

## A BOOK REPORT

“WHO’S TAMPERING WITH THE TRINITY/An Assessment of the Subordination Debate”  
March, 2022

Name/Title of Book: “Who’s Tampering With the Trinity/An Assessment of the Subordination Debate.”

Author: Millard J. Erickson, Who is considered to be one of the top Evangelical Theologians, and who is the former president of the Evangelical Theological Society. He has written numerous books, including *Christian Theology*. He is considered to be one of the very foremost advocates for Systematic Theology.

Publisher and Date of Publication: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2009

First Impressions: As I approached this book, and being mindful of the reputation of its author, Millard J. Erickson, in the fields of Systematic Theology and Evangelical Theology, I thought that, perhaps, my mind would be opened to new insights into the complex theological subject of “The Trinity”, a subject as to which very few of us can express any profound insight or knowledge. However, as I read and completed the book I found that, yes, I did learn a good deal about the raging debate over the issue of whether Jesus Christ, as the Son and a member of the Trinity, was only temporarily subordinated in His authority to that of the Father during the period of His Incarnation as the God Man, or to the contrary such subordination of authority has existed and will exist for all eternity, both past and future. To put it in my words, and not those of Mr. Erickson, did the Father, by virtue of His position of authority over the Son, send the Son to become human and to suffer and die for our sins, and to be resurrected in order to clear a path to the Father for mankind, as some prominent theologians would argue (i.e. the permanent subordination theory), or did the Son, Himself, voluntarily, as a part of a “joint decision” of the three persons of the Trinity, agree to so submit Himself and to be so sent? A companion question might relate to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. If, as parts of Scripture would indicate, the Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit after the Son’s Ascension has the Holy Spirit occupied a position of equal authority with the Father and the Son, or has the Holy Spirit (and is the Holy Spirit) in a position of subordinated authority with respect to the Father and perhaps the Son? To put it more bluntly, has the Father for all eternity been, and is He now and will He for all eternity be the Person in charge of the Persons of the Trinity, or are all such Persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in positions of equal authority where all decisions are jointly made, but where each of them might, by voluntary agreement, be given differing roles in the progress of the Plan of Redemption of God’s Creation?

Yes I was vaguely aware of this debate, and I did learn a good deal about it and about Mr. Erickson’s response to it by reading this book. Acquiring that knowledge, which is not unimportant, was not the most prominent knowledge which I gained from reading this excellent book. What I learned and observed from reading this book that I considered to be of most importance to me is the manner in which a very learned theologian describes and applies his



theological method in resolving for himself (and hopefully others) a complex, highly debated issue. I have certainly been aware of the importance of "Theological Method", and have even participated in teaching some things about "Theological Method", but I have never been as exposed, as I was by reading this book, to a highly respected theologian's description of, and application of a Theological Method which he used in trying to deal with a highly debated, complex theological issue.

So, my first impression of this excellent book is one which causes me to recommend this book, not so much for its proposed resolution of the raging debate over the positions of authority of the persons of the Trinity (and that resolution is important) but more so because of its excellent description of, and use of a systematic Theological Method in seeking to deal with a complex theological subject. For this reason I would recommend this book as providing a very valuable case study for any class in which Theological Method is being considered.

#### What Is The Author Doing With What the Author is Saying/Summary of Book's Contents:

The author, Millard J. Erickson, is a former president of the Evangelical Theological Society ("ETS"). He would, therefore, naturally want to defend the positions of the ETS as expressed in its Statement of Faith. That Statement of Faith states, as to the Trinity, that the three divine persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are one in essence and are equal in power. The currently stated positions of several very learned, respected, evangelical theologians that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, in the author's view, contradicts this ETS Statement of Faith. The author, therefore, in considering the practical consequences of this view of some theologians that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, states at the Conclusion of his book that while each of the two views (the one of ETS and the one of the other theologians cited in his book) "...falls within the boundary of traditional orthodoxy...(in that)...neither view has been condemned by an official body of the church....(he is concerned that the second position, the one that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father, with the Father holding supremacy of authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit)....is an unstable position...." which might prove threatening to numerous orthodox traditions, including even the belief that Jesus was both fully God and fully human.

So the author does proceed from a position of obvious bias with respect to his views of the Trinity, those being the ones expressed by the ETS, as generally outlined above. However, the author having heard numerous presentations by very learned, respected theologians (all of whom are cited in his book) who have expressed at meetings of the ETS and elsewhere and in very extensive writings and in discussions with the author their positions, which they have argued are supported by Scripture and Church History and Tradition, as well as by logic and philosophical reasoning, that the Son and the Holy Spirit are, and have for all eternity been subordinate in their authority to the authority of the Father (while they are in all respects God and Divine and of an essence equal to that of the Father), was persuaded to carefully examine the issues related to the "eternal subordination" debate from all sides, in order to either firm up or refute his previously held position (that of the ETS). Hence, the author engaged in very extensive studies of Scripture, Church History and Tradition, and arguments of logic and philosophy, as well as concerns over practical considerations, in order to try, as best he could, to



determine the “truth” of one of the two competing positions as to the Trinity.

The author first characterized the two competing positions, only one of which can be correct or “true”, as they are in direct contradiction to each other. He identifies these two positions as being “the gradational view” and the “equivalence view.” The gradational view is the one held by some theologians and some church leaders, all of whom are identified by the author, with their arguments and supporting sources (including Scriptural, Church Tradition, Philosophy and Logic sources) being extensively described by the author. The gradational view is that, while all three of the Divine Persons of the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are God and equally Divine, holding all of the “essence” of Divinity, there has been eternally and is, and will for all eternity be a hierarchy of authority among them, with the Father being the “supreme member of the Trinity”, and hence the one who sent the Son and who with the Son sent the Holy Spirit. Under this view “.....this is how the three have been related in eternity past, during the earthly ministry of Jesus, and the present ministry of the Holy Spirit in the life of believers, and it will also be true throughout eternity future.” The other view, the equivalence view, holds that “...the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally equal in authority....” and that they are equal in all aspects of their very essence and nature, while “...a temporary functional subordination of the Son to the Father has been established for the purposes of carrying out a particular mission....(but when)...that mission is completed, the three persons’ full equal authority will resume....” Therefore, references to the Father’s authority as to the Son, or to the Son doing the Father’s will, are to be referred to this temporary, functional and missional subordination. A further statement might also be added to the equivalence view, and that is that the Divine Community consisting of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit has, in some manner (either by covenant, agreement, joint decision or simply a total concurrence of mind and will) has provided that one of their persons will perform certain functions in the furtherance of the Divine Plan for redemption of God’s Creation. In other words, while one of them might perform certain functions (such as those performed by the Son during His earthly ministry, and the ones now performed by the Holy Spirit) the decision (for want of a better word, my word not that of the author) that one of them would perform such a function is one made by a joint will of the three persons of the Divine Community, the Trinity.

These two views, the gradational view and the equivalence view, obviously contradict each other. Only one of them can be the “Truth”. So the author embarked on an extensive study, and analysis and thought process in order to determine for himself and his readers which of these two views appears to be “the stronger view”, recognizing that he could (and we can) only decide which view seems to be supported by the greater weight of the evidence and that the ultimate truth as to the two views rests only in the knowledge of the Divine Community.

In embarking on this study and analysis, the author first seeks to arrive at a proper definition of “Truth”. What is true, and how do we seek to determine what is true and what is not true, or, more appropriately in this case and in the case of many complex, not easily decided theological issues, what is more likely true (or what does the greater weight of the evidence convinces us that something is more likely true than is something else)? To put it another way, considering all of the relevant, competent evidence, of what do we become convinced that



something is true, while exercising proper humility by acknowledging that there are other views which might later prove to be the "Truth." So, in this case the author seeks to arrive at a model, method or criteria for determining which of the two views of the Trinity (i.e. the Gradational of Authority view or the Equivalence of Authority view) is more likely True when all of the evidence is considered. The author first identifies the three theories of truth which are held pursuant to the conventional wisdom of philosophers, such being "*the correspondence theory*", "*the coherence theory*" and "*the pragmatic theory*". The correspondence theory holds that "...truth is agreement of ideas or propositions with the actual state of affairs.." (and it is the theory that is most generally accepted). The coherence theory "...is that truth is the agreement or coherence of ideas or propositions with others within their set". The "...pragmatic theory is that truth is the utility of ideas or propositions, the fact that they work out to have desirable consequences". In other words (mine not the author's) "if it works it is true". While generally accepting the *correspondence theory of truth*, which the author argues (and has argued) "...at length (elsewhere) that virtually every sane and functioning human being proceeds on the basis of what (he calls) a primitive or naive correspondence theory..."; it appears to me, your reviewer, that the author in fact uses a theory of truth (at least in this instance as to the questions about the Trinity) that is something of an amalgamation of all of the three classic theories of truth. He examines the evidence, first, for what it shows to be the actual "correspondence" with the actual nature of the Trinity of the two views, the Gradational of Authority view and the Equivalence of Authority view. He then examines the evidence in order to determine whether either of these two views represents a true correspondence with other views or ideas or traditions which make up the "matrix" if you will of Christian Orthodoxy. The author then, having arrived at what I have characterized as an amalgamation of the classical theories of Truth (something which I have concluded from this book and not from the author's stated conclusions) seeks to determine the practical effects of each of these two views on such matters as Christian Prayer (i.e. should Christians direct their prayers to the Father, as Jesus advised as to the Lord's Prayer, the Our Father, or should they pray to the Father through Jesus or direct their prayers to Jesus (such as is the case with the so called *maranatha prayer*) asking for His return, or when should they pray to the Holy Spirit for His guidance, or to the Trinity as a Divine Community) and other Orthodox Christian Doctrines contained in the matrix of Orthodox Christian Doctrine (meaning that if one of these two views is accepted as true, what will be the effect of that acceptance upon other "truths" or "traditions" or doctrines in the overall matrix of Christian Orthodoxy).

I want to make this clear. The conclusion that the author has used an amalgamation of the three classical theories of Truth is my conclusion, and it is not one clearly stated by the author. It simply seems to me to be a conclusion which logically flows from the overall flow of this book. Whether or not my conclusion is a correct one, the author does, in seeking the Truth of either of the two views of authority among the three persons of the Trinity, apply what I would call a "Theological Model" or "Theological Method". His Model or Method is not dissimilar from the one outlined by the so called "Wesleyan Quadrilateral". In that Model the sources of Theological Truth are variously stated to be: "Holy Scripture", "Church Tradition and History", "Human Reason or Reasoning" (which I believe includes science, logic, philosophy and other sources of human reason and discovery), and "Experience" (both personal and corporate spiritual



experience). One might also add to this Quadrilateral or one of its points or to this list of Sources of Theological Truth, "Natural Revelation" or "Nature (which could include the hard and soft sciences, and just plain human observations of the world around us such as is spoken of by Paul in Romans 1). The question arises in using a Wesleyan Quadrilateral Model or any Theological Model or Method which provides for resort to the various sources of God's Truth just what weight (some would say "font size") you give to each of these sources. The author certainly attaches his greatest weight (as would most theologians) to Scripture, which provides the guiding light for any theological investigation. Any conclusion of Theological Truth must lie within the boundaries or rails established by the Bible, Scripture.

The author, using his Theological Model or Theological Method, and seeking to evaluate all of the sources of available evidence as to the Truth or Falsity of either of the two views of Trinitarian Authority, carefully examines:

-1) Scripture, and all Scriptural Passages which seem to deal with the issue, including those passages asserted and argued by each of the theologians, both past (including historical past) and present to be supportive of their view, whether that be the Gradational of Authority view or the Equivalence of Authority view (and the author's examination and analysis here is very thorough and even handed on both sides of the issue).

-2) Church Tradition and Church History, including the views on the issue expressed by such noted theologians as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and others, the author's goal being one to seek to determine just what the historical position of the Church has been on the issue of Trinitarian Authority (and, again, the author's analysis here is very thorough and very fair and even handed).

-3) The Creed's adopted by the various Councils of the Church including "*the Nicene Creed*", "*the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*", "*the Athanasian Creed*", "*the Apostles' Creed*", and the "*Chalcedonian Creed*", and the various arguments of the theologians on both sides of the Trinitarian Authority issue whereby they argue that these Creeds support their position or view (and, again, the author's analysis here is very detailed and even handed).

-4) The tenets of Logic and Philosophy, and the manner in which they apply to the issue at hand, and the arguments of the theologians on both sides of this issue as to how these tenets support their respective positions or views.

-5) The ultimate practical effects of each of the two views on various important matters, such as Christian Prayer, the entire matrix of doctrines of Christian Orthodoxy and Pastoral Care.

I am not going to even attempt to outline the author's investigations, arguments or conclusions in each of these 5) areas of his theological investigation. I leave it to the reader to read this book and arrive at his or her own conclusions in these respects. Suffice it to say that the author's use of his Theological Model or Theological Method (while applying his theory of Truth, which I have concluded, rightly or wrongly something of an amalgamation of the three classic theories of truth) is exhaustive, and is extremely fair to the views of the theologians on both sides of the "Subordination of Authority" issue, and that he places the reader in a position where the reader can be apprised of the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments on both sides



of this issue. The author's final conclusion is as follows: "We have seen that the arguments for an against each of these views are complex and range over a large number of areas. Neither view has any single fatal difficulty, and neither is supported unambiguously by all of the evidence. Consequently, we must choose on the basis of the stronger consistency and coherence of the two views, the relative weight of the evidence supporting each, and the ability of each to deal with its problems and the objections raised to it. Without calculating any exact percentage, it is my judgment that the equivalence view is, on the basis of the criteria we have outlined, considerably the stronger of the two views, and thus to be accepted over the gradational view. At the same time, we must be careful to keep our minds open to the evidence and to continue to investigate the relevant considerations, being prepared to change our minds if the balance of the argumentation shifts."

What a great expression of the overall posture which theologians and we Christians should take as to complex theological issues which rest outside of the circle of those "core principles" which we accept without any reservation whatsoever; that posture being that "we can be convinced of our position but we must do so with proper humility, recognizing that there are other positions and that we could be wrong".

On the whole I think that this book presents a great Case Study of the application of a Theological Model or Theological Method in seeking to work with a complex theological question.

To What Audience or Readership is This Book Directed?: I don't think that it is directed to the everyday Christian in the pews of our congregations. I don't think that they ever gave any thought to the issue of whether or not there are degrees of authority among the Three Persons of the Trinity, and I am not sure that even bringing up that issue will serve them in any way. So I think that the book is directed to other Academic Theologians, Church Pastors, and perhaps some other Church Leaders. Why is that the case? I think that people in these capacities will, by reading this book, be exposed to, and will learn a great deal about Theological Models or Methods and how to use them in confronting theological issues.

How To Read This Book: I know that everyone wants to find a shortcut to reading any book that is not an easy read. Candidly, I cannot provide such a shortcut here. I believe that anyone who approaches this book has to be serious enough about the questions it presents, and the methodology of problem solving which it presents in order to read the whole book. That said, one can become well acquainted with the contents of the book by reading its very fine Introduction (which clearly outlines the issues at hand-the two views of relative Trinitarian Authority), and the concluding "Summary and Conclusions", which sets forth, in summary form, the results of the author's investigation and conclusions and his concerns for the possible ultimate practical effect (a feared negative one) of the "Gradational of Authority" view on the real nature/essence of each of the three persons of the Trinity (i.e. How can they all be in *essence* equivalent and divine and God, if, in fact, a part of that *essence* would place two of them in subordinate positions, subject to the will and directions (command if you will) of the Father-putting it in my terms, not those of the author, how can Jesus be fully God, fully Divine if He has



been, is, and will for all time be a Person of Subordinate Authority to the Authority of the Father?). Having read the Introduction and the Summary and Conclusions, one can also review the Table of Contents. One should then have a very good idea as to the contents of the book. Even if one chooses to “quickly read” the book, if you will, then I don’t think that one has to exhaustively read each chapter of the book, but one should then at least carefully skim each chapter, and then carefully read the conclusions which appear at the end of each chapter.

Can This Book Be Used In TE I/ECLI?: It cannot be used as a text for any class. It is, however, a great library resource, and it can be used as a wonderful case study for the identification of, and application/use of a Theological Model.

My Personal Issue: I am not sure why, but I have had some earlier acquaintance with this “Degree of Authority” issue. The one Biblical Passage which has always “bothered me”, if you will, is 1 Corinthians 15:24-28, where Paul states that: “Then the end will come, when he (meaning the Son) hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.....Now when it says that ‘everything’ has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who has put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.” I must personally confess that this passage, at least standing by itself indicates, if it does not outright state that the Son will hand over the kingdom and be subordinated to the Father. The author, and other theologians who support the “Equivalence of Authority” view find that this passage refers only to a “functional subordination” of the Son to the Father with respect to the battle or plan to redeem creation, and that this functional subordination will end (if it has not already ended) when the battle or plan is completed. Draw your own conclusions about this passage.