

A Response to “An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity”

by Daniel H. Chew

Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith: Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance [Essence] ...

— Athanasian Creed, Sections 1 to 4¹

Recently, William David Spencer, in consultation with many theologians, has drafted a document which he has called “An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity.” Is this document however what it proclaims to be? Is this statement truly Evangelical, in the historic sense of the term? More importantly, is it biblical?

In this article, I would like to analyze this statement as it is made available online.² Is this a statement that Christians and especially Evangelicals should embrace, or should it be rejected?

The theological commentary of the Statement is arranged according to a few themes, and we will therefore in part one first address these themes in the order they are written, then give an apologetic for a more biblical view of the Trinity in part two

PART I

I. Athanasius and the issue of rank

The Statement starts by strongly affirming the equality of the Persons of the Trinity. It strongly affirms that the three distinct persons of the Trinity are equal “in being,

¹ “The Athanasian Creed”, in Philip Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1877, 1905, 1919). As accessed on e-Sword.

² “An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity” (<http://www.trinitystatement.com/wp-content/files/AN%20EVANGELICAL%20STATEMENT%20ON%20THE%20TRINITY,%20Dec,%20011.pdf>)

authority and power” and therefore there are “equalities of the attributes of each Person of the Trinity.” It then addresses the issue of rank (*taxis*), quoting Athanasius in his *Epistulae quattuor ad Serapionem* to that effect that “But of such rank [*taxis*] and nature the Spirit is having to the Son, so the Son has to the Father.” It then next quotes from a follower of Athanasius who is cited as saying, “But the Father is first not according to time, and not according to rank, surely not!”

The issue here is what we mean by “rank.” The Greek word *taxis* (τάξις) has the meaning of “an arrangement of things in sequence,” “a state of good order,” or “assigned station or rank, position.”³ The idea therefore seems to be one of order or position. To be first in rank (τάξις) implies that one is superior to the others. Therefore, we must conclude that Athanasian Christianity does in fact deny any such primacy of the Persons over each other. But denial of primacy does not imply denial of order in some sense, as we shall see later

When we analyze the original sources closer, an examination of the quote by Athanasius does not seem to teach what Spencer in the Statement is saying. This is the larger context of the sentence from the *Epistulae quattuor ad Serapionem*:

and on the one hand, the Son praises the Father, saying, "Father, I praised you." And the Spirit praises the Son, "That one" for he [the Son] says, "He praised me." And on the other hand the Son says, "The [things] I heard from the Father, these even I speak into the world." And the Spirit receives from the Son. "From me [Jesus]" for "He [the Spirit] will receive and proclaim to you," he says. And on the one hand the Son came in the name of the Father. "But [as for] the Holy Spirit," the Son says, "The Father who sent [me sends] in my name." And of

³ τάξις, BDAG

such order and nature, the Spirit is having with the Son, so the Son has with the Father, how is this creature saying, "He [the Spirit] is not" and will he think concerning the Son that he [exists] of necessity? But if the Spirit of the Son is a creature, following it might be they say even the Word of the Father is a creature. For of such the Arians having appeared, have fallen into [the error according to] Caiaphas and Judaism.⁴

Athanasius was discussing the relation of the Spirit to the Son as being analogous to the relation of the Son to the Father. His discussion of "rank" (τάξις) and nature in the sentence cited is therefore his attempt to posit an analogy between how the Spirit is sent by the Son and how the Son was sent by the Father; between the order of the Spirit to the Son and the order of the Son to the Father. Through this analogy, the deity of the Spirit is affirmed, for the denial of the divinity of the Spirit and making Him to be a creature should then be followed by the denial of the divinity of the Son, the Word (*Logos*) of God the Father, which is the error of the Arians.

Ironically therefore, Athanasius seems to be teaching some form of order even in the sentence cited by Spencer to teach the opposite, a fact which shall be discussed later.

II. The Uniqueness of God

⁴ Athanasius, *Epistulae quattuor ad Serapionem*. Translation by Daniel H. Chew. Original as follows:

Καὶ ὁ μὲν Υἱὸς τὸν Πατέρα δοξάζει, λέγων· «Πάτερ, ἐγὼ σε ἐδόξασα»· τὸ δὲ Πνεῦμα δοξάζει τὸν Υἱόν· «Εκεῖνος» γὰρ, φησὶν, «ἐμὲ δοξάσει.» Καὶ ὁ μὲν Υἱὸς φησὶν· «Ἄ ἤκουσα παρὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς, ταῦτα καὶ λαλῶ εἰς τὸν κόσμον»· τὸ δὲ Πνεῦμα ἐκ τοῦ Υἱοῦ λαμβάνει· «Ἐκ τοῦ ἐμοῦ» γὰρ «λήπεται καὶ ἀναγγελεῖ ὑμῖν,» φησὶ. Καὶ ὁ μὲν Υἱὸς ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ Πατρὸς ἦλθε· «Τὸ δὲ Πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον,» φησὶν ὁ Υἱὸς, «ὃ πέμψει ὁ Πατὴρ ἐν τῷ ὀνόματί μου.» Τοιαύτην δὲ τάξιν καὶ φύσιν ἔχοντος τοῦ Πνεύματος πρὸς τὸν Υἱόν, οἷαν ὁ Υἱὸς ἔχει πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα, πῶς ὁ τοῦτο κτίσμα λέγων οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ καὶ περὶ τοῦ Υἱοῦ ἐξ ἀνάγκης φρονήσει; Εἰ γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα τοῦ Υἱοῦ κτίσμα, ἀκόλουθον ἂν εἶη λέγειν αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸν Λόγον τοῦ Πατρὸς εἶναι κτίσμα. Τοιαῦτα γὰρ οἱ Ἀρειανοὶ φαντασθέντες, εἰς τὸν κατὰ Καϊάφαν Ἰουδαϊσμὸν πεπτώκασιν.

The Statement proclaims the uniqueness of God, saying that “we must rely on God’s revelation of God’s nature.” To this, we would add a hearty amen. It however states also the following:

“We mistake the nature of the Godhead by positing three Persons in tandem, one eternally exercising authority over the others as human chief executive officers exercise authority over their subordinate staff.”

As a statement, it is certainly true. The Persons of the Godhead do not exercise authority one over the other and bossing each other around. But who exactly teaches that?

It is suspected that this sentence is rather aimed at the complementarian position that the relations between the Godhead exhibit authority and submission, which is the type of the relationship that should exist between husbands and wives as based upon biblical texts such as 1 Cor. 11:3. If this is the aim of this section, it misses the mark altogether. First of all, complementarians have never claimed that the relations between the Godhead are based upon any hierarchal relations in the world. Rather, relations between wives and husbands are to image the relation between Christ and God the Father (c.f. 1 Cor. 11:3). Complementarians also have never claimed that the persons of the Godhead exercise authority as superiors over their inferiors, or anything like that. If this section was aimed at the analogy drawn between the wife-husband relation to the Christ-God the Father relation, it totally misses the mark altogether.

III. God and the limitation of human gender

The Statement is right in saying that God has no gender, and that issues of gender relation should be “included under the doctrine of humanity and not of the Trinity.”

However, as is similar above, if this is meant to be a rebuttal of complementarian thought, it misses the mark. The direction of flow is from the Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son as the analogy for how husbands and wives are to interact with each other. The claim that “there is no direct and specific analogical correspondence” between one man and one woman, and between the relation between the Father and the Son, explicitly contradicts Scripture in 1 Cor, 11:3. The charge of “ignor[ing] the Holy Spirit” is vacuous as firstly, the analogy in Scripture in 1 Cor. 11:3 does not speak of the Holy Spirit. Secondly, such a charge does not interact with how people like Augustine have dealt with the issue of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity, in which the Holy Spirit is mentioned as mediating the gift of love between the Father and the Son.⁵ This model is perfectly congruent with the complementarian analogy of the relation between the Father and the Son. Regardless of whether one agrees with Augustine, that there is present at least one analogy compatible with complementarianism, whereby the Holy Spirit is not ignored in discussing the relation between the Father and the Son, means that any charge of ignoring the Holy Spirit must by necessity show why Augustine’s model does in fact “ignore the Holy Spirit.”

The Statement continues by quoting Athanasius’ warning against “over anthropomorphizing Trinitarian language.” This is certainly true, but as usual, if it was meant to be a rebuttal against complementarianism, it misses the mark again.

IV. God and the exercise of perfect co-operative relationships

⁵ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.19.37 (NPNF¹ 3: 219-20)

God is said to exercise perfect co-operative relationships. The Statement correctly notes that the “Persons of the Godhead indwell each other (John 17:21), expressing perfect love and mutual glorification (John 17:1; 23-24), each sharing cooperatively in humanity’s creation, redemption and sanctification.”

The issue however is not whether all the Persons of the Godhead cooperate with each other. The issue is whether in that cooperation one Person of the Godhead submits to another Person of the Godhead, a submission which both parties consent to gladly and they cooperate through such a relationship. As we shall see, only a distorted view of submission and radical egalitarian assumptions force the false dichotomy between cooperation and submission.

V. Voluntary deference and the plan of salvation

Spencer in this Statement elaborates greatly on the point that voluntary deference is the way the Persons of the Godhead relate to each other, and even quotes John Calvin and B.B. Warfield to that effect. The problem comes when he says that voluntary deference indicates that there was only a “temporal (not eternal) submission of one of the Persons of the Godhead in the incarnation.”

It seems that voluntary deference in the view of Spencer implies a denial of submission, and therefore the submission of the Son to the Father is only temporal, not eternal. The problem is that this is another false dichotomy based upon egalitarian assumptions. Voluntary deference is not antithetical to submission of any form. We agree with Calvin and Warfield that Christ’ voluntary deference to the Father does not in

any way deviate from His perfect equality with the Father, but as we have said, equality does not imply the denial of submission of Persons within the Godhead.

VI. Elements of Arianism?

The Statement ends with the charge that we should avoid elements of Arianism. They correctly point out that “suggestions of superiority and inferiority of authority eternally exist among the Persons of the Godhead are problematic” and that the position that “the degree of each attribute can differ according to rank” is contradictory to the sharing of the same divine essence. The problem is that complementarianism does not believe in any of these things. If it was meant to be an attempted summary rebuttal of complementarianism, the whole Statement is a straw man.

With this, let us look more deeply into the issue of complementarianism and the Trinity.

PART II

I. Complementarianism

We shall start with a brief description of complementarianism, the biblical antidote to egalitarianism. Egalitarianism is the view that equality (especially as it pertains to men and women) pertains to every aspect of being, roles and relationships. Therefore, egalitarianism teaches that there is full equality between men and women to the extent that there are no fundamental differences (besides biological which cannot be denied) between men and women. In society, egalitarianism teaches what is called absolute gender blindness. No discrimination between men and women is allowed, and whatever

men can do, women can likewise do. Whatever men can be, women can likewise be. You will seldom hear of course of the converse that men should be able to do what women can do, although egalitarianism should promote that same truth.

In marriage, egalitarianism is worked out in the rejection of any form of headship of the husband over the wife. If any headship is allowed at all (soft egalitarianism), it is a functional headship whereby one party especially the dominant party makes the final decision. In Christian circles, this can be worked out as the husband being the head of the family in the sense of functionally leading the family. Yet any other form of headship is implicitly or explicitly denied.

Complementarianism is the view that agrees that men and women are equal before God. Women are not inferior to men, or vice versa. However, we stress that there is a creational difference of roles and relationships between men and women. Men and women are different not just biologically, but also ontologically as created. If it was just biological, then having a sex-change operation would turn one automatically from a male to a female or vice versa. Rather, gender is not a biological or social construct but a created construct.

Socially, this means that men and women are not the same. Certainly, women should not be discriminated against in terms of denying of jobs and promotions and pay, but this is not what we are getting at. The issue here is that men and women think differently, perceive things differently etc. To the extent that such differences are manifested, they should not be denigrated as mere social constructs, as if women must be able to be almost a carbon copy of men with the exception of biology. Differences

between the genders are to be celebrated, not denigrated. Along this line, having mandatory gender quotas for any field of study and work denies both the equality of value and worth, and the created differences between the two sexes. Having a minimum number of women in politics (an affirmative action) is one such error of egalitarianism. Fields such as these should be based purely on interest and meritocracy rather than some misplaced egalitarian view of human nature. If no woman for example wants to join politics, one should not force them to, and one should not discriminate against them entering the field either.

In the family, there is an equality in the worth and value of the marriage partners. But the headship of husband is ordained by God not merely as a functional reality but as a creational ontological reality. A woman submits to her husband not because that is the best way to run a household; not because if both sides insist on their way there would be perpetual conflict. A woman submits to her husband because that is the ordained reality of creation. Similarity in worth and value, but differences in roles and relationships.

In complementarianism, the submission called for is not that of a superior over the inferior. Men are not superior to women and women are not inferior to men. Rather, it is a submission of an equal to another equal, based upon creational reality. Only the embrace of radical egalitarian assumptions would make this incoherent, for egalitarianism equates submission to inferiority, whereas that is not true.

II. The Relations of the Persons of the Triune Godhead

It is unanimously agreed that the Son in His incarnation submits to the Father. What is disagreed here however is that such a submission is eternal. In other words, there is a denial that the relations of the Persons within the Godhead are eternal.

The problem with the Statement comes about however when one looks into the way the Creeds speak of the relations between the Persons of the Trinity. As we have previously said, Athanasius teaches that there is a similarity in order of the Spirit to the Son, and of the Son to the Father. Athanasius in fact teaches such an ordering of the relationships between the Persons in the Godhead. As the Athanasian Creed puts it,

The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten.
The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created: but begotten.
The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten: but proceeding.⁶

And as it is written in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed,

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds ... begotten, not made, being of one substance [*essence*] with the Father ...
And ... in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life; who proceedeth from the Father [and the Son]⁷

The Creeds are unanimous that the relationships between the Persons of the Godhead are eternal. These are the same creeds that teach the equality between the three persons of the Godhead. The Church Fathers did not see a contradiction between the idea that the Persons of the Godhead have eternal relations between them, and that they are coequal and coeternal. Threading a path through the twin errors of Modalism on one side, and Arianism and Subordinationism on the other, they expressed against

⁶ "The Athanasian Creed," Sections 21-3. As cited in Schaff, *Creeds*.

⁷ "The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed." As cited in Schaff, *Creeds*.

the former error that the persons of the Godhead are distinct and have distinct relationships between them, and against the latter errors that the Persons of the Godhead are coequal, coeternal and all fully God.

Robert Reymond has argued that the relations between the Persons of the Godhead should be temporal, not eternal.⁸ His position however comes about because of a misunderstanding of what such an ordering means, which we shall now look at.

III. The Persons of the Godhead: Fixed or Arbitrary?

The crux of the issue in whether the relationships within the Trinity are eternal or temporal pertains to the status of the Persons of the Godhead. Are the Persons of the Godhead fixed as to their eternal beings and differing roles they play, or is their positions an arbitrary decision? In other words, is the Father necessarily the Father and therefore does what He does because He is the Father? Or is the Father the Father because that is the role He plays?

I would submit that the Persons of the Godhead are what they are because they are what they are. The alternative scenario would play out as if the three persons of the Godhead in eternity past decided to throw the heavenly three-sided dice. Person X1 threw the dice, and it came out "Father" and so He became the Father. Person X2 threw the dice, and it came out "Son" and so He became the Son. In this scenario, it is

⁸ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2nd Ed. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 323-35. Reymond's argument is basically that it undermines the equality of the Persons and the Reformational emphasis on the all three Persons of the Trinity being *autotheos*. I submit that this is a misunderstanding of what the Church Fathers and Creeds are driving at when they use language such as "eternal generation," "begetting," and "procession."

hypothetically possible that Person X1 threw the dice and the outcome was “Son” instead of “Father.”

It is my opinion that the Persons of the Godhead are what they are by nature, not by choice. In fact, a belief in divine immutability necessitates that God the Father is God the Father by necessity, and this applies to all the Persons of the Godhead. If that is so, then the relations between the different persons of the Godhead which differentiate them become necessarily eternal. When God the Father is said to be neither created nor begotten, it means that God the Father has the distinctive of being neither created nor begotten. When God the Son is said to be not created but begotten of the Father alone, it means that that is the distinctive status of the Son. Likewise, when God the Holy Spirit is said to be neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding, it means that that description is the distinctive status of the Spirit.

Therefore, the differing relations within the Godhead must be eternal, to safeguard against the blurring of the Persons which has its concluding point in Modalism. Reymond’s rejection of Jn.5 :25 as teaching an eternal relation of the Son to the Father is invalid as the discourse in verses 19 and 30 speaks of the outworking of the eternal plan of God where Jesus is not doing any work of himself.⁹ The context is indeed messianic in nature as Reymond claims, but more than that it is divine in nature. No human messiah can claim that God has given all judgment to him such that God the Father does not personally judge (Jn. 5:23). As a revelation of the *pactum salutis*, the context with its frequent use of the present tense (which is gnomic in sense) indicates

⁹ Reymond, 325

that the passage of Jn. 5:19-30 is the revelation of the divine submission and authority of the Son to the Father.

The issue therefore of the submission of the Son to the Father, and other such relations, is eternal and pertains to the differentiations of the Persons of the Godhead. Reymond is correct in summarizing that “the Son, with respect to his essential being, is wholly God of himself (αὐτόθεος)” and that He “as the second Person of the Godhead, derives his *hypostatic identity*, as the Son from the ‘generated’ relation ‘before all ages’ which he sustains to God the Father, the first Person of the Godhead.”¹⁰ His rejection of eternal relations and order stems from a misunderstanding of what these concepts exactly mean, since they logically flow from the two summaries that he has himself embraced.

IV. Rejection of Egalitarianism in the Trinity

If the relations between the Trinity are fundamental to preserving their distinction, such that the Father is not the Son and the Son not the Spirit, then the egalitarian interpretation of the Trinity found in the “Evangelical Statement” by Spencer is to be rejected. Just because the persons of the Godhead are equal in rank does not mean that they have no rank. Such is smuggling in of egalitarian principles into the doctrine of the Trinity, where differences especially if it is couched in the language of “submission” and “authority” when interpreted through that hermeneutical filter must necessarily imply superiority and inferiority. Yet the Bible is clear that there is an order within the persons of the Godhead, for example that the Son is begotten of the Father (c.f. Ps. 2: 7), not

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 335

the other way around. Such an order never translates into inferiority and superiority, but the order in the intra-Trinitarian relationships does remain nevertheless.

The egalitarian impulse in this Statement, in its attack against what it perceives as Subordinationism and Arian tendencies, make the Statement deny any form of subordination whatsoever. If the Persons of the Godhead are truly egalitarian such that there are no real differences in relations and roles except for what is functional, the logical conclusion is that the Persons of the Godhead are not truly distinct. Thus, the begottenness of the Son is a functional activity and the procession of the Spirit likewise. The specter of three Persons, X1, X2 and X3, in eternal past rolling the cosmic 3-sided dice to determine who will take the temporal role of "Father," "Son" and "Holy Spirit" rears its ugly head.

Such an error moves Spencer's position towards the other end of the spectrum towards Modalism. In fact, consistently, this view of the Trinity could be called Hypothetical Patripassionism, since it is hypothetically possible that the Person who is now the Father could very well have drawn the role of the "Son" and died on the Cross instead.

Besides being in error through necessary deductions from the truths of Scripture, the egalitarian impulse in this Statement is ahistorical. As we have seen, it distorts what Athanasius is teaching. Furthermore, the Filioque controversy shows us that the early Church does think the relations between the Trinity to be eternal and not just temporal, for nobody in the East-West controversy ever disputes that Jn. 15:26 teaches that Jesus the Son sends the Spirit in time.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Christians should reject this supposed Evangelical Statement on the Trinity. It is contrary to the Scriptures, contrary to the Creeds of the historic Christian faith, contrary to the teachings of the Church Fathers, and thus contrary to orthodoxy. Its rank embrace of egalitarianism compromises the doctrine of God and shifts it towards the other end of the spectrum of Modalism in its embrace of Hypothetical Patripassionism. In its attack against complementarianism, it misrepresents it based upon egalitarian presuppositions and then reads egalitarianism into the Godhead.

What we need is a robust understanding of the complementarity of submission and equality. "Submission" is not a four-letter word! It is rather the proper response of one equal towards another equal as ordained by God. The Son submits to the Father gladly, and in order is begotten from Him, yet He is not inferior in any way including order.

Let us maintain the proper emphases as seen in the Athanasian Creed, which proclaim both the coequality of all three persons of the Godhead while teaching also the distinct order of the Persons. Let us not follow this so-called "Evangelical Statement" and pit them against each other, denying the latter in the name of affirming the former. Amen.