’s immutability.” *Ibid.*, 163.

hierarchy in authority cannot change in the past, present or future: “God cannot be other than he is, for he is unchanging.”²⁶ He further explains it thus:

Before the Son came to earth, and even before the world was created, for all eternity the Father has been the Father, the Son has been the Son, and the Holy Spirit has been the Holy Spirit. These relationships are eternal, not something that occurred only in time If God now exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then he has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²⁷

Therefore, for Grudem, the relations of authority among the members of the Trinity are unchangeable, just as God is unchangeable. According to Grudem, some examples found in Scripture that speak to the unchangeable relationships among the members of the Trinity are the Father’s “initiatory act of choosing us ‘in’ the Son” prior to the foundation of the world (spoken of in Eph 1:3–4) the “foreknowledge of God the Father” (spoken of in 1 Pet 1:2) and that the Father “gave his only Son” and “sent the Son into the world” (spoken of in John 3:16 and Gal 4:4).²⁸ These biblical statements, according to Grudem, are among several that “indicate that there was a Father-Son relationship before Christ came into the world”²⁹ and that “the Son did not become the Son when the Father sent him into the world.”³⁰ Thus, Grudem aims to show how the Father has the highest authority among the Trinity since eternity.

The Trinity and the Human Family

Interestingly, relying mostly on apostolic teachings about male-female relationships, Grudem understands the eternal roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to have implications for the roles of men, women, and children in human families.³¹ Specifically, Grudem emphasizes that husbands and wives, like the

²⁶Ibid., 241.

²⁷Ibid., 250.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, chapter 22, “Man as Male and Female,” and chapter 47, “Church Government.” Apart from his *Systematic Theology*, Grudem has written extensively about roles of subordination within the Trinity in connection with gender roles. His most popular work in this regard is: *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of more than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012). See also Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism: A New Path to Liberalism*; Wayne Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Publishers, 2006); Wayne Grudem, “Foreword,” in Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women In the Church: A Biblical Study On The Role Of Women In The Church*

Trinity, are ontologically equal but have differences in roles: “Just as the Father and Son in the Trinity are equal in deity and equal in importance but different in roles, so the husband and wife in marriage are equal in human personhood and equal in importance but different in roles.”³²

Grudem’s parallel between the Trinity and the human family mainly addresses authority and submission relations between women and men, comparing them with those of the Son and the Father respectively. That is, calling for wives (counterparts of the Son) to be submissive to their husband’s authority (counterparts of the Father). Grudem also compares the role of children in the human family with the submissive role of the Holy Spirit. This is how he explains the whole equation:

The husband’s role is parallel to that of God the Father and the wife’s role is parallel to that of God the Son. Moreover, just as Father and Son are equal in deity and importance and personhood, so the husband and wife are equal in humanity and importance and personhood. And, although it is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, the gift of children within marriage, coming from both the father and the mother, and subject to the authority of both father and mother, is analogous to the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son in the Trinity.³³

Thus, in the same way that members of the Trinity have equality in being but difference in roles, so do men, women, and children have equality in being but differing roles in the family.

Response to Criticism on Subordinationism

Lastly, in responding to criticism to his EFS views, Grudem has argued that it would be erroneous to call him a *subordinationist*.³⁴ Subordinationism, he says, refers to a heretical concept that entails “the Son being inferior or ‘subordinate’ *in being* to God the Father.”³⁵ Appealing to his dichotomous view on eternal roles (function) and divine being (ontology), he states that “the heresy of subordinationism . . . should be clearly distinguished from the orthodox doctrine that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in *role or function*.”³⁶ Having

(Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1987). Other similar resources can be found on his webpage www.waynegrudem.com.

³²Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 207.

³³Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 257.

³⁴Ibid., 243–245.

³⁵Ibid., 244 (emphasis supplied).

³⁶Ibid., 244 n. 27 (emphasis supplied).

looked at Grudem's EFS,³⁷ let us briefly explore how Adventist theologians have related to this view.

³⁷At the Evangelical Theological Society held in San Antonio, TX on November 15, 2016, Wayne Grudem presented "Why a Denial of the Son's Eternal Submission Threatens Both the Trinity and the Bible" (<http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/ETS-Presentation-on-Trinity-11-15-16.pdf>), accessed October 18, 2018. This presentation came partly as a response to evangelicals who accused Grudem of unorthodoxy given his views on EFS. See Grudem's account of it in "Whose Position on the Trinity is Really New?" (<https://cbmw.org/public-square/whose-position-on-the-trinity-is-really-new/>), accessed October 18, 2018. In his presentation at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, Grudem made an effort to demonstrate that his position is orthodox, partly by emphasizing how his views on EFS rely on creedal statements. He had, to an extent, referred to creedal statements in the past (see, for instance, Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251), but his current view includes some changes in his argumentation, specifically in how he now understands the concept of the eternal generation of the Son as evidence for the Son's "eternal submission." (Grudem, "Why a Denial of the Son's Eternal Submission Threatens Both the Trinity and the Bible," 1). In his ETS presentation, he claimed: "I am now willing to affirm the 'eternal generation of the Son,' based on John 1:14, 18, etc., as something mysterious, not implying creation of the Son ('begotten not made'), and somehow analogous to a human father-son relationship." Further, he said that while he used to understand 'monogenēs' to mean "unique, one of a kind," he is now convinced that the term is better translated as "only begotten" (Grudem, "Why a Denial of the Son's Eternal Submission Threatens Both the Trinity and the Bible," 1). From this he concluded that "if monogenēs means 'only begotten' then there is some kind of eternal ordering of subsistence that makes auth/submission appropriate." This is different from his previously published position since he is now considering whether or not eternal submission is actually "necessary to the nature of God," and he goes as far as claiming that "the economic Trinity reveals the ontological Trinity." This argument is nuanced by his clarification that "relationships between three Persons in eternity" are "largely a matter of deep mystery" (Grudem, "Why a Denial of the Son's Eternal Submission Threatens Both the Trinity and the Bible," 3). Given his appeal to the element of mystery, it is unclear whether or not he believes that submission within the Trinity is in being (ontological) and not just in role (functional). However, that is certainly what his presentation seems to point to. Yet, beyond his ETS presentation outline, there is no other available publication that elaborates on the matter in enough detail that allows readers to make any definitive claims. Therefore, this article will not incorporate these new developments beyond this brief footnote provided for the benefit of the reader. Ultimately, these recent developments should not affect the analysis of Grudem's previously published views as they relate to Seventh-day Adventism for the purposes of this article.

*Adventist Relationship to Grudem's EFS*³⁸

Grudem's EFS view has incited plentiful discussion in the evangelical world at large,³⁹ both in academic and non-academic circles, and Adventism has not been an exception. Although interaction with Grudem's work within Adventism has tended to focus on gender issues related to ordination to the pastoral ministry,⁴⁰ some Adventist thinkers have interacted more directly with his EFS views in respect to the doctrine of the Trinity in particular. In this regard, Adventist sympathies to EFS seem to be somewhat divided, with a minority of Adventist thinkers embracing Grudem's EFS, or a nuanced version of it, and a majority of Adventists thinkers rejecting it.⁴¹ Let us now turn to the main statements or arguments of Adventist thinkers as they agree or disagree with EFS.

³⁸Because this is an ongoing discussion, what follows might not be a complete survey on the topic. Yet, I believe the sources that I will provide here are representative of the arguments involved in the discussion and therefore can be useful in showing the relationship of Adventist thinkers to Grudem's EFS views. For a brief but informative survey on the topic of the Trinity in general within Adventism, see Denis Fortin, "God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (2006): 4–10; and Merlin D. Burt, "History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 17, no. 1 (2006): 125–139. For a more recent overview and discussion on issues specifically related to EFS from an Adventist perspective see Matthew L. Tinkham, Jr., "Neo-subordinationism: The Alien Argumentation in the Gender Debate," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 55, no. 2 (2017): 237–290.

³⁹See n. 2 of this article.

⁴⁰See 2013–14 General Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) resources at <https://www.adventistarchives.org/gc-tosc>. Examples of Adventist authors of that study committee who sympathetically quote Grudem in regards to gender issues and distinction of ontology and roles while not specifically connecting the arguments to the Trinity are: Laurel Damsteegt, "Women of the Old Testament: Women of Influence" (Theology of Ordination Committee, July 2013), and Paul S. Ratsara and Daniel K. Bediako, "Man and Woman in Genesis 1-3: Ontological Equality and Role Differentiation" (Southern Africa-Indian Ocean Division and Valley View University, Ghana respectively, Theology of Ordination Study Committee, July 23, 2013). An earlier reference is Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *Prove All Things: A Response To Women In Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer, (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), as well as Bacchiocchi, *Women In the Church*, which features a foreword by Grudem himself.

⁴¹For now, my main basis for stating this is that official statements of beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist church on the Trinity do not presently feature EFS in any prominent role nor in a favorable light. See, for example, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 2nd ed. (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005). Thus, for the moment, I stand in affirming that EFS is not a majority view within Adventism.

Embrace of EFS

First, let us survey some representative examples of Adventist thinkers who are sympathetic to EFS. In “Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship in First Corinthians,”⁴² Edwin Reynolds, religion professor at Southern Adventist University, states that it is “God the Father, from whom derives all properly constituted and delegated authority.”⁴³ He argues that relations of authority and submission “between Christ and His Father” do “extend from eternity past to eternity future” and that these are not “in conflict with full ontological equality.”⁴⁴ According to Reynolds, role relationships among the members of the Trinity are not in conflict with ontological equality because the eternal headship of the Father and eternal submission of the Son are both “grounded in differences in function rather than in essence.”⁴⁵

Stephen P. Bohr, evangelist and president of the evangelism ministry *Secrets Unsealed*, offers a similar argument in “Issues Relating to the Ordination of Women with Special Emphasis on 1 Peter 2:9, 10 and Galatians 3:28.”⁴⁶ In a section entitled “The Godhead Model,” Bohr argues that “the Father and the Son are one and ontologically equal and yet have different roles, with the Son being subject to His Father’s authority.” Although he does not in this paper explicitly identify the biblical texts that undergird his view, Bohr believes that “there is significant evidence in the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy that Jesus has been, is now, and will ever be equal to His Father. And yet there is also persuasive evidence that Jesus has been, is now, and will be subject to His Father’s authority.”⁴⁷

There are a few other thinkers who could be considered to hold a nuanced version of EFS. John W. Peters, a minister in the Pennsylvania Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, is one such example. In his earlier statements on the subject of subordination (c. 2014), Peters language sounds very similar to Grudem’s. For example, in “Restoration of the Image of God: Headship and Submission,”⁴⁸ Peters writes:

⁴²Edwin Reynolds, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship in First Corinthians” (Theology of Ordination Committee, July, 2013).

⁴³Ibid., 44.

⁴⁴Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵Ibid., 44.

⁴⁶Stephen P. Bohr, “Issues Relating to the Ordination of Women with Special Emphasis on 1 Peter 2:9, 10 and Galatians 3:28” (Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Senior Pastor Fresno Central Church, President *Secrets Unsealed*, July 23, 2013).

⁴⁷Ibid., 34–35.

⁴⁸John W. Peters, “Restoration of the Image of God: Headship and Submission” (Pennsylvania Conference Theology of Ordination Study Committee, January, 2014).

In eternity past, prior to the foundation of the world, the Son was subject to the Father; in the Creation the Son was subject to the Father; following the incarnation the Son was subject to the Father; from His ascension, the Son has been subject to the Father, sitting at His right hand; today, as He intercedes for us, the Son is subject to the Father; and when death is destroyed, the Son will be eternally subject to the Father. . . . The principle of headship/submission is manifested also in the relation of the Holy Spirit with the Son and the Father. The Son is subject to the Father and the Holy Spirit is subject to the Son.⁴⁹

Peters continues to argue that “since God never changes,”⁵⁰ these “authority-obedience” roles among the members of the Trinity are “fixed,” “mandatory,” and exist “throughout eternity”⁵¹ (that is, “eternity past” and “eternity future”⁵²). Like Grudem, Peters argues for this eternal “authority-obedience relationship,” while also affirming the “equality of being” of the members of the Trinity.⁵³ However, Peters’ statements on the topic have evolved slightly over time. In an undated open letter that appeared at some point after 2014,⁵⁴ Peters appears to modify his claims about the past eternity of the Son’s subordination, allowing that the Son may have become subordinate to the Father at “some point in eternity past, prior to the creation of the universe.” But in spite of these clarifications, Peters still seems to subscribe to some mode of EFS in that he believes the subordination of the Son has existed since prior to the creation of the universe, and in that he affirms an indefinite future eternal subordination. In the same open letter, Peters writes that since “ontological equality (equality of

⁴⁹Ibid., 56–57.

⁵⁰Ibid., 57.

⁵¹Ibid., 53–54, 57.

⁵²Ibid., 55.

⁵³Ibid., 54. See details in sections entitled “God is the Head of Christ—Eternity Past” and “God is the Head of Christ—Eternity Future” (55). Peters also notes: “Although it might be assumed that the Son took on the ‘role of Son’ at the incarnation or at some point in eternity past . . . the distinction in names, ‘Father’ and ‘Son,’ has always existed, implying role differentiation. Christ has always been the eternal, self-existent Son” (52). He also states: “Christ never has changed His position, or role, or office in relation to the Father. The term “role” underscores the fact that it is a relationship willingly entered into by the Son from before the beginning of creation with respect to the Father, and thus it is not permanent in the sense of somehow being inherent in the Son’s being” (53).

⁵⁴John W. Peters, “Response to Rodriguez’s Critique on Headship,” (<http://www.womenordination.com/free-resources/articles-and-documents/id/1772/response-to-rodriguez-critique-on-headship-by-john-w-peters#sthash.03Io9UUW.dpuf>), accessed October, 2016. Peters is responding to Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “Evaluation of the Arguments Used by Those Who Oppose the Ordination of Women to the Ministry” (Theology of Ordination Study Committee, January, 2014).

being) and functional submission . . . constitutes the image of God from the standpoint of the created universe,” it follows that “the Son will continue in that functional role of submission into the indefinite eternity future.” Ultimately, his letter appeals to mystery, stating that “arguing about the eternal nature of the Trinity is fruitless, since the nature of the infinite God is beyond our comprehension and forever will be.”⁵⁵

Similarly, in “Adam, Where Are You? On Gender Relations,”⁵⁶ Ingo Sorke, who, at the time of writing that paper, was theology professor at Southwestern Adventist University, argues that “the Godhead functions in a (ontological) personal equality” that is also a “hierarchical, functional subordination” in which “the Son submits to the Father, the Holy Spirit submits to the Son.”⁵⁷ In terms of the duration of this hierarchical, functional subordination, he maintains that “whether this subordination is eternal or just incarnational is immaterial.”⁵⁸ Sorke’s reasoning gives the impression that he is not sure whether EFS is the correct view, and that he does not think it is a question of significance, while at the same time leaving the door open to the possibility of eternal submission.

Although somewhat brief, the examples referred in this section could serve as representative of Adventist thinkers who seem to argue for the validity of Grudem’s EFS views, although perhaps in nuanced form.

Rejection of EFS

I will now present some representative examples of Adventist thinkers who reject EFS. In *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships*, co-authors Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, all former or current professors at Andrews University, provide a straightforward statement in regards to EFS. They write:

We find no convincing biblical evidence that Christ’s subordination has been for all eternity. His subordination was only temporary. Furthermore, the scriptural evidence is that the subordination of Christ to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both the Father and the Son is merely for the practical purposes of creation and redemption among those otherwise equal in their shared divine nature.⁵⁹

⁵⁵Peters, “Response to Rodriguez.”

⁵⁶Ingo Sorke, “Adam, Where Are You? On Gender Relations” (Joshua, TX, Theology of Ordination Committee, July, 2013).

⁵⁷Ibid., 24. According to Sorke, this refers to “functional subordination rather than ontological denigration.”

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹ Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2002), 275–277. Although in this work there is the concession that “quite possibly the fact

Norman R. Gulley, retired research professor of systematic theology at Southern Adventist University, also addresses the matter in his *Systematic Theology: God As Trinity*.⁶⁰ Gulley maintains that issues related to EFS “would have never been raised if theologians had rejected the Greek view that God is timeless.”⁶¹ The view that God is timeless does not allow for the possibility of change within the persons of the Trinity, but according to Gulley, this view must be rejected on the grounds that the Bible teaches that there is indeed change within the Trinity. In this regard, he argues that “the incarnation brought a change to the second Person of the Godhead,” but that “any attempt to read this incarnational reality into time before His incarnation isn’t logical.” Gulley also questions EFS’ usage of the Father-Son analogy in order to establish the ontology of the persons. In this regard he states that the “Father-Son relationship” is not “an actual ontological reality, for even Christ is addressed as the “Everlasting Father” (Isa 9:6b).” He argues as well that “the fact that Scripture says that the Father gave his Son in the incarnation . . . has no relevance to the two beings related as Father and Son from eternity.”⁶² Additionally, Gulley critiques EFS’ selection of authority as the primary element to be taken into account in Trinitarian relations, and instead calls for a prioritizing of “eternal reciprocal love” as the main aspect.⁶³

In a similar fashion, Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, retired director of the Biblical Research Institute, rejects EFS. In “Evaluation of the Arguments Used by Those Opposing the Ordination of Women to the Ministry,”⁶⁴ Rodríguez states that EFS

of Christ’s subordination to the leadership of the Father may suggest some clues about leadership roles in the church and the family,” they also suggest “that the Trinity provides no compelling clues, one way or another, when it comes to the issue of what sort of leadership roles each gender should receive in the church. We must decide the issue on other biblical principles.” Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 244.

⁶⁰Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity*, vol. 2 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011).

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 130.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 122. Gulley adds, “Why would this subordination of function be eternal when the plan of salvation, for which it is needed, is but a mere moment in future endless eternity?”

⁶³*Ibid.*, 142 n. 3. Gulley further develops this point as follows: “Grudem focuses on the way the Persons of the Trinity relate to each other through different roles. By contrast, I believe that the Persons of the Trinity relate to each other through their eternal reciprocal love in their inner history. There is a big difference between these two views of the Trinity. The latter view does not need the eternal subordination in which the Father has commanding authority over the Son and Spirit. Such a hierarchical relationship seems to exclude the reciprocal love relations they have with each other. Granted there was a temporary role that each Person of the Trinity took, but this came out of the context of their unchanging mutual love.” Gulley, *Systematic Theology*, 2:142.

⁶⁴Rodríguez, “Evaluation of the Arguments.”

“redefines the Biblical doctrine of God”⁶⁵ in the sense that, among other things, it introduces a false dichotomy between nature and function (role and being).⁶⁶ He rejects this distinction because:

the concept of an eternal headship within the Godhead is incompatible with the distinction between equality of nature and functional differentiation within the Trinity. If the Son had been eternally under subjection to the Father, then this is what defined Him; this is who He is. . . . He would have always existed in subordination to the Father. . . . There is no dichotomy here. . . . An eternal submission is not something a person does but the eternal state of that person. Therefore submission, function, and being cannot be separated from each other.⁶⁷

Rodríguez also considers the implications of EFS for the atonement and its portrayal of God’s self-sacrificing love, specifically in relation to the sacrifice of the Son.⁶⁸ He believes that the relationship that exists among the members of the Trinity is “an eternal, loving relationship,” not an eternal relationship of authority and submission,⁶⁹ and that “at the core of the atonement is the love of God manifested in self-sacrificing and disinterested divine salvific actions toward sinners.”⁷⁰ Proponents of EFS might argue that this submission was eternally voluntary, which would seemingly allow for divine self-sacrificing love in freedom, but Rodríguez sees such an argument as “a logical inconsistency,” given that for him “‘voluntary’ means that up to a particular moment in eternity the Son was not under submission to the Father.” In other words, he claims that “the eternal headship of the Father could imply that the sacrifice of the Son was the result of an order given by the Father to Him to save us; the assignment of a function.” Thus he concludes that a voluntary subordination “could not have been eternal” and thus “headship within the Godhead cannot be eternal.”⁷¹ Ultimately, Rodríguez explicitly states that proponents of EFS engage in “serious deviation from Adventist theology and doctrine” and that this theological trend presents “serious implications . . . for our body of beliefs.”⁷²

⁶⁵Ibid., 10.

⁶⁶See Rodríguez, “Evaluation of the Arguments,” 11.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 11–12. See also Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, “A Question of Sonship,” *Biblical Research Institute* (<https://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/materials/godgodhead-jesus-christ/question-sonship>), accessed October, 2016.

⁶⁹Rodríguez, “A Question of Sonship.”

⁷⁰Rodríguez, “Evaluation of the Arguments,” 11–12.

⁷¹Ibid., 12.

⁷²Ibid., 10.

Lastly, in “God in Three Persons: Blessed Trinity,”⁷³ Jo Ann Davidson, professor of systematic theology at Andrews University, states that “the three divine persons are equal but not identical,” allowing for the possibility of distinction among them.⁷⁴ Yet she denies that references in the Bible to the Trinitarian names “Father” and “Son” imply any eternal roles of subordination. She writes: “there is no hierarchy or subordination suggested by an unchangeable order in the presentation of their names.”⁷⁵

Summary and Conclusions

As one of the main contemporary proponents of EFS, Wayne Grudem argues that eternal roles of authority and subordination are necessary for the Trinity to exist as such. Although he sees these roles as eternal and necessary, Grudem distinguishes these functional roles from the Trinity’s equality in being (ontology), thus advocating for an eternal role-being dichotomy. Grudem places the Father as the highest authority, with the Son being submissive to the Father and the Holy Spirit being submissive to both the Father and the Son. He also adds the particularity that the relationships between persons of the Trinity have implications for members of human families, specifically in the roles that husbands and wives should play with respect to one another. Grudem’s understanding of the immutability of God is foundational to his EFS view, which he considers orthodox.

Adventist thinkers have engaged directly or indirectly with Grudem’s views of EFS. Some embrace Grudem’s perspective, at least in its broad outlines. They generally accept Grudem’s views of the eternal nature of roles of authority and subordination as well as his perspective on the differentiation between eternal roles and equality in being (ontology). Some others hold to nuanced versions of these views or at least leave the door open to them. On the other hand, those Adventist thinkers who reject Grudem’s EFS views deny the eternal nature of relations of authority and subordination among the members of the Trinity, and they question the validity of the eternal role-being dichotomous thinking. Furthermore, instead of interpreting the Father-Son analogy with a focus on relations of authority and subordination, they focus on eternal loving relationships. Thus, Adventist thinkers featured in this paper, all influential in their own sphere, represent two different lines of thought present in Adventism.

⁷³JoAnn Davidson, “God in Three Persons: Blessed Trinity,” 2013 (<https://www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/god/trinity/article/go/-/god-in-three-persons/>), accessed October, 2018. This is one of two articles that accompanies the Fundamental Doctrine of the Trinity on JoAnn Davidson, “God in Three Persons: Blessed Trinity,” *Seventh-day Adventist Church*, 2013 (www.adventist.org), accessed October, 2018.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Ibid.

This certainly presents Adventism with a call to resolution in regards to such a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith.

In closing, understanding Grudem's EFS view has served two purposes: first, that of better understanding a relevant trend within Evangelicalism, and second, that of facilitating ideas and context that are helpful in understanding the relationship of Adventist thinkers to views such as his.