

# Preserving the Trinity

## Inside:

**Page 4** How complementarians should not argue for their position

**Page 9** How eternal functional subordination undermines transactional atonement theory

**Page 16** An extended review of *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*

**Page 26** Examining eternal functional subordination in light of the church fathers

# Contents

3

On Earth as in Heaven  
*Mimi Haddad*

4

Trinity, Gender, and the Ordination  
of Women: How Complementarians  
Should *Not* Argue for Their Position  
*John Jefferson Davis*

9

Crumbling Cathedrals of the  
Mind: How Eternal Functional  
Subordination Undermines  
Transactional Atonement Theory  
*D. Glenn Butner*

16

An Extended Review of *One God in Three  
Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of  
Persons, Implications for Life*  
*Reviewed by Kevin Giles*

26

One Essence, One Goodness, One Power  
*Nancy Hedberg*

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# On Earth as in Heaven

Mimi Haddad

Growing up close in age, my sister and I developed various systems to negotiate our disputes or perceived injustices. Generally, our methods worked well. But there were occasions when we were forced to appeal the highest court—our parents. We made our plea only rarely, knowing that in soliciting our parents' judgment, there would be no turning back. Our parents would render a final answer. In a similar way, Christians committed to male-authority have brought their case to the highest court—the Trinity. Those who see women as equal in being but unequal in role (authority) search for parallels in heaven, where they believe God the Son is equal in being (*ontos*) but unequal in authority (*telos*) to God the Father. While the analogy between relations in the Godhead mirroring those on earth is flawed as analogies go, the discussion itself exposes the distinct worldviews held by “siblings” who differ on male authority as God's ideal.

What is at the heart of our divergent worldviews? It is nothing less than the nature of God the Son. To suggest that men and women are equal in being but unequal in authority *just as* God the Son is equal in essence or in being (ontologically) to God the Father, yet unequal in authority, is to resurrect an ancient heresy known as subordinationism—an inadequate and feeble view of Christ against which the Nicene Creed was aimed. The crafters of the Nicene Creed were careful to make one matter clear: God the Son and God the Father share equally in power, glory, honor, and majesty, just as they share one will *because* they are *one* God.

The theological emphasis of the Nicene Creed is repeated in later creeds because the historic church opposed any ranking of power or authority within the Godhead. Through these creeds and in the theological writings of the church as a whole, an orthodox view of the Trinity was carefully guarded. For this reason, it should not surprise us that the recent mutation of the doctrine of the Trinity has inspired much debate and numerous publications, and has now become the theme of this year's Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) convention.

A subordinationist view of the Trinity has been building for years among complementarians, who have traversed every theological path in teaching that Christian faith has a “masculine feel,” and that God is revealed primarily through male leadership. The sum of these efforts is the distortion of every doctrine of systematic theology. This is never more the case than when insisting on the eternal subordination of God the Son to God the Father—a perspective that itself brings enormous disarray to our doctrine of Christ.

It is Jesus who most perfectly reveals the nature and being of God through his words, and especially his deeds—healing the sick, raising the dead, forgiving sins, and more. Jesus accomplishes these miracles because he holds absolute authority as God the Son—sharing in the same authority and glory as God the Father (Matt. 28:18, Eph.1:20–21, Col. 2:9–10). What is more, those who insist on the eternal authority of God the Father now teach Christians

to pray *not to Jesus* but to God the Father,<sup>1</sup> who alone is said to hold supreme authority within the Godhead.<sup>2</sup> Of course, the one, true God *has* only *one* will. To suggest that the Son is lesser in authority, power, glory, or dominion *is* undeniably a primary issue that some claim is untouched by the gender debate. Yet, modern subordinationism is taught by those who wish to deny women equal authority and leadership in church and family life. They have contrived a faulty divine example to defend a faulty argument.

To say that men and women are *equal* in being but that males hold supreme authority eviscerates the term “equal” of its essential meaning. Two parties cannot be “equal” if they are ontologically defined by a power differential. This renders the word “equal” meaningless. The “equal but different” argument was used in the United States to segregate according to skin color, and the Supreme Court correctly determined that separate is never equal.

The notion of “separate” or “other” creates *inherently* unequal and unjust social structures. To posit that males and females are equal in dignity but different in role (i.e. unequal in authority) solely due to gender—a fixed and unchangeable condition—is to create communities, organizations, churches and marriages that are *inherently unjust*. Leadership throughout Scripture is based on character (1 Tim. 3:2–11) which is a choice, rather than gender, which is not.

As when my sister and I appealed to our parents, Christians today are appealing to the Trinity to discern whether an equality of being (*ontos*) can ever yield a *permanent* inequality of authority or purpose (*telos*). If more than 1500 years of theological reflection offers insight, the answer is “No!” This view is not simply theologically flawed, it is used to marginalize women's agency, based solely on gender. It is an injustice that distorts the teachings of Scripture and diminishes human flourishing.

The articles in the following pages examine the subordinationist argument and its ramifications. Together, they present a compelling case for the orthodox view of the Trinity. It is my fervent hope that the evangelical academy chooses to stand on the side of orthodoxy in this critical conversation.

## Notes

1 Bruce Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance*. (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2005), 18–19.

2 *Ibid*, 21.



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# Trinity, Gender, and the Ordination of Women: How Complementarians Should *Not* Argue for Their Position

John Jefferson Davis

## Introduction and Background

The title of this paper requires some clarification, in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding. I am not arguing that complementarians should not argue for their position, but rather, that they should not argue for their position in a particular way: i.e., by appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity in general, and in particular, to some notion of the “eternal subordination of the Son,” as, for example, in the work of Wayne Grudem.

The argument of this paper will be as follows: first, that the notion of the “eternal subordination of the Son” (hereafter, ESS) is inconsistent with historic Nicene orthodoxy and Reformation creeds; second, that ESS is inconsistent with the witness of the New Testament; third, that the New Testament texts that are germane to this debate focus not on the Trinity, but on the doctrines of creation and Christ’s relationship to the church; and fourth, that appeals by complementarians to the doctrine of the Trinity are counterproductive to their own interests—inasmuch as they by so doing associate their arguments with teachings that have been understood as heretical by mainstream Trinitarian orthodoxy.

### 1. Grudem and the “Eternal Subordination of the Son”

In several of his published writings, Wayne Grudem has argued for his complementarian position on the roles of women in marriage and ministry on the basis of his notion of the ESS. In *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, for example, he stated:

Women are equal to men in essence and in being . . . and yet they have a different function or role in church and home. Such differences do not logically imply inequality or inferiority, just as Christ’s subjection to the Father does not imply His inferiority . . . that the Son submits to the Father is clear from 1 Cor 15:28. It is clear that this subjection is *after* His earthly ministry, so how can anyone say that there is no hint of a difference of order or role within the Trinity is difficult to see.<sup>1</sup>

In his widely read *Systematic Theology* Grudem states his notion of the ESS in the following way, arguing (incorrectly) that the notion of subordination is the essential basis for maintaining the eternal distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit within the immanent Trinity:

if we do not have economic subordination, 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 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.<sup>2</sup>

As will be argued below, this appeal to a notion of the ESS is erroneous and fundamentally flawed on a) historical grounds; b) exegetical grounds; and c) theological and philosophical grounds, and consequently should be abandoned by those who wish to argue for a complementarian position on the roles of women in marriage and ministry.

### 2. Historical Creedal Orthodoxy: *Contra* “Eternal Subordination of the Son”

It is an evident that historic Nicene orthodoxy and the Roman Catholic and Reformation creedal traditions lend no support to the notion of the ESS. The Constantinopolitan Creed, generally known as the Nicene Creed, was formulated in 381 to refute the Arian subordinationism of the Son to the Father, and emphatically asserts the essential equality of the Son and the Father:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father (*homoousion to patri*), through Whom all things came into being . . .<sup>3</sup>

An important commentary on this creed is found in a synodical letter of the bishops who had gathered in Constantinople, issued shortly afterward in 382. The Nicene Creed, according to the bishops that formulated it,

tells us how to believe in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit: believing also, of course, that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have a single Godhead and power and substance, *a dignity deserving the same honour and a co-eternal sovereignty* [emphasis added] in three most perfect hypostases, or three perfect Persons . . . To sum up, we know that he was before the ages fully God the Word, and that in the last days he became fully man for the sake of our salvation.<sup>4</sup>

This language—especially the words *a coeternal sovereignty*—shows that the fathers of the council intended to affirm the eternal equality of nature and dignity of the Father and the Son.

Such an understanding of the creed is supported by the teachings of Gregory of Nazianzus, a Cappadocian father who was instrumental in the formulation of Nicene orthodoxy. In his *Fifth Theological Oration*, delivered in Constantinople prior to the Council of 381, Gregory clearly stated his understanding of the eternal equality of the Father and the Son:

We believe in three Persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is one before and another after; nor are they divided in will or parted in power . . . When we look at the Godhead . . . at the Persons in whom the Godhead dwells, and at those who *timelessly*

*and with equal glory* [emphasis added] . . . there are three whom we worship. Each of these Persons possesses unity . . . by reason of the identity of essence and power . . . I hope it may always be my position . . . to worship God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, three persons, one Godhead, *undivided in honor and glory and substance and kingdom* . . . [emphasis added]<sup>5</sup>

The language of *undivided in honor and glory and substance and kingdom* gives no support to any notion of ESS.

In synod at Rome in 382, shortly after the formulation of the Nicene Creed, Pope Damasus issued the so-called “Tome of Pope Damasus,” asserting the full equality of the Father, Son, and Spirit:

1. We anathematize those who do not wholly freely proclaim that he (the Holy Spirit) is one power and substance with the Father and the Son. . . . 12. Anyone who does not say that the Son of God is true God, as the Father is true God, that he can do all things, and knows all things, and is equal to the Father, is heretical. . . . 20. Anyone who does not say that there is only one godhead, one might, one majesty, one power, one glory, one lord-ship, one kingdom, one will and one truth of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is heretical.<sup>6</sup>

A notion of ESS that denies the equality of the Son with the Father in “might, majesty, power, glory, lordship, kingdom, and will” is considered heretical.

The so-called “Athanasian” Creed, that first appeared in its currently accepted form toward the close of the eighth century or beginning of the ninth century, and long considered a standard of Trinitarian orthodoxy in the West, states that:

6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the majesty coeternal (*aequalis Gloria, coaeterna majestas*) . . . 13. So likewise the Father is Almighty: the Son Almighty (*omnipotens*): and the Holy Ghost Almighty . . . 17. So likewise the Father is Lord: the Son Lord (*dominus*): and the Holy Ghost Lord . . . 19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity: to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord (*Deum ac Dominum*) . . . 25. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another: none is greater, or less than another (*nihil majus, aut minus*) . . . 26. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal (*coaequales*) . . . 33. Equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead: and inferior to the Father as touching his Man-hood (*minor Patre secundum humanitem*).<sup>7</sup>

This language excludes any notion of “eternal subordination” of the Son to the Father. The Son is voluntarily (and temporarily)

subordinate to the Father in the *economy*, with respect to his humanity, but eternally equal to the Father by virtue of his divine Person, with equal majesty and lordship.

In 675 the local council of Toledo formulated a creed expressing orthodox understandings of the Trinity and Incarnation:

In all things the Son is equal to God the Father, for his being born had no beginning and no end . . . It must also be confessed and believed that each single Person is wholly God in himself and that all three Persons together are one God. They have one, or undivided, equal godhead, majesty or power, which is not diminished in the individuals nor augmented in the three.<sup>8</sup>

This language is consistent with earlier expressions of Nicene orthodoxy: “In *all things* the Son is equal to the Father . . . one undivided, equal godhead, majesty, or power . . . not diminished in the individuals nor augmented in the three.” There is no place here for ESS.

The historic orthodox understanding of the full equality of the Father and the Son was continued in the creeds of the Reformation. The Belgic Confession of 1561 stated that all three Persons of the Trinity are “. . . co-eternal and co-essential. *There is neither first nor last* [emphasis added]; for they are all three one, in truth, *in power*, in goodness, and mercy.”<sup>9</sup>

The Second Helvetic Confession of 1566 stated that in the Trinity there are not

three gods, but three persons, consubstantial, coeternal, and *coequal* [emphasis added] . . . We also condemn all heresies and heretics who teach . . . that there is something created and subservient, *or subordinate to another in the Trinity* [emphasis added] (*serviens aut alteri officiale in trinitate*) and that there is something unequal in it, a greater or a less (*inequale, majus aut minus*) . . . something different with respect to character or will.<sup>10</sup>

If the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity do not differ in will, there can clearly be no eternal subordination of the will of the Son to the will of the Father.

Question nine of the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1646 asks, “How many persons are there in the Godhead?” The answer given is, “There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, *equal in power and glory* [emphasis added] although distinguished by their personal properties.”<sup>11</sup> This language of the Son and the Father being “equal in power and glory” reflects the historic Trinitarian orthodoxy of the Nicene tradition and Athanasian creed.

**If the Father and the Son in the immanent Trinity do not differ in will, there can clearly be no eternal subordination of the will of the Son to the will of the Father.**

### 3. The New Testament Witness: Equality of the Father and Son in Eternity

Any attempt to argue biblically for ESS should be done on the basis of texts (e.g., Jn 1:1; 17:5; Heb 1:2,3,8; Phil 2:6,7; Rev 5:6,13) that specifically attest to the eternal, immanent relationship of the Son to the Father—rather than reading the voluntary and temporary subordination of the Son in the *economic* Trinity back into the immanent Trinity. An examination of such texts, however, reveals not subordination, but rather, the full equality of the Father and the Son.

The classic text that opens the gospel of John, Jn 1:1 (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”: *kai theos hen ho logos*) clearly affirms the equality of the Son with the Father. As Murray Harris has noted in his monograph *Jesus as God*, “John seems intent to begin his work as he will end it (20:28) with an unqualified assertion of the supreme [not *subordinate*] status of Jesus Christ, in both his preincarnate (1:1) and resurrection (20:28) states . . . he equally with the Father, is the legitimate object of human worship.”<sup>12</sup>

In Jn 17:5, Jesus prays for the Father to “glorify me in your presence with the glory I *had with you before the world began*.” Jesus in his incarnate state can remember when, before his incarnation, he shared a coequal glory with the Father. In both Jn 1:1 and 17:5 the explicit witness is to a coequal deity and glory of the Father and the Son; any note of subordination would be read back into such texts from without.

The writer to the Hebrews states that the Son is the “radiance of God’s glory” (*apaugasma teis doxeis*) and the “exact representation of his being” (*charakteir teis hupostaseos autou*) (Heb 1:3). And in 1:8 he applies a text ascribed to God (Ps 45:6,7) to Christ: “But about the Son he says, “Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever.” Heb 1:3 asserts the full ontological equality of the Father and the Son, and 1:8 implies a coequal lordship and sharing of the divine throne; in neither is there any note of subordination.

Phil 2:5–11 is especially germane to this discussion, in that it refers to the Son in both his immanent and economic relationships to the Father. In 2:6, the apostle Paul states that Christ, in his preincarnate and eternal state existed in the form of God (*en morphē*

If the Son was subordinate to the Father before the incarnation as well as during incarnation and the economy, then Christ was not really “emptying” himself of anything, but rather, merely continuing in the same subordinate state that he held from eternity.

*theou*) and did not consider equality with God (*isa theoo*) a matter of robbery or usurpation. In the economy, however, he voluntarily gave up the independent exercise of his divine prerogatives by taking the form of a servant (2:7). After his death, resurrection, and exaltation he returned to his state of eternal glory as the rightful object of worship, together with the Father (2: 9–10). To read any notion of ESS into Phil 2:5–11 is inconsistent with the text, since if the Son was subordinate to the Father *before* the incarnation as well as *during* incarnation and the economy, then Christ was not really “emptying” himself of anything, but rather, merely continuing in the same subordinate state that he held from eternity.

At this point reference needs to be made to 1 Cor 15:28, a text that both in the contexts of the Arian controversy and the current debate concerning the ESS has been alleged to support eternal subordination. The apostle Paul states that after the return of Christ, the general resurrection, and the destruction of all God’s enemies, “. . . then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all” (15:28). This text, however, should be seen as a statement of Christ’s final act in the *economy*—finishing the conquest of evil, attesting to the Father the completion of the Son’s *economic* work. The Son as the *Christ* (15:27) is less than the Father with respect to his *humanity*, but as the eternal Son, is equal to the Father with respect to his deity.

This way of reading 1 Cor 15:28 is consistent with Nicene orthodoxy and with such texts as Rev 5:6, 13. The crucified and now risen and exalted Lamb of God is now seen to be standing *in the center* (*en mesoo*) of the throne of God, not in a lesser or subordinate position of honor. The exalted Lamb of God and divine Son is worshipped together with the Father with a coequal praise, honor, glory and power (5:13). Rev 5:6, 13 reveals what happens to the incarnate Son *after* the events described in 1 Cor 15:28, and like Jn 1:1; Jn 17:5; Heb 1:2, 3, 8; and Phil 2: 5–11 witness to the full equality of the Son and the Father in the immanent Trinity.

### 4. New Testament Witness: How Paul and Peter Argue for “Complementarian” Positions

An examination of the New Testament texts that are most obviously germane to the complementarian-egalitarian debate (e.g., 1 Cor 11:3–16; 1 Cor 14:34; Eph 5:22–33; Col 3:18; 1 Tim 2:11–15; 1 Tim 3:1–13; 1 Pet 3:1–6) will readily show that the writers do not appeal to any notion of the ESS in the immanent Trinity to support their arguments.

In addressing improprieties in worship in Corinth, in a passage involving women prophesying and appropriate head coverings or lengths of hair (1 Cor 11: 3–16), the apostle states that “the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God” (v. 3). Man did not come from woman, but woman from man, and man not was created for woman, but woman for man” (vv. 8,9). Irrespective of whether the disputed term “head” (*kephalē*) is taken in the sense of “authority” or “source” (or possibly both), the point to be noticed is that the appeal here is to the order of creation as given in the Genesis narrative (Gen 2:18–25), not to the Trinity as such. The statement that “the head of Christ is God” (v.3) is a reference to the economic Trinity, not to the immanent Trinity, since “Christ” (*christos*; “messiah”) refers to the Son in his incarnate

rather than eternal, pre-incarnate state. The entire discussion of the creation order in 11:8–11 is reframed by the new redemptive order of the New Covenant, “in the Lord”, wherein “woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman” (v. 11).

In 1 Cor 14:34, the writer instructs women to be silent in the churches,<sup>13</sup> stating that women should be in submission “as the Law says.” It is not clear where the “Law” (Pentateuch? Gen 3:16b, “he will rule over you”?) states this, but in any case, the argument is an appeal to a biblical text relating to creation and the curse, and not to the Trinity—economic or immanent.

In Eph 5 wives are instructed to submit to their husbands (v. 22), since the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is head of the church, his body (v. 23). The argument appeals not to the order of creation, or to the Trinity, but to Christology, i.e., the relationship of the incarnate Son in the economy to the church, his body and bride.

In the highly controverted text 1 Tim 2:11–15, the apparent restrictions<sup>14</sup> of the ministry of women in public worship are based on Adam being formed first (v. 13) and the woman being deceived rather than the man (v. 14). The reasons stated here relate to the creation narratives, not to Trinitarian relations of Father and Son. Nor does the doctrine of the Trinity have any relevance to determining the meaning of the disputed term *authentēin* in v. 12. In this same epistle, the qualifications of elders and deacons (1 Tim 3:1–13) such as being the “husband of one wife” (vv. 2, 12) seem to presuppose that these office bearers will all be men. This, however, may only reflect the circumstances of the time, and in any case, such considerations have nothing to do with Trinitarian doctrine.

In 1 Pet 3, wives are instructed to be “submissive to your husbands” (v. 1), so that by such behavior the unbelieving husband may be “won over without words.” The appeal later in the periscope is not to Christ and to the church, but rather to Sarah, who “obeyed Abraham and called him master” (v. 6). Nowhere in this passage is there an appeal to the Trinity.

The conclusion to be drawn from this review of “complementarian” texts is clear: the writers appeal not to any notion of the ESS in the immanent Trinity, but to other grounds: the order of creation; the relationship of Christ to the church; and in the case of Peter, to “evangelistic” (“won over . . .”) considerations or to the lives of Sarah and Abraham.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, then, this article has argued that “complementarians” should abandon their appeals to the notion of the ESS in the Trinity in advocating for their position, inasmuch as this notion 1) is inconsistent with the historic Nicene and creedal orthodoxy of the Christian church; 2) is not supported by the New Testament texts that explicitly deal with the immanent Trinity; and 3) is not a line of argument to which the NT writers of “complementarian” texts actually appeal. Persisting in attempts to make such a connection only serves to tar their position with the taint of heresy—heresy not on a minor matter, but on a doctrine—the doctrine of the Trinity, which is at the very heart of the Christian faith.

I concur with the appeal of Millard Erickson to the “New Evangelical Subordinationists” such as Grudem: “Please think through the implications of your view, observe the body of

evidence against it, and reconsider the idea of the eternal functional superiority of the Father over the Son and the Holy Spirit . . . Go back. You are going the wrong way.”<sup>15</sup>

## Notes

1. John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1991; 2006), 128, 129.

2. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994), 251.

3. John H. Leith, ed. *Creeds of the Churches*, rev. ed. (Richmond, Virg.: John Knox Press, 1973), 31, 32. The creedal formulations in this section have been examined in my earlier article, “Incarnation, Trinity, and the Ordination of Women to the Priesthood,” *Priscilla Papers* 24:1 (Winter 2010): 9–18. See also the studies of Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), and *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006); and Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

4. Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 28.

5. Gregory Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration*, 14, 28.

6. Karl Rahner, ed., *The Teaching of the Catholic Church As Contained In Her Documents* (Staten Island, New Jersey: Alba House, 1967), 90, 91.

7. Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom*, v.2 (New York: Harper and Bros., 1877), 66–69.

8. Rahner, *op. cit.*, 92, 95.

9. Schaff, *op. cit.*, v.3, 390.

10. *Ibid.*, 241.

11. *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Willow Grove, Penn.: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), p. 160. The personal properties that distinguish the Son from the Spirit in the immanent Trinity—being begotten and proceeding—were not understood in Nicene orthodoxy to imply any element of *subordination*; the presupposition of these distinctions was the *homoousios* and the full equality affirmed by it.

12. Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1992), 65.

13. For a thorough discussion of this text from an egalitarian perspective, see Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: an Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul's Letters* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2009), 217–270.

14. In my article, “First Timothy 2:12, the Ordination of Women, and Paul's Use of Creation Narratives,” *Priscilla Papers* 23:2 (Spring 2009), I argue that Paul appeals to the creation narratives in a church-specific and contextual manner, and that consequently, the restrictions on women's ministry activities in Ephesus should not be universalized to all times and contexts.

15. Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Academic, 2009), 259, 258).



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1 CORINTHIANS 11:11-12

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# Crumbling Cathedrals of the Mind:

## How Eternal Functional Subordination Undermines Transactional Atonement Theory

D. Glenn Butner, Jr.

Etienne Gilson once spoke of medieval theology as an attempt to build great “cathedrals of the mind,” mental dogmatic constructions meant to bring glory to God and to inspire worship as much as the stone cathedrals built across Europe during the same time period. Like any architectural achievement, these mental cathedrals brought together the many pieces of Christian dogmatics into coherent and often beautiful structures of thought, building idea upon idea until great theological and metaphysical systems emerged from scriptural foundations. This architectural analogy implies something important—it is rarely possible to shift the ground floor of a building without the entirety of the construct tumbling down. Only with great caution and preparation, where new supports are carefully constructed before the old are removed can such a change go smoothly. Unfortunately, evangelical theology finds itself today in a situation where a great shift in a foundational doctrine of Christian theology has occurred in the doctrine of the Trinity. As theologians increasingly speak of the eternal functional subordination of the Son (hereafter EFS), they unwittingly move a central pillar of the cathedral of Christian doctrine, unaware that such a change could bring the entire edifice of systematic theology down on their heads.

With this situation in mind, this article will not focus on direct reasons why EFS is a problematic articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, though I believe it certainly is, nor will it primarily explain why the Trinity is a poor analogy for gender relationships, though again I believe that it is. Rather, I will seek to explain how moving the foundational doctrine of the Trinity leaves the doctrine of the atonement without structural integrity—to continue the cathedral metaphor. But the problem does not stop here, because a crumbling doctrine of atonement also has consequences for the doctrine of theological anthropology at one of the points where its line of thought is vulnerable in the face of a structurally unsound doctrine of the atonement. To put the matter as clearly as I know how, EFS eliminates the ontological basis for traditional versions of transactional atonement theories, and it undermines the moral universe within which such traditional theories are properly rooted in the goodness of God as revealed in the Bible.

### Prolegomena: Varieties of Atonement and of Trinitarianism

Several key terms must be explained before the argument can unfold. First, the term EFS. EFS is the name by which I classify the argument that the Son eternally submits to the Father in obedience to the Father’s will as a form of functional (not ontological!) subordination. For some theologians, such submissions serves as the eternal basis for distinguishing between the persons of the Trinity in lieu of more traditional accounts of eternal generation and spiration.<sup>1</sup> For others, eternal submission supplements such traditional accounts of procession that emphasize the “distinguishing characteristics related

to origin” to explain the “active expression” of the “distinguishing personal characteristics” of the Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>2</sup> However, all advocates of EFS share the belief that the Son’s economic submission to the Father in the incarnation points back to an eternal submission within the immanent Trinity. Nearly uniformly, advocates of EFS use the Trinity as an illustration of the relations between husband and wife, where wives should submit to husbands as the Son submits to the Father.<sup>3</sup> In Bruce Ware’s words, egalitarianism has “chafed at . . . the very nature of God himself.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, I need to distinguish between various theories of atonement, which can be classified as cosmic, exemplary, or transactional. Cosmic theories of atonement emphasize how Christ’s work brings about some form of change for the entirety of the created order. For example, the “classical type” of atonement presented in Gustaf Aulén’s *Christus Victor* is a cosmic model insofar as it centers the Son’s victory over powers of evil, with the cosmic significance of initiating the eternal dominion of God.<sup>5</sup> Revelatory models of the atonement emphasize the manner in which Christ’s death reveals something about God or about humanity. Revelatory models include Peter Abelard’s exemplary model, with its emphasis on how Christ’s death reveals the love of God that justifies us,<sup>6</sup> or Hugo Grotius’s emphasis on how Christ’s death manifests the justice of God in its condemnation of sin.<sup>7</sup> Transactional models highlight the manner in which Christ’s death was an exchange between the Son and the Father resulting in salvation. This essay will focus on transactional theories of atonement, so I will explain the two predominant models in greater depth.

#### 1. Anselm of Canterbury and the Satisfaction Theory of Atonement

Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur Deus Homo* is a theological text with tremendous impact on the development of systematic theology in the West and its emphasis on transactional theories of atonement.<sup>8</sup> Writing to explain the basis for the incarnation and the need for the crucifixion, Anselm also manages to develop a sophisticated treatment of creation, providence, angelology, Mariology, Christology, and hamartiology. Two dimensions of Anselm’s thought are particularly important for understanding his specific treatment of the atonement. First, Anselm draws on Augustinian themes to understand God as the *iustissimus ordinator* who directs the universe according to the divine will, so that there is a certain *rectitude* that is, to Alister McGrath’s summary, the “basic God-given order of creation.”<sup>9</sup> Simply put, creation is designed to exist in harmony with the divine will. *Iustitia*, in Anselm’s words, thus becomes a “rectitude of will served for its own sake,”<sup>10</sup> a means by which creature and creation are in harmony with the intent of the Creator. Second, and closely related, is Anselm’s notion of sin. Sin is considered unjust “on account of an unjust will” that yields to temptation rather than retaining the rectitude of conformity to the divine will.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Anselm writes that “justice of will” is the “whole and complete honor

which we owe God.”<sup>12</sup> As R. W. Southern summarizes, “Any movement of the disobedient will, however slight, disturbs the perfect order of God’s creation in a way that nothing within the system can correct.”<sup>13</sup> What God designed in creation, sin undoes in rebellion, and herein lies the dilemma. Should God abandon the divine intention behind creation to allow sin and disordered wills to prevail? Certainly not, for then God would have created in vain.<sup>14</sup> Should God pardon sin without punishment? Again, Anselm answers in the negative, for to do so would be to elevate injustice over justice, chaos over rectitude, thereby either reversing the purpose of creation or undermining the divine character.<sup>15</sup> What, then, was God to do?

Anselm finds his answer in the logic of the God-man. Through the incarnation, the Son assumed a human nature, and with it a human will (which Anselm clearly treats as a property of nature).<sup>16</sup> Having assumed this nature, the Son assumes the obligation to honor God in justice, which is the rectitude of his human will. Anselm connects the doctrine of creation and redemption here: as the perfect human Jesus is able to live with a perfect human will in the manner God intended for all creation.<sup>17</sup> Here, empowered by the divine nature, Christ fulfills the obligation incumbent upon human nature to honor God through obedience. The content of this obedience is quite important to recognize, for Anselm is clear that “God did not compel Christ to die, for in Christ there was no sin. Instead, Christ willingly underwent death—not by obeying a command to give up His life, but by obeying a command to keep justice.”<sup>18</sup> Were God the Father to command the Son to die, the Son would be compelled to die. Justice would then require that the Son die to fulfill the obligation to the divine will, and this would undermine the second half of Anselm’s atonement theory: supererogatory gift. Jesus Christ was obedient to justice, but in an unjust world this resulted in his death. Because Christ also bore the divine nature, his death in obedience to God’s command to live a life of justice resulted in the death of an individual of infinite value, a gift that honored the Father above what was required and that restored humanity to right relationship with God such that punishment of all was no longer required.<sup>19</sup> This is Anselm’s satisfaction theory, and it is one of two major transactional atonement theories.

## 2. Reformed Theology and the Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement

Penal substitution retains the emphasis on satisfaction found in Anselm, but modifies or supplements it with an emphasis on punishment. Thus, John Calvin can write that

Our Lord came forth very man, adopted the person of Adam, and assumed his name, that he might in his stead obey the Father; that he might present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to the judgment of God, and in the same flesh pay the penalty which we had incurred.<sup>20</sup>

Here is evident an emphasis on obedience and debt so central to Anselm, but it is coupled with the idea of penalty, which is much less important for the medieval thinker. For this reason, satisfaction theory and penal substitution theory can be contrasted as a distinction between a pecuniary model concerned with debt and a penal model concerned with penalty as well debt.<sup>21</sup>

The logic of penal substitution varies slightly between the numerous authors who advocate it, particularly within the Reformed

tradition, but the basic idea remains constant. Fundamentally, penal substitution sees Christ’s incarnation and death as cause of salvation because it manifested both obedience and suffering,<sup>22</sup> the former resulting in the merit by which Christians are saved, and the latter satisfaction by which divine wrath is expiated and justice fulfilled.<sup>23</sup> Though all of Christ’s life can rightly be classified as obedience<sup>24</sup>—and here reformed thinkers generally distinguish between a passive obedience unto death and an active obedience that fulfills the law—a shift in how theologians view sin required more than the obedience that lead to the supererogatory gift so emphasized by Anselm. As sin became identified more closely with guilt that necessitated punishment, it was argued that God’s act of atonement must still allow for the justice of punishment.<sup>25</sup> Hence, Christ assumed humanity both to fulfill an active obedience that satisfied the law by uniting divine goodness with human obligation, and a passive obedience in order that humanity so strengthened by its union with the divine could withstand the full wrath of God displayed on the cross which justice required.<sup>26</sup> God’s wrath having been satisfied, and Christ’s merit being sufficient to purchase the salvation of the faithful, redemption is accomplished. Indeed, Reformed theology sees the obedience of Christ and the merit thereby obtained as the formal cause of justification.<sup>27</sup> Thus, obedience remains central to Reformed views of the atonement, particularly given the Protestant emphasis on justification.

## Eternal Submission and the Destruction of the Ontology of Transaction

Advocates of EFS have frequently been accused of Arianism for positing that the Father eternally commands and the Son eternally obeys. The accusers suggest that attributing such distinctions to the Father and Son results in two distinct natures with different properties such that Father and Son are *homoiousios*.<sup>28</sup> Those who seek to defend EFS respond that obedience of the will is a hypostatic property, one that is attributed only to the person of the Son.<sup>29</sup> Though this defense does seem to avoid the standard *homoiousios* objection, it has disastrous results if one wants to affirm the two predominant transactional theories of atonement.

Consider Anselm’s satisfaction theory. Those who defend EFS want to make obedience a hypostatic reality, but as Katherine Sonderegger notes, “Obedience is a matter of the will; and when we have raised the topic of the will, human and divine, we have touched on the nerve center of [Anselm’s] whole treatise.”<sup>30</sup> As noted above, will is clearly a property of nature for Anselm, such that a dyothelite Christology lies at the center of his atonement theology. Paul Daffyd Jones explains the matter clearly:

Dyothelism is a necessary corollary of his belief that humanity ought to render obedience to God. Were God to impose obedience upon Christ— say, by coercively superintending the humanity that the Son assumes—the soteriological fabric of *Cur Deus Homo* would unravel. Only because Christ lives and dies humanly, offering a human ‘compensation’ to God, are God and humanity set in right relationship.<sup>31</sup>

If will is not a property of nature but of hypostasis, as EFS advocates teach, and if there is no human hypostasis in Christ (as the Council of Chalcedon declared orthodox), and as Anselm quite unsurprisingly

believed)<sup>32</sup> then it appears that there is no human will in Christ, such that satisfaction is impossible. Perhaps, an EFS proponent might respond, obedience is a mode of willing proper to the hypostasis, but the faculty we call a will remains a property of nature. Here again EFS runs into a problem, insofar as it is not just a human will that is required for satisfaction, but human obedience. If human obedience cannot be carried out in the human nature, then one wonders whether there is in fact any human obedience at all, or simply the divine obedience of the divine hypostasis. Better to argue with Anselm that Jesus Christ “owed this obedience to God the Father; as His humanity owed it to His divinity.”<sup>33</sup> Christ’s human obedience was an obedience of the human nature that was obedience to the divine will shared by the Father and Son by virtue of their shared and singular nature.

I imagine that certain distinctions may produce a non-traditional account of how Christ can be obedient as the person of the Son in a human manner, where the divine hypostasis is the source of the still-human obedience, though this seems to be the more confused option. Were such an account developed, an even larger problem would remain: that of the eternal obedience of the Son, which itself undermines the logic of satisfaction theory. Throughout *Cur Deus Homo*, Anselm is at great pains to insist that “the Father did not force the Son to die against His will; nor did He permit Him to be put to death against His will. Instead, that man willingly underwent death in order to save men.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, “the requirement of obedience did not constrain Him, but His mighty wisdom disposed Him.”<sup>35</sup> As noted above, this distinction is of grave importance, because if the Father commanded the Son to die, and if the Son must eternally submit to the Father, then the Son must die in order to be just. His death thereby becomes the means by which he is just for himself without which he would not fulfill his own obligation as Son to the Father, instead of the supererogatory gift by which he offers freely what was not required in order to purchase humanity for redemption, becoming just for others. Simply put, if on the cross the Son is simply continuing his role of eternally submitting to the Father, there is in Anselm’s system no supererogatory gift and no satisfaction. There is no atonement.

The need for a supererogatory gift is why Anselm categorizes Christ’s death as a form of subsequent necessity, something resulting from his voluntary commitment to a promise, not something arising from compulsion.<sup>36</sup> Anselm writes that “if you wish to know the true necessity of all the things He did and suffered, know that they all occurred of necessity simply because He willed them.”<sup>37</sup> Anselm’s account relies on a functional equivalent of what Protestants later discussed under the name of the *pactum salutis*. Anselm depicts this eternal decision of God toward salvation as a mutual decision of the three persons, the Son committing himself in agreement with the Father and Spirit toward this course of action so that it was at once immutable and necessary, and yet entirely free, gratuitous, and supererogatory. So Anselm can

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**Stephen R. Holmes** (University of St. Andrews, Scotland)  
Eternal Functional Subordination and Inseparable Operations: Trinitarian Theology and Gender

9:20 a.m.—10:00 a.m.

**D. Glenn Butner, Jr.** (Marquette University)  
How Eternal Functional Subordination Undermines Transactional Atonement Theories

10:10 a.m.—10:50 a.m.

**Kirk R. MacGregor** (McPherson College)  
1 Corinthians 14:33–38 as a Pauline Quotation-Refutation Device

11:00 a.m.—11:40 a.m.

**Anneke Stasson** (Indiana Wesleyan University)  
Virgin Mothers: An Evangelical Theology of Womanhood

write, “with an unchangeable will (*immutabili voluntate*) He freely willed (*sponte voluit*) to die.”<sup>38</sup> Jones interprets well: “As Christ sets his face towards Jerusalem, his ‘immutable’ will is *also* ‘spontaneous’: this striking pairing attests to a deft integration of dyothelite Christology and soteriology.”<sup>39</sup> Here Christ’s human will and divine will meet in perfect harmony. Here dyothelite theology meets a vision of the unitary will of God undivided by eternal submission or obedience but singularly united in the commitment to redeem the world. And here, too, advocates of EFS meet a theology of the atonement that is ultimately incompatible with their doctrine of God.

At this point, I must digress briefly to address a key scriptural passage that can illuminate the accuracy of the Anselmian position: John 10:17–18. The passage reads as follows:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father. (NRSV)

It should be clear from the context of the gospel of John that the Father’s love for the Son is eternal (see especially John 17:23–26), so Whitacre is correct to write that the passage does not mean that the Father’s eternal love of the Son derives from his obedience, but rather that this must be interpreted in terms of the salvific effects of the obedience as linked to the eternal relationship of Father and Son.<sup>40</sup> John here treats the very question that so concerned Anselm—how the Son’s obedience relates to the Father and to the Son’s salvific work of the cross, and how it results in the love shared with believers through the cross. On the one hand, the passage reveals the Son being obedient to the command of the Father (and thus to the divine will). On the other, it depicts the Son laying down his own life of his own accord and volition. This passage particularly manifests a tension between subordination and equality that runs throughout the gospel of John,<sup>41</sup> and it must be resolved.

Two strategies for treating this tension warrant attention in our current discussion. Advocates of EFS resolve the tension through appeal to the immanent Trinity—the Son eternally submits to the Father and this is the basis for a full distinction between Father and Son. If this solution is pursued, then a different answer must be provided for why the Son’s death in John is a laying down of the good shepherd’s life for the sheep (John 10:15) if not by the merit of Christ’s supererogatory gift. When John says that the Father loves the Son because he lays it down, John would mean that obedience is the condition under which the Son is eternally the beloved Son. Likewise, if Christ’s death is a byproduct of his eternal obedience, it is unclear in what sense it is also voluntarily given “of his own accord,” as John teaches. The alternative is the classical patristic position which is rooted in the economic Trinity and which appeals to dyothelite Christology. This interpretation suggests that the Father loves the Son in his humanity because of his perfect human obedience unto death, by which he fulfilled the covenant. Herein lies obedience to the command of the Father. However, the Father eternally loved the pre-incarnate Son regardless of this act of self-sacrifice, and the Son was under no covenantal law. In voluntarily fulfilling the law to the point of death, that is in laying down his own life for the sheep (10:11) of his own

accord (10:18), the Son in his divinity is simply following the united will of God such that supererogatory gift is possible. The Father loves the Son in his humanity for this gift, and by its imputation the faithful share in the love of God. Here, there is no obedience *ad intra* but only that subsequent necessity arising from the *pactum salutis*. Following this classical interpretation, modern commentators are correct to see in John 10:17–18 evidence of how, for example, “the will of the Son as Mediator harmonizes completely with that of the Father.”<sup>42</sup> A twofold harmony preserves both the doctrine of atonement and the doctrine of God.

What then of penal substitution? Context and theological method muddy the waters when we try to discern the impact of eternal functional subordination on the satisfaction component of penal substitution. The debates of the Reformation and Protestant Scholastic eras were not, as in Anselm’s time, so often focused on the nature of the incarnation, so there are fewer Christological concerns appearing in the Reformed accounts of the atonement. Furthermore, the theological method deployed by Anselm proceeded along a philosophical trajectory to convince skeptics. Though Anselm’s arguments assume and even cite numerous scriptural principles, Reformed theological method generally spends far more time on exegesis, and far less on philosophical argumentation. Nevertheless, while the dyothelite Christology central to Anselm’s satisfaction theory is less explicitly integrated into Reformed accounts of soteriology, it is assumed throughout.<sup>43</sup> As Jonathan Edwards puts the matter,

Christ merely as God was not capable either of that obedience or suffering that was needful. The divine nature is not capable of suffering, for it is impassable and infinitely above all suffering; neither is it capable of obedience to that law that was given to man.<sup>44</sup>

A human will and a human obedience are required, both as a foundation for active obedience, and as the source of the merit whereby the faithful are justified and receive the imputed righteousness of Christ. Here again, accounts of will as a property of hypostasis or of obedience as a mode of a hypostasis appear to undermine the role of active obedience in Christ’s merit insofar as there is no human hypostasis in the hypostatic union.

Anselm’s philosophical emphasis on subsequent necessity is also not a central feature of Reformed accounts of penal substitution. However, such a form of necessity is assumed. It lies behind Calvin’s teaching that “the first step in obedience was his voluntary subjection; for the sacrifice would have been unavailing to justification if not offered spontaneously.”<sup>45</sup> Wollebius likely has something similar in mind when he warns that, “Unless he submitted to the curse willingly, his sacrifice was forced,”<sup>46</sup> which is why Wollebius treats the efficient cause of the office of mediator as the Trinity in its entirety.<sup>47</sup> The Son voluntarily wills along with Father and Spirit to assume the flesh and fulfill humanity’s obligation to the law and to the divine justice which requires punishment. So while subsequent necessity and the consequent result of supererogatory gift are not prominent in Reformed theology, the elimination of these elements through a theology that treats the Son as eternally obedient risks not only the atonement, but the theology of justification *solus Christus* as well.

What is assumed as an ontological precondition for penal substitution theory does, admittedly, remain hidden behind more

central themes in Reformed theology. It is quite possible that a Biblicist account of penal substitution may retain the pastoral and exegetical elements central to penal substitution while unraveling the metaphysical basis for this theory through EFS without many in the church noticing the ontological chasm at the heart of its theology.<sup>48</sup> For this reason, we must also consider the pastoral and ethical consequences of EFS on penal substitutionary theory, that those less familiar with the Anselmian foundations of transactional theories of atonement may still be easily convinced of the problematic nature of any notion of eternal obedience in the immanent Trinity.

### **Eternal Submission and the Elimination of the Moral Horizon of Punishment**

Perhaps the most common theological objection raised against penal substitution atonement theories is that they promote a culture of violence against the powerless.<sup>49</sup> Feminist theologians often criticize transactional atonement theories as morally problematic because they legitimize the suffering faced by women, “since by sweetly accepting unjust suffering they become Christlike,” to quote Rosemary Radford Ruether. Here penal substitution is treated as a “tool for justifying domestic violence.”<sup>50</sup> Another common argument claims that penal substitution is a form of divine child abuse, where the Father commands the Son to suffer for others. “Jesus,” Darby Kathleen Ray writes, “like a typical child victim for whom love is identified with obedience to the adult’s authority, obliges.”<sup>51</sup> Leanne Van Dyk notes that the motivations of abusers are complicated and not easily explained in terms of their religious dimensions, but the testimonies of abused women do often suggest a religious component that may be linked to certain theological views such as penal substitution.<sup>52</sup> Arguments could be multiplied, but the present sample illustrates a widespread concern that where theology depicts the Father’s authority requiring the Son’s obedience unto death, then the power structure resulting in suffering of the subordinate may echo in the created order in ways that harm the weak and powerless.

Those who want to defend penal substitutionary accounts—and I certainly want to make such a defense—have two main arguments in their arsenal. First, penal substitution is scriptural, so where Biblical inerrancy is affirmed, penal substitution cannot be avoided. The basic logic of transactional atonement is found throughout the New Testament, and a penal dimension is central to numerous scriptural tropes, ranging from Paul’s claims that the “wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23) and that Jesus became a curse for us (Gal 3:13), to Hebrews’s argument that without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness (Heb 9:22), to scriptural use of the term propitiation (i.e. 1 John 2:2, to cite a single example). As helpful as Anselm’s notion of supererogatory gift may be, it needs to be supplemented with an account of how Christ’s satisfaction included our sins being imputed to him to do full justice to the biblical testimony.

The second defense builds upon the first by arguing that penal substitution is not in fact a situation where an authority figure requires the suffering of an obedient (functional) subordinate. Instead, penal substitution depicts God assuming suffering voluntarily for our behalf. Stephen Holmes summarizes this line of defense well:

The criticisms that begin with the feminist theologians assume an improper separation between Father and Son (and no account of

the Spirit, usually.) If we do not realize that God is on the cross, that God is taking the suffering on himself, then we have not begun to understand what is going on. . . The story is not of a vengeful Father punishing an innocent Son, but of a loving and holy God, Father, Son and Spirit, bearing himself the pain of our failures.<sup>53</sup>

The metaphysical commitments underlying such a defense are twofold. First, the divine will is the undivided property of the single divine nature such that there is no eternal relation of authority and obedience that could even potentially be construed as an abusive power dynamic.<sup>54</sup> Second, and closely related, the idea that the *opera dei ad extra indivisa sunt* (the Trinity works inseparably in the works of God in the economy of redemption) entails that the atonement is not something done to the Son by the Father, but something that the Son voluntarily undergoes without compulsion in accordance with the united work of the Trinity (see John 10:17-18).<sup>55</sup> Note well that these are the very two metaphysical premises that EFS undermines. In the theology of EFS, the divine will is divided either because will is a hypostatic property alone, or because the singular will is possessed in three divisible modes attributable to each of the three divine persons respectively. In the logic of EFS, all divine actions are divided insofar as the Father commands and the Son subsequently<sup>56</sup> obeys. All divine acts are accompanied by distinct actions of commanding and obeying such that if one affirms EFS, it becomes extremely difficult to deny that the penal dimension of Christ’s death was something the person of the Father did to the person of the Son, and not merely something that the Godhead does in and to the humanity of Christ, as theologians noted above like Anselm and Wollebius would argue.

Where theologians who reject EFS can argue that penal substitution is scriptural and clearly not an example of a problematic authority/submission dynamic, something that has been convincing to some feminist thinkers,<sup>57</sup> those who affirm EFS must argue that penal substitution is scriptural and then grant that someone in authority inflicting suffering on a subordinate is central not only to the logic of the gospel, but to the very Trinitarian nature of the Godhead. I find this a deeply troubling distortion of the God revealed in Jesus Christ as attested to in the Scriptures. Where Philippians 2 teaches us to follow the example of Christ who forsook power to humble himself for the salvation of the powerless, EFS teaches the powerless to submit themselves to the powerful even to the point of death. Where Ephesians 5 teaches husbands to imitate Christ in sacrificing themselves for the wives who are called to submit to them, EFS calls wives to sacrifice themselves to the husbands to whom they must submit.<sup>58</sup> In the theology of EFS, gone is an apocalyptic ethic rooted in the divine goodness where the first are last (Matt 20:16) for the Father who is first never assumes the role of last,<sup>59</sup> the least of these are no longer served for Jesus’s sake (Matt 25:34-40) but sacrificed in his imitation, and the power of God is no longer made evident in the weakness of self-humbling (2 Cor 12:9) but in the authority of one who can subdue the weak. We are left with a pastoral theology centering the authority of the Father over the Son, whose obedience does not clearly establish redemption under traditional transactional models, and whose death in weakness at the command of the authority of the Father alone erases the moral horizon within which penal substitution fits the biblical picture of the divine goodness against all critics. In the place of classical soteriology, I fear that we are left with an atonement theology without

ontological moorings and an ethical universe with harmful pastoral outcomes, particularly in the realm of theological anthropology. This is a significantly different form of complementarianism from those versions rooted in texts like Ephesians 5, and in my opinion a form much more likely to lead to the harm of Christian women.

It took centuries to construct a theological system that fit Christology, soteriology, and the Trinity into a beautiful cathedral of the mind, one faithful to the scriptures, inspiring worship, and compelling the church to ethical behavior. In a half-century, evangelical Trinitarianism has threatened to undo that work in full. If a shift in Trinitarian theology toward EFS has such drastic ramifications for soteriology, there are no doubt further problematic consequences for this change in other areas of dogmatics. How many must be uncovered before EFS is abandoned remains to be seen, but it is certain that EFS should be left behind.

## Notes

1. See: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 250-1; Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 69-71, 82; Philip R. Gons and Andrew David Naselli, "An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity," in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, eds. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 204-5.

2. J. Scott Horrell, "Complementarian Trinitarianism: Divine Revelation is Finally True to the Eternal Personal Relations," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, eds. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 352-3.

3. Craig Keener stands as a notable exception, when he defends EFS but rejects complementarianism. Craig S. Keener, "Subordination within the Trinity: John 5:18 and 1 Cor 15:28," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, eds. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 52-4.

4. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, 73.

5. Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: MacMillan, 1967).

6. Peter Abailard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans (Excerpt from

the Second Book)," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 276-287.

7. Hugo Grotius, *A Defense of the Catholic Faith Concerning the Satisfaction of Christ*, trans. W. H. (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1692).

8. Paul Dafydd Jones objects to the use of "transactional" to summarize Anselm's model on the grounds that Anselm's theory is rooted in the supererogatory gift of obedience. I do not think this objection carries weight, given that even a gratuitous exchange is in some sense a transaction between two parties. See Paul Dafydd Jones, "Barth and Anselm: God, Christ, and the Atonement," *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 12.3 (July 2010): 258.

9. Alister E. McGrath, "Rectitude: The Moral Foundation of Anselm of Canterbury's Soteriology," *The Downside Review*, 99.336 (July 1981): 205-6.

10. Anselm of Canterbury, *On Truth*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 5 vols., ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1976), 2:\$12.

11. Anselm of Canterbury, *The Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 5 vols., ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1976), 5:\$4.

12. Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became a Man*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 5 vols., ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1976), 5:I.11.

13. R. W. Southern, *Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 218.

14. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, II.4.

15. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man* I.12.

16. We can deduce both from his explicit affirmation that justice, a rectitude of will, is found in rational natures in *On Truth*, and from his arguments in *The Procession of the Holy Spirit* where he claims that personal properties are just those that arise from relational opposition, i.e. from titles that cannot logically be predicated of the same nature, such as begotten and unbegotten, but which are in some sense ordered toward another. Anselm, *On Truth*, I.12; Anselm of Canterbury, *The Procession of the Holy Spirit*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, Vol. 3, ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1976).

17. Katherine Sonderegger, "Anselm, Defensor fidei," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 9.3 (July 2007): 350-1.

18. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, I.8.

19. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, II.18.

20. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), II.12.3.

21. Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Atonement* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1867), 35-6.

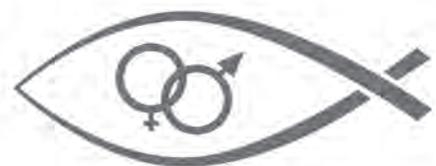
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22. Hodge, *The Atonement*, 249; Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1852), 86; Robert A. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1983), 72-6.

23. Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, trans. and ed. John F. Wilson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 304.

24. "When it is asked then how Christ, by abolishing sin, removed the enmity between God and us, and purchased a righteousness which made him favorable and kind to us, it may be answered generally, that he accomplished this by the whole course of his obedience." Calvin, *Institutes*, II.16.5; "Christ's obedience comprises not simply a part of his life, but the totality of his Messianic work. . . That was the sole purpose, we may say here, because it concerned the will of God which was oriented to the sacrifice." G. C. Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ*, trans. Cornelius Lambregtse (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1965), 316.

25. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics Vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 345.

26. For example, Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 87; cf. Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee III (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), XVII.i.4.

27. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 330-1. In a similar vein, Wollebius writes that the merit of Christ is the "external active cause" of justification. Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, XXX.i.5. With even less clarity, A. A. Hodge speaks of obedience as the "ground of our justification." Hodge, *The Atonement*, 250.

28. Examples abound, but two important examples are: Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), 172; Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *JETS* 40/1 (March 1997), 64.

29. Bruce A. Ware, "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?" in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, eds. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 244; Gons and Naselli, "Recent Philosophical Arguments," 204-5.

30. Sonderegger, "Anselm, *Defensor fidei*," 353.

31. Jones, "Barth and Anselm," 267.

32. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, II.6. Indeed, the question of the two natures and particularly of the two wills was a widely discussed topic during Anselm's day and among the following generation of theologians. See G. R. Evans, *Anselm and a New Generation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 155-61.

33. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, I.8.

34. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, I.8.

35. Anselm of Canterbury, *A Meditation on Human Redemption*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, 5 vols., ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson (Toronto: Edwin Mellen, 1974), 3:140.

36. See Sonderegger, "Anselm, *Defensor fidei*," 354.

37. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, II.17.

38. Anselm, *Why God Became a Man*, II.16.

39. Paul Dafydd Jones, "Barth and Anselm," 269.

40. Rodney A. Whitacre, *John* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1999), 266.

41. See John 14:28, John 1:1-18, 5:1-47, and John 17. C. K. Barrett surveys some views on this tension in C. K. Barret, "The Father is Greater than I" John 14:28 - Subordinationist Christology in the New Testament," in *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 19-36. In the end I affirm the patristic position that Barrett rejects as failing to present a real person. Here Barrett's attempt to conform the person of Christ to his experience of real personhood falsely assumes too great a continuity between mere humanity and perfect humanity united with perfect divinity.

42. William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953), 115.

43. Robert Letham notes how Luther, Calvin, and key Reformed statements of faith all continue to utilize versions of Anselm's satisfaction theory. Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993), 165-6.

44. Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, 295.

45. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.16.5.

46. Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, XVIII.i.18.

47. Wollebius, *Compendium Theologiae Christianae*, XVII.i.3.

48. For example, Wayne Grudem's account of the righteousness of Christ deriving from his active obedience and imputed to the faithful treats Christ's fulfillment of the law alone as sufficient for justification. However, as a human being Christ owed this obedience himself, so it is difficult to see why fulfilling his own obligation can in some fashion produce merit for all of humanity, which is the basis for justification. Due to his nearly exclusive emphasis on Scriptural concerns, Grudem does not raise the question of supererogatory gift, nor connect the dignity of the divinity of Christ who voluntarily offers such a gift to the Father to the humanity of Christ that owes such a gift. Thus, Grudem retains the exegetical and pastoral elements of penal substitution, but he does not clearly present the underlying metaphysics. See Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 571.

49. When the objection is raised against Anselm, it is easily refuted for several reasons: (1) Anselm does not treat punishment as the formal cause of redemption, but gift; (2) The Father did not require the Son to receive punishment, but jointly with the Son willed justice as rectitude of will; (3) for Anselm the death of Christ was not the death of a representative of guilty humanity as much as it was a death of an innocent one slain by a fallen world. Therefore, Anselm could perhaps join feminists in critiquing the death, though to a far smaller extent.

50. Rosemary R. Reuther, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 99.

51. Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1988), 62.

52. Leanne Van Dyk, "How Does Jesus Make a Difference?" in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 211 n. 17.

53. Stephen R. Holmes, *The Wondrous Cross: Atonement and Penal Substitution in the Bible and History* (London: Paternoster, 2007), 109.

54. Keith E. Johnson, "Penal Substitution as an Undivided Work of the Triune God," *Trinity Journal* 36.1 (Spring 2015): 53.

55. Steve Jeffery, Mike Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Nottingham, UK: Intervarsity, 2007), 230. It is interesting that Mike Ovey, who here appeals to the undivided divine operations and the shared willing of the Trinity in the atonement, remains an outspoken defender of eternal functional subordination elsewhere. See Michael J. Ovey, *Your Will be Done* (London: Latimer Trust, 2016).

56. The use of "subsequently" should be treated in reference to logical and not temporal sequence. After all, its defenders ensure us EFS is eternal.

57. For example, a "hesitant" endorsement of this argument is found in Sally Alsford, "Sin and Atonement in Feminist Perspective," in *Atonement Today*, ed. John Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 162-4.

58. I set aside for the moment the egalitarian interpretation of Ephesians 5, partly to illustrate that there are two different kinds of complementarianism, and partly because I do not find the egalitarian position fully compelling.

59. If the Son is eternally equal in authority with the Father, he is the first who in the incarnation and crucifixion becomes last.



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# An Extended Review of *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*

Edited by Bruce Ware and John Starke (Crossway, 2015)

Kevin Giles

Wayne Grudem says that for twenty-five years he has believed that how the Trinity is understood “may well turn out to be the most decisive factor in finally deciding” the bitter debate between evangelicals about the status and ministry of women.<sup>1</sup> This is encouraging to hear, because Grudem and many of his fellow complementarians have got the doctrine of the Trinity completely wrong. On the status and ministry of women they can quote verses in support of their position, and egalitarians can quote verses in support of their position, and so we end up in a text jam without an external adjudicator to say who is right or wrong. But with the Trinity it is different. The doctrine of the Trinity is exactly and unambiguously defined by the ecumenical creeds and the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions, enunciated in detail by the great Trinitarian theologians of the past such as Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, and spelled out carefully today in the numerous scholarly books on the history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> Thus what each side is claiming to be the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity can be evaluated against evidence; the facts of the matter can be checked. Both sides cannot be right. After debating with my complementarian friends on the Trinity for more than fifteen years in numerous publications, I am more than ever convinced that the complementarians are the ones who have it wrong—dead wrong. The creeds, the confessions, and virtually all the great theologians of the past and present reject completely any hierarchical ordering in divine life.

Beginning in June 2016, one after another confessional Reformed theologians came to the same conclusion, the most significant voice being Professor Carl Trueman of Westminster theological seminary.<sup>3</sup> They have been adamant; orthodoxy allows for no sub-ordering in any way of the Son or Spirit in the eternal life of God.

Before turning to the essays in the book *One God in Three Persons*, I want to say that the reason given by the editors for publishing the book is fallacious. It is written, we are told, to challenge those who “view the Trinity as a model for evangelical egalitarianism.”<sup>4</sup> The fact is, appeal to the Trinity by evangelical egalitarianism is rare.<sup>5</sup> Virtually every evangelical egalitarian book on the status and ministry of women primarily appeals to scripture, saying nothing at all about the Trinity. In the definitive summary of the evangelical egalitarian position given by Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE) the Trinity is not mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Similarly the definitive book of essays outlining the evangelical egalitarian case, *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy*, makes no appeal to the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> My chapter on the Trinity in this book is simply a strong warning to complementarians that their hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity breaches historic orthodoxy. I have never argued for

gender equality by appeal to the Trinity, nor has Philip Payne, possibly the most published scholarly evangelical egalitarian. The argument that the Trinity is a hierarchy of three divine persons and as such prescriptive of the male-female relationship on earth was invented by George Knight III, popularized by Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware, and is now an intrinsic part of the complementarian position.<sup>8</sup>

Because egalitarian evangelicals generally do not appeal to the Trinity for male-female equality, since they do not think it is relevant to this issue, they do not have anything novel to say on this doctrine. Millard Erickson,<sup>9</sup> Tom McCall,<sup>10</sup> Keith E. Johnson,<sup>11</sup> Robert Letham,<sup>12</sup> and myself,<sup>13</sup> as well as other informed evangelicals (gender complementarians and egalitarians alike), who have written in opposition to the Knight-Grudem-Ware doctrine of the Trinity, simply want evangelicals to remain faithful to what the church universal has agreed is what the Bible teaches on this centrally important doctrine. In all my writings on the Trinity my one aim has been to articulate the Nicene faith as it is expressed by Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, and Augustine, summed up in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, and reaffirmed by Calvin and in the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions, thus showing that what most complementarians are teaching on the Trinity is not historic orthodoxy.

I am strongly of the opinion that neither side in the debate about the status and ministry of women should appeal to the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is our distinctive Christian doctrine of God, the primary and most important doctrine; it does not set a social agenda of any kind. To argue that the Trinity supports gender equality or women’s subordination is simply bad theology and bad thinking. How a three-fold divine relationship, or specifically Grudem and Ware’s “male-male” divine Father-Son relationship, might prescribe a two-fold, male-female relationship on earth cannot be explained. Correlation is not possible.

Ware and Starke’s book is not easy to review because most of the eleven chapters show virtually no understanding of the key elements of the creedal and confessional doctrine of the Trinity. The same errors are endorsed time and time again, and often what is asserted makes little sense. Then we have the problem that two essays outline orthodoxy in opposition to all the other authors, but the editors do not acknowledge this, and a third chapter on the beliefs of particular Baptists in eighteenth century England has no connection with what this book is about. Letham’s entirely orthodox chapter on the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, a doctrine confessed in the Nicene Creed, endorsed by all the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions, and taught by almost every significant theologian across history, is, we should carefully note, written in opposition to those who reject

this doctrine, most importantly Grudem and Ware. Finally, I point out that the editors and most of the contributors seem to believe that all those on the egalitarian side are for a co-equal Trinity of persons and all those on the complementarian side are for a hierarchically ordered Trinity, but this is simply not true as this book's selection of contributors illustrates. Letham and Oliphint, who have chapters in this book, and Keith E. Johnson, who is sharply criticized in it for opposing the Knight-Grudem-Ware doctrine of the Trinity, are complementarians on the gender issue. These men believe in the permanent subordination of women but not in the eternal subordination of the Son.

What is more dozens of confessional Reformed theologians who have come out this year (2016) in opposition to the "complementarian" doctrine of a hierarchically ordered Trinity are all gender "complementarians." This is why this new development is so important.

## Chapter 1

Wayne Grudem has the first say. He accuses evangelical egalitarians of "denying the Trinity" and of "important doctrinal deviations" from orthodoxy. He says "evangelical feminists" "deny eternal distinctions between the Father and the Son," deny "that God the Son was eternally God the Son," claim "that any act of any [divine] person is actually the act of all three persons," reject "the authority of Scripture," and affirm "things about Scripture that are not true." A certain Kevin Giles and the doyen of evangelical systematic theology, Millard Erickson, get the most criticism. The charges are either ones that could be levelled against Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin, or virtually any of the great theologians of the past, or they are without substance. I have a full chapter in my book *Jesus and the Father* on how orthodoxy ensures the eternal distinctions between the Father and the Son.<sup>14</sup> I argue that the personal identity of each member of the Trinity is first grounded in their unique names—Father, Son, Spirit—which cannot be altered, and in differing origination: the Father "begets," the Son is "begotten," and the Spirit "proceeds," which immutably differentiates them relationally. The Father is the Father of the Son and cannot be otherwise, the Son is the Son of the Father and cannot be otherwise, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, or from the Father through the Son. What I and all orthodox theologians past and present reject absolutely is that the three omnipotent divine persons are differentiated in power or authority. You will not find any of the great theologians of the past, or any of the creeds or confessions, teaching divine differentiation on the basis of differing authority. This is an Arian error.<sup>15</sup> Following exactly in the steps of the Nicene fathers, I endorse the idea that all the works of God are works of all three divine persons. This is called the doctrine of "inseparable operations," and it is well grounded in scripture. Letham agrees. He says, "all three persons work inseparably in all God's works," and then he adds, as all orthodox theologians do, nevertheless,

Each work is attributed [in scripture] peculiarly to one trinitarian person; only the Son died on the cross, although he offered himself by the Spirit (Heb. 9:4). This inseparable action should keep us from conceiving of only one person

being at work in this or that; talk of "roles" that each of the divine persons undertake is potentially misleading.<sup>16</sup>

The claim that Erickson and I deny that the Son is eternally the Son and the Father eternally the Father leaves me speechless. Grudem even claims that I could speak of God the Father as "my friend in heaven" or my "brother in heaven."<sup>17</sup> This is a serious accusation with no justification whatsoever. I could not speak of the Father in these terms and I never have, and I believe unequivocally that the Son is eternally the Son and the Father eternally the Father. And I am sure professor Erickson does likewise. I agree with Grudem that "to deny that the Son was [sic, it should be "is"] eternally the Son would be to deny both the Nicene and Chalcedonian Creeds."<sup>18</sup>

What is so perverse in this attack on me is that I have written a book on the eternal generation of the Son, defending this doctrine<sup>19</sup> and Dr Grudem wants this doctrine excised from the Nicene Creed and "modern theological formulations" of the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>20</sup> The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is the foundation for the belief in the eternity of the Son and his distinction from the Father.

To assert that Erickson, Linda Belleville, and I "reject the authority of scripture" simply because we point out that the title "the Son" is not the only title given to Jesus Christ, and that some other titles are more commonly used, is absurd.<sup>21</sup> To accuse Erickson of rejecting the authority of scripture is also absurd. Erickson has been a defender of biblical inerrancy all his professional life. Finally, Grudem accuses evangelical egalitarians who have written on the Trinity of "ignoring verses that contradict" their position.<sup>22</sup> This again is simply not true. I am willing to consider any verse in the Bible that might inform me better on divine triune life. Most of the verses Grudem lists, that he says Erickson and I ignore, speak of "divine order"—how the three persons work cooperatively in an unchanging and irreversible pattern. We do not discuss them because we have no problem with them. They do not speak of a hierarchical order. And *contra* Grudem's claim, the Father is not always mentioned first in Trinitarian texts in scripture, as Letham points out in explaining scriptural teaching on order in divine life and action.<sup>23</sup> In this section I get another broadside for arguing that isolated verses that seem to stand in tension with what is dominant and theologically deepest in scripture should not be absolutized, and that "simply opening our Bibles cannot settle what should be believed about the Trinity."<sup>24</sup> I stand by both assertions. As a confessional Christian I come to scripture assuming that the creeds and my own church's confessions of faith will guide me to a right understanding of the many diverse comments I find in scripture on most if not all of the great doctrines. Without their guidance I could easily read my own views into scripture and fall into heresy.

Throughout this chapter Grudem shows a breathtaking ignorance of the historic doctrine of the Trinity, as do most of the other contributors to this book. The Nicene Fathers were totally opposed to the subordination of the Son in being, power, or work. In the Nicene Creed, the Son is confessed as "the only (*monogenēs*) Son of God," the unique Son like no other son. Then he is said to be "eternally begotten (*gennaō*) of the Father." Rather than his begetting indicating his subordination, the creed asserts

he is “God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, one in being with the Father.” Lewis Ayres, arguably the most informed patristic scholar on the Trinity at this time, says, “It is fundamental to all pro-Nicene theologies that God is one power, glory, majesty and rule, Godhead essence and nature.”<sup>25</sup> If the divine persons are one in power, they are each omnipotent and thus one does not rule over another. Ayres also says that “one of the most important principles shared by pro-Nicenes is that whenever one of the divine persons acts, all are present, acting inseparably.”<sup>26</sup> Again it follows, if the divine persons always work inseparably, one does not command and another obey; they work in perfect harmony as one. Complementarians cannot expect to be taken as serious scholars if they ignore or reject what Ayres and other well informed patristic scholars conclude.

Why the editors of this book put first this ill-informed and wildly polemical chapter raises many questions.

## Chapter 2

Christopher Cowan next explores how the Father and the Son are portrayed in John’s Gospel. He begins by speaking of “John’s ubiquitous depiction of a hierarchical relationship between the two”<sup>27</sup> and then repeatedly describes the Father-Son relationship as hierarchically ordered.<sup>28</sup> The endorsement of hierarchical ordering in divine life is found throughout this book. Most of the writers seem unaware that historic orthodoxy views hierarchical ordering in divine life as the essence of the error specifically called Arianism or, more generally, subordinationism.<sup>29</sup>

Before considering in more detail what Cowan says in his chapter, I digress to give greater specificity to why I reject most of what he says and most of what most others say in this book. I strongly oppose their hierarchical ordering of the divine persons and particularly their subordination of the Son to the Father because this teaching contradicts the ecumenical creeds and the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions. For this reason it cannot be taken as an expression of orthodoxy.

The Nicene Creed that defines the faith for all Western and Eastern churches says,

We [Christians] believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only (*monogenēs*) Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten (*gennaō*) not made, of one being with the Father. Through whom all things were made. For our salvation, he came down from heaven . . .

What this clause asserts is that the Son is unique (*monogenēs*) and, on the basis of his eternal begetting by the Father, is God

in exactly the same way as the Father. He is one with the Father in being and thus one in majesty, glory, wisdom, power, and authority. If I wanted to rule out of court any sub-ordering of the Son I could not say it better.

The Athanasian Creed, the most definitive statement of Trinitarian orthodoxy from the early church, is more explicit. It says,

In this Trinity, none is before or after, none is greater or less than another. But the whole three persons are co-eternal together and co-equal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit. All three are “almighty” and “Lord.”

Then we have the Reformation and Post-Reformation Confessions, binding on millions of Christians who belong to mainline Protestant churches.<sup>30</sup> These with one voice decree that the Bible teaches that the divine three persons are one in being/ essence *and* power. The confession of the Evangelical Theological Society says the same. The terms “power” and “authority” are both divine attributes shared equally by the divine persons, and thus the terms are virtual synonyms. If the three divine persons have the same power then they have the same authority. The Reformed Belgic Confession of 1651 explicitly excludes hierarchical ordering in the same words as the Athanasian Creed and adds that the Son is “neither subordinate nor subservient” to the Father.

Confessional evangelicals do not give to the creeds and confessions the same authority as scripture, let alone set these documents over scripture. Rather, they believe the creeds and confessions express what the best theologians from the past have concluded the scriptures teach on doctrines that have been in dispute. They see them as both summaries of what the church universal should believe the scriptures teach, and the best guides we have for the right interpretation of the scriptures on the doctrines they articulate. In this book, *One God in Three Persons*, there is no interaction with these weighty theological documents that enunciate what the universal church believes about the Father, Son, and Spirit. Their teaching is ignored.<sup>31</sup> What this means is that most of the essays in the book reflect nothing more than the idiosyncratic opinions of individual men whose main agenda is maintaining the subordination of women.

We of course do need to check if John’s Gospel teaches the *eternal* subordination of the Son in authority and thus hierarchical ordering in divine life, as Cowan argues, but for the moment we need to accept that hierarchical ordering in divine life is rejected by the creeds and confessions and endorsed by no orthodox theologian from the past. Indeed, for most patristic scholars

**Hierarchical ordering in divine life is rejected by the creeds and confessions and endorsed by no orthodox theologian from the past.**

it is seen as the essence of the various forms of fourth century Arianism. Letham, for example, says, “Arians of all shapes froze the triad into a hierarchy.”<sup>32</sup> No one denies that in John’s Gospel, and occasionally elsewhere in the NT, we find texts that speak of the subordination of the Son, but for all orthodox theologians these speak of the Son “in the form of a servant” during his earthly ministry.

Central to Cowan’s case is that frequently in John’s Gospel the Son is said to be “sent” by the Father. For him, and for most of the other writers in this book, this indicates that the Son must do as the Father commands; he is set under the Father’s authority and must obey him. This is an old argument; the Arians never tired of using it. Augustine says “they turn to the axiom: ‘The one who sends is greater than the one sent.’”<sup>33</sup> In a reply to such Arian reasoning Augustine argues that sending does not imply, let alone indicate, subservience: only that the one sent comes from the sender. He thus concludes that, just as the terms “unbegotten” and “begotten” differentiate the Father and the Son, while not suggesting any subordination or inequality, so too do the terms “send” and “sent.”<sup>34</sup> What Augustine clearly recognized is that creaturely words such as “begetting,” “sending,” “son,” and “father” cannot be applied to God univocally. God is not defined by human terms used of creaturely existence. When it comes to John’s understanding of the sending language, I argue that what is reflected here is the Jewish *Shaliach* principle, namely that the one sent has the same authority as the one who sends.<sup>35</sup> Cowan will not concede this point. In answer to him I raise three points. First, no exegete should assume that creaturely words such as “father” and “son” and “sent,” when used in the Bible, should be understood univocally and literally. God cannot be defined in creaturely terms. Second, in John’s Gospel Jesus does see himself representing perfectly the Father because he has been “sent” by him (3:34, 5:23, 7:16, 28–29, 8:16, 18, 12:44–45, 49, 13:20, 14:24). And third, in John’s Gospel, while it is true that Jesus is sent by the Father and does his will perfectly, he is pre-existent God (1:1), who does the works of the Father (5:19, 9:4, 10:37), including those works that only Yahweh can do such as raising the dead (5:21, 6:40) and exercising judgment (5:22, 27–29, 8:16). What is more he identifies himself with Yahweh in the “I am sayings” (8:59, 6:35, 8:12, 10:7, etc.), and after his resurrection he is unambiguously confessed as “The Lord” (20:18, 28, 21:7), Yahweh in all might, majesty, and authority.

Elsewhere in the NT the title “Son” speaks pre-eminently of Jesus Christ’s kingly status. In the book of Revelation he is identified as the Son of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who rules on the one throne with his Father (Rev 7:10–12, 11:15). Here complementarians need to be reminded that Jesus Christ is not only named the Son of God but also “the Lord.” In this confession he is

identified with Yahweh, the Lord God omnipotent. The Reformed theologian and complementarian John Frame says, “scripture calls Jesus the Son of God in a *unique sense*,”<sup>36</sup> and he adds,

There is a considerable overlap between the concepts of Lord and Son. Both indicate Jesus’ rule over his covenant people (as Son, he is the covenant King of Ps 2:27). Both [titles] indicate Jesus’ powers and prerogatives as God, especially over God’s people: in other words divine control, authority, and presence.<sup>37</sup>

These observations remind us that we should never give content to titles used of Jesus Christ by appeal to fallen human life and relations. It is scripture that should give the content. When the NT writers call Jesus Christ “the Son of God,” his lofty status, not his subordination, is implied. He is “the unique (*monogenēs*) Son of God,” like no human son.

### Chapter 3

Clyde Claunch in his chapter, “God is the Head of Christ” says he writes to ask the question “Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 ground gender *complementarity* [italics added] in the Immanent Trinity?” He argues that it does. As someone who believes strongly in the complementarity of the sexes<sup>38</sup> I need to point out first of all that, in fact, Claunch is arguing that 1 Cor 11:3 grounds *woman’s subordination*,

not the complementarity of the sexes, in the immanent Trinity. For him the term “complementarity” is a code word for female subordination.<sup>39</sup> He begins by saying that his argument does not imply a “social model of the Trinity,”<sup>40</sup> but then later endorses the idea that the three divine persons each have their own will, which is the essence of a social doctrine of the Trinity!<sup>41</sup> Claunch agrees that the Greek word *kephalē* that literally refers to the top part of the body may have the metaphorical meaning of either “source” or “authority over,” but he says it must mean the latter in 1 Cor 11:3 because Paul in this passage is securing the subordination of women in the subordination of the Son to the Father.<sup>42</sup> I am not convinced. The metaphorical meaning of a word, I agree with him, is best determined by context, and in this case context well-nigh rules out the meaning “authority over.” Why would Paul first say in v. 3 that man is *head over* woman and then immediately say in v. 5 that men and women can both lead in church by praying and prophesying, “the two principal exercises in public worship of the Early Christians”?<sup>43</sup> And second, why would Paul say in v. 11 that women have “authority” on their heads if he thought authority was reserved to men? Given the priority of context in determining the meaning of metaphors, the meaning “source” is to be preferred. In 1 Cor 11:9 and 12, the apostle has man/Adam as the source or origin of woman (Gen 2). This being so, then the clause, “God is the *kephalē* of Christ,” probably refers to the Father as the origin or “source” of Jesus Christ in the incarnation, or possibly to the Son’s eternal generation *from* the Father.

**No exegete should assume that creaturely words such as “father” and “son” and “sent,” when used in the Bible, should be understood univocally and literally. God cannot be defined in creaturely terms.**

Assuming that *kephalē* means “head-over” in this context, Claunch argues, following Calvin, that 1 Cor 11:3 Paul is speaking of the Father as head over the Son in the economy. The text is saying the Son is subordinate to the Father in his incarnate ministry as Phil 2:4–11 clearly teaches. However he then says, this text “does indeed ground gender complementarity in the immanent Trinity, albeit indirectly.”<sup>44</sup> In other words, he argues, this text first of all speaks of the Son as *subordinated* (my translation of his term “complementarity”) to the Father in the economy, but then he argues that this economic subordination is to be read back into the immanent Trinity. What this means is that what he gives with one hand he takes back with the other. The Son is not only subordinate in the economy (that is in history in his incarnate state); he is also subordinated eternally.

On *taxis/order*, Claunch is simply factually wrong.<sup>45</sup> The biblical “order” is not always Father, Son, and Spirit, as 2 Cor 13:13 and many other Trinitarian verses demonstrate.<sup>46</sup> Frequently the Father is not mentioned first. On Augustine he is also wrong. The great Latin-speaking theologian does not allow that the eternal generation of the Son implies a “Trinitarian taxis” of authority and submission in the eternal life of God.<sup>47</sup> For Augustine, the eternal generation of the Son, which anticipates the sending of the Son into the world, speaks of the “absolute equality” of the Father and the Son.<sup>48</sup> They are one in being and attributes—and authority is a divine attribute.<sup>49</sup> I quote Augustine, “The Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Spirit is almighty; yet there are not three almighties but one almighty.”<sup>50</sup> What Claunch fails to recognize is that Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity excludes on principle the idea that the Son is eternally set under the Father and must obey him. The Father, Son, and Spirit are the one God, equal in all things.

Finally, I commend Claunch for his honesty and openness. He admits that the complementarian doctrine of an hierarchically ordered Trinity that he and most other contributors to this book endorse, in which the Son must eternally submit his will to the will of the Father, “runs counter to the pro-Nicene tradition, as well as the medieval, Reformation, and post-Reformation Reformed traditions that grew from it.”<sup>51</sup> In this key clause, Claunch openly admits that the contemporary “complementarian” doctrine of the Trinity is not historic orthodoxy. It “runs counter to the Pro-Nicene tradition” and the great Protestant confessions of the Reformation age!

## Chapter 4

In his chapter, “‘That God May Be All in All’: The Trinity in 1 Corinthians 15,” James Hamilton accuses Erickson and me of not adequately dealing with 1 Cor 15:24–28.<sup>52</sup> This text speaks of the Son on the last day handing over the kingdom of God to the Father. He says we err in not considering these words in the light of the whole argument Paul is making in this chapter. I reject his charge against Erickson and me, but I like his conclusion: this whole chapter is an argument “that the resurrection of Jesus is a necessary component of the Gospel, and to deny the general resurrection, as some Christians do, undermines the Gospel.”<sup>53</sup> But how this conclusion aids in the interpretation of vv. 24–28, he does not explain.

Before considering his criticism of Erickson and me for the way we understand vv. 24–28, it is to be noted that Hamilton believes, as do most of the contributors to this book, that orthodoxy teaches the ontological equality of the divine persons and the eternal “role” subordination of the Son—by which, in plain speak, he means the eternal subordination in authority of the Son.<sup>54</sup> This is simply factually incorrect. With one voice the Nicene fathers teach, in modern terms, the ontological equality of the three divine persons and their equal authority. Thus all the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions and the confession of faith of the Evangelical Theological Society, as we have already noted, speak of oneness in being and power in divine life. For the Nicene theologians, the Father and the Son work or function as one, not in a command structure. Hamilton is correct: the Arians, “would not have affirmed ontological equality,”<sup>55</sup> but he fails to note that it was they, not the Nicene fathers, who taught the eternal functional subordination of the Son—his subordination in authority. The Nicene fathers held that, if the Son was not one in being with the Father, then he was not one in power with the Father, and vice versa. They never spoke of the “role” subordination of the Son, as Hamilton claims they did. They spoke rather of the “works” or “operations” of the divine persons, arguing that they worked “inseparably.” The term “role” and the idea of assumed “roles” is not found in the Nicene fathers, and the word “role” is not found in any of the most-used English translations of the Bible.<sup>56</sup> I agree with Letham that in the cause of truth the word “role” should not be used in any discussion on divine life and action.<sup>57</sup> And, I would add, it should not be used to interpret the Bible on the male-female relationship. We do not simply play the “role” of being a man or woman. We *are* a man or a woman.

The pro-Nicene fathers, as well as Erickson and I, believe that ontological equality excludes absolutely any necessary and eternal (functional) subordination/submission. To suggest otherwise is “nonsensical.”<sup>58</sup> If the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father and cannot be otherwise, then his subordinate status speaks not only of his function or “role” but of his person—who he *is*. What is more, Arians in the middle of the fourth century explicitly confessed the Son to be truly God, even if neither they nor the Nicene fathers ever spoke explicitly of “the ontological equality” of the Father and the Son. For example, the Second Sirmium Creed of 357, which none deny is an Arian Creed, first confesses the Son “to be begotten of the Father . . . before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, by whom all things were made” before speaking of his eternal subordination. What this means is that Arians in the middle of the fourth century, like most complementarians today, confessed the Son to be truly God without any caveats, yet eternally subordinate to the Father as well.

When it comes to the exegesis of 1 Cor 15:24–28, Hamilton dismisses Pannenberg’s evocative interpretation (which I do not endorse). He says little about my account of what Calvin and the majority of Reformed theologians have said on these verses. They agree that this text is not speaking of the end of the Son’s rule but the end of his rule as the God-man mediator. In support, Erickson and I, together with many Reformed theologians, point out that numerous scriptures speak of the Son ruling for ever and ever (2

Sam 7:12, Isa 9:7, Luke 1:33, 2 Pet 1:11, Rev 7:10–12, etc.). These texts count against Hamilton's interpretation of 1 Cor 15:24–28, namely that the Son in eternity "will be subject to the Father."<sup>59</sup> I thus with confidence, along with millions and millions of other Christians who confess the Nicene Creed, believe that the Son's rule "will have no end."

Hamilton wrote before Wesley Hill's book, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters*,<sup>60</sup> had appeared and so he cannot be criticized for not taking into account his exposition of 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, which eliminates any suggestion this text eternally subordinates the Son to the Father. Hill argues that the primary question in any discussion of the Trinity is what the "relationship" is between the Father and the Son. He concludes that Paul undeniably identifies Jesus as God but does not confuse him with God the Father. Paul thus consistently speaks of the Son as God yet differentiates him from God the Father. We see this in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28. First, Paul identifies Jesus as God who "puts all his enemies under his feet" and then he speaks of God the Son freely handing over his rule to God the Father. What is alluded to here, Hill says, is not the subordination of God the Son to God the Father but mutuality between God the Son and God the Father.

## Chapter 5

This chapter by Robert Letham on the eternal generation of the Son is the most unexpected and important chapter in the book. He writes in opposition to evangelicals, including Ware and Grudem, who reject this doctrine, a doctrine fundamental to Trinitarian orthodoxy. I applaud Letham's endorsement not only of the Nicene doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and of "inseparable operations,"<sup>61</sup> but also his rejection of the use of the term "role" to differentiate the Father and the Son,<sup>62</sup> his opposition to reading back into divine life the creaturely content of the terms "father" and "son," his emphatic affirmation that the "Father and the Son are one in being, equal in power and glory, possessing all God's attributes," and his allowing only that "in terms of personal relations there is a distinction. The Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten—never the reverse."<sup>63</sup> This he believes reflects "order" or "a general pattern" in divine life and operations that is irreversible and unchanging. It does not speak of hierarchical ordering in divine life.<sup>64</sup>

What is so important in this essay is that Letham brands as Arian the primary argument used in this book and elsewhere by complementarians for the eternal subordination of the Son in authority, namely that the divine names, "Father" and "Son" should be understood as they are in human relationships. He says,

The Arian argument that human sons are subordinate to their fathers led to their contention that the son is subordinate to the Father. The church rejected this conclusion as heretical and opposed the premise as mistaken. Rather, the Son is equal with the Father in status, power and glory. He is identical in being from eternity. In short, to take the creaturely reality as definitive of the life of God is a serious error, leading to dire results.<sup>65</sup>

Compared to what I say in this critique of *One God in Three Persons*, what Letham says is far more telling. It inflicts a mortal blow to the complementarian hierarchically ordered doctrine

of the Trinity. He gives a profound and informed rejection of virtually every assertion that the other contributors make and of the primary thesis of this book, namely that the creaturely terms "father" and "son" define the triune relationships of the Creator. He brands this argument for the Son's eternal subordination "Arian," "heretical" and a "serious error." We can only wonder whether the editors understood what Letham was saying.

## Chapter 6

"True Sonship—Where Dignity and Submission Meet: A Fourth Century Discussion" is the title of Michael Ovey's chapter.<sup>66</sup> He is the principal of Oak Hill, a prestigious evangelical Anglican theological college in England. You would imagine someone holding this position would appeal first to the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds and then to the Thirty-Nine Articles, binding on all Anglicans, in seeking to outline the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. Instead, Ovey appeals to a number of contentious creeds from the middle of the fourth century, a quotation from the Arian bishop Basil of Ancyra, and a selected quotation from Hilary of Poitiers, which all reflect either the confused theological thinking in this period or explicitly Arian teaching. He also appeals to the fact that Athanasius speaks of a divine Father-Son relationship.

Commendably, he outlines his thesis succinctly and clearly.

The creedal and confessional material we will examine shows that overall, Arian, Nicene, and non-Nicene sources alike commonly held to the submission of the Son outside the incarnation. However the material also shows that the Son's submission may be grounded differently, with Arian versions of submission being associated with the Son as a creature, while the others stress the Son's submission arises from his sonship and not from him being a creature.<sup>67</sup>

Ovey is unambiguous; he believes that the Arian and pro-Nicene fathers both "held to the submission of the Son outside the incarnation." The Arians only differed from the Nicene fathers on what is the basis for this "submission" or "subordination" of the Son (he uses both terms interchangeably). For all those called "Arians," the Son is subordinate because he is a creature, not truly God. In contrast, for all the pro-Nicenes, the Son is God yet eternally subordinate because he is "the Son" and like all sons he is set under his father's authority.

Ovey is completely wrong in both his primary assertions. The Arians in the middle of the fourth century did not subordinate the Son because he is a creature and the pro-Nicene fathers did not subordinate the Son because he is like a human son. The creeds to which he appeals, as proof that the Arians subordinated the Son because they did not believe he was fully God and the co-creator, all contradict his thesis. Let me outline the facts, quoting from the creeds to which Ovey appeals. He and I agree that each of these creeds speaks unambiguously of the eternal subordination of the Son. Thus for Athanasius they are Arian creeds.<sup>68</sup> But in direct contradiction to Ovey's assertion, they all confess in the strongest terms that the Son is fully God and the co-creator. "The Dedication Creed" confesses the Son to be "begotten of the Father, before all ages, God from God, whole God from whole God, sole from sole,

perfect from perfect, King from King, Lord from Lord, by whom all things were made.”<sup>69</sup> Similarly the Macrostich Creed of 345 and the First Creed of Sirmium of 351 speak of the Son as generated “before the ages” and as “God from God, Light from Light” “through whom all things were made.”<sup>70</sup> The Second Sirmium Creed of 357, called “the Blasphemia” by Athanasius and Hilary of Poitiers because of its stark teaching on the eternal subordination of the Son, is equally explicit. The Son is “begotten of the Father . . . before all ages . . . God from God, Light from Light, by whom all things were made.”<sup>71</sup> If the non-biblical word *homoousios* is not to be used, I can think of no stronger wording to affirm that the Son is God in the same way as the Father.<sup>72</sup>

Yes, these creeds and Athanasius, to whom Ovey also appeals, affirm that the Father is the Father and the Son is the Son. We would expect this because they all oppose Sabellianism, which denied eternal differentiation in divine life. However, to argue, as Ovey and several other contributors to this volume do, that this indicates the belief that the divine Son is eternally subordinated to the divine Father because he is a son and all sons must obey their father is completely mistaken. The Nicene fathers opposed the idea that creaturely words and creaturely relationships can define divine life, which is what the Arians believed, as Letham so eloquently points out. He calls this argument “heretical” and a “serious error.”

Paradoxically, what Ovey has proven is that the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity he and most other contributors to this book espouse reflects Arian theology in the middle of the fourth century: *The Son is truly God but he is eternally subordinate or submissive to the Father.*

## Chapter 7

In the next essay, “Augustine and His Interpreters,” John Starke, in opposition to every patristic scholar I have read, argues that Augustine teaches an “order of authority and submission” in which the Father rules over the Son. In contrast, the erudite patristic scholar J. N. D. Kelly says that, for Augustine, “the unity of the Trinity is squarely in the foreground, subordinationism of every kind is excluded.”<sup>73</sup> Similarly, Letham says that for Augustine, “The inseparability of the persons in both being and action, in turn, is a reflection of their complete equality. All elements of subordination are pruned away.”<sup>74</sup> Starke is of the opposite opinion. He argues that by speaking of the Son as eternally begotten of the Father and as “sent” by the Father into the world, Augustine shows that he believed that there is an “an order of initiating authority and receptive submission between the Father and the Son.”<sup>75</sup> This is absurd. If this book were not a scholarly publication his conclusion would not deserve comment. For Augustine “the Son is equal to the Father in every respect,”<sup>76</sup> only subordinate by his own choice in that he took the “form of a servant” for our salvation.

Augustine comes back to the issue of the sending of the Son many times, and in every instance he rejects the Arian argument that this implies the Son’s subordination.<sup>77</sup> He says,

If the reason why the Son is said to be sent by the Father is simply that one is the Father and the other the Son, then there is nothing at all to stop us believing that the Son is equal to the Father . . . one is not greater and the other less.<sup>78</sup>

In regard to the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, Augustine believed that this guarantees both the full equality of the two divine persons and their indelible differentiation. Augustine says orthodox theologians agree that the scriptures teach that

The Father, Son and Spirit exist in an inseparable equality of the substance present in divine unity; and therefore there are not three Gods but one, although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, and therefore he who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten of the Father, and therefore he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father or the Son, but the Spirit of the Father and the Son, himself co-equal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the three fold unity.<sup>79</sup>

The names Father and Son definitely distinguish the divine persons for Augustine, like all the Nicene fathers, but he rules out of court the possibility of moving from human relations to divine relations. This, he says, is what men “misguided by the love of reason” do. For him, we cannot “transfer” what we observe

about bodily things to incorporeal and spiritual things, which they [the men who love reason] would measure by the standard of what they experience through the senses of the body or learn by natural human intelligence.<sup>80</sup>

Augustine never wavers. For him the scriptures clearly teach that the Son is eternally “equal to the Father” in “the form of God” and “less than” or “inferior to,” or as we would say today, “subordinate to” the Father temporally in “the form of servant” in his earthly ministry.<sup>81</sup>

## Chapter 8

I will not comment on Michael Hakin’s essay on the doctrine of the Trinity espoused by eighteenth century Particular Baptists, for I cannot see how it bears on the topic addressed in the book or in this review.

## Chapters 9 and 11

Ch. 9 is Philip Gons and Andrew Naselli’s essay, “An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments Against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity,” which I pair with the concluding essay by Bruce Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*,” for they cover much the same ground. They alike reject the argument presented by the well-informed philosophical theologians Tom McCall, Keith Yandell, and Millard Erickson, that to insist that the Son is necessarily and eternally subordinated to the Father in authority implies his ontological subordination, and as such is a denial that the Father and the Son are *one in being* (Greek *homoousios*). Gons and Naselli’s ignorance of historical theology is immediately disclosed in that they assume that “hierarchical ordering” in the immanent Trinity is orthodoxy. Virtually all informed theologians see hierarchical ordering in divine life as the essence of the Arian error and the heresy called “subordinationism.” Gons, Naselli, and Ware also show that they have not grasped historic orthodoxy in that they separate and distinguish between what is true of the one divine essence/being and what is true of the divine persons.<sup>82</sup> The three persons are the one divine being; there is no divine being or essence apart from the persons. What the divine persons are in unity, they are as Father, Son, and Spirit.

I will make no attempt at a reply to their attempts to ward off the philosophical objections to their doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son in authority, first because I am, like Gons, Naselli, and Ware, not a philosophical theologian, and second, because it has been done superbly by Thomas McCall, a very competent philosophical theologian. I warmly commend McCall's work.<sup>83</sup> I will focus rather on the theological argument that Gons, Naselli, and Ware make in reply to them. They point out that orthodoxy eternally differentiates the Father and the Son on the basis of differing origination—the Father begets, and the Son is begotten—which is true, and I have made the point many times. They believe this indicates that each divine person has a unique “property,” so to differentiate the persons by differing origination, or as complementarians do, by differing authority, does not imply ontological subordination or the denial of *homoousios*. Again what they say reveals a failure to understand Nicene orthodoxy. The Nicene fathers insisted that differing origination was *the one safe way* to differentiate indelibly the Father and the Son (and the Holy Spirit) because this alone did not call into question divine oneness and equality or allow for the subordination of the Son in the eternal life of God in any way. It is because the Son is eternally begotten of the Father that he is, as the Nicene Creed says, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God . . . one in being with the Father.” Differentiating the Father and the Son on the basis of differing

authority, all the pro-Nicene fathers clearly saw, entailed the sub-ordering of the Son, the essence of the Arian error.

## Chapter 10

Finally, I briefly comment on K. Scott Oliphint's essay, “Simplicity, Triunity and the Incomprehensibility of God,” which is a competent account of the somewhat abstract philosophical yet theologically orthodox idea that God is “simple.” The argument is that the triune God of revelation is ultimately the one God, divided in no way, or to quote Oliphint, “whatever essential attributes, qualities, or properties [that] inhere in God, they are identical with him, in the sense that they are not something other than God himself.”<sup>84</sup> What this means is that, if our triune God is “simple” in this sense, then he is not and cannot be divided into a God who commands and a God who obeys. Highlighting his orthodoxy Oliphint also argues first that we cannot define God in creaturely terms; we must “rather submit our thinking to scripture.”<sup>85</sup> This comment excludes defining the divine Father-Son relationship by appeal to the force of the human words “father” and “son.” And second, he argues that a distinction must be made, a distinction rooted in scripture, “between God (including the Son of God) as he is essentially and God in relation to creation.”<sup>86</sup> This distinction rules out of court reading the subordination of the Son seen in creation back into the life of God. What is missing from this essay is any engagement with the

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strongly argued essay by the evangelical theologian, Dennis Jowers, on divine simplicity. For Jowers, the doctrine of divine simplicity makes the divided Trinity of the complementarians, where the Father rules over the Son, a logical impossibility.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I must admit that I can find little to commend in this book with the exception of Letham and Oliphant's essays which accurately reflect orthodoxy, but what they say is drowned out by the other ill-informed essays that reflect an Arian understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine rejected by the Nicene fathers and excluded by the creeds and confessions. Should any reader want to discover what in fact orthodoxy teaches, the best place to begin would be the Athanasian Creed which sums up the catholic, or universal Christian, faith on the Trinity and on the person of Christ. Then they should move to the books on the Trinity written by competent patristic scholars who in most cases know nothing at all of the distinctive post-1977 complementarian doctrine of a hierarchically ordered Trinity. I list the best of these in endnote 2 below.

Finally, I return to where I began. Grudem is convinced that “the most decisive factor in finally deciding” who will win the bitter debate between evangelicals about the status and ministry of women is what is believed about the Trinity. I disagree because I am convinced that the Trinity in no way defines the male-female relationship on earth, and appeal to the Trinity is therefore irrelevant and bad theology. If, however, Grudem's view is accepted—as do most of the writers in *One God* and, I suspect, the majority of complementarians—then these evangelicals are left with only two starkly opposed options. They can endorse the Knight-Grudem-Ware doctrine of a hierarchically ordered Trinity, following the Arians. Or, they can endorse the Nicene doctrine of a co-equal Trinity enunciated clearly and unambiguously by Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine, codified in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, reaffirmed by the Reformers, and now spelled out in the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions. To opt for the second choice is, of course, difficult for most complementarians because, given Grudem's argument, it would involve abandoning belief in the permanent subordination of women. I of course strongly recommend this path because I do not believe the Bible makes the subordination of women the creation ideal. What is more, to argue that women are permanently subordinated to men demeans them, and to do so in our age makes as much sense as believing that the world is flat.

## Notes

1. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters: Multnomah, 2004), 411 n. 12.
2. See for example, L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1988); E. Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982); J. Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, 2 vols. (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary, 2004–2006); T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1996); S. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

3. This development is written up in two *Christianity Today* articles. See June, 2016 edition, or web page, [christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june-web-only/gender-trinity-proxy-war-civil-war-eternal-subordination.html](http://christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june-web-only/gender-trinity-proxy-war-civil-war-eternal-subordination.html), August, 22, 2016, or web page, [christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/september/behind-trinity-tussle.html](http://christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/september/behind-trinity-tussle.html).

4. Bruce Ware and John Starke, eds., *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), back cover.

5. The only examples I can think of are S. Grenz and D. Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995), 151–56, and W. Spencer, “An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity,” *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 16. In both cases the connection is incidental to what else they say. I am sure other egalitarians have appealed to divine life in support of gender equality; my point is simply that it is not an argument in any of the better known and most informed books by evangelical egalitarians.

6. <http://www.cbeinternational.org/content/statement-men-women-and-biblical-equality>.

7. Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, eds., *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity without Hierarchy* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005).

8. I fully document this fact in *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 20–32.

9. M. J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

10. T. H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 175–88.

11. K. E. Johnson, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective,” *Them* 36 (2011): 22–24.

12. One of the clearest and most telling essays in opposition to the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity is given by Letham in ch. 5 of *One God*. See my discussion of his chapter below. Early in our debate with each other I said a few things I would now word more carefully, and I suspect Letham would say the same about what he has written. On the basis of such comments by Letham, some of the writers in this book quote him in support of their erroneous ideas. See *One God*, 11 n. 1, 157, 162, 166, 170, 195 n. 2, 197 n. 7. Some of the appeals to what Letham says on “order” in divine life are wrongly understood. For him order in divine life does not imply hierarchical order.

12. Kevin N. Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

14. Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 205–41.

15. Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 172–99.

16. Robert Letham, “Eternal Generation in the Church Fathers,” in *One God* 123.

17. Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity,” in *One God*, 19.

18. Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations,” in *One God*, 29.

19. Kevin N. Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012).

20. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 1233–34

21. Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations,” in *One God*, 32–37.

22. Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations,” in *One God*, 37.

23. Letham, “Eternal Generation,” in *One God*, 121. For more detail see Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 109–10. And more recently, Roderick K. Durst, *Reordering the Trinity: Six Movements in God in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015).

24. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity* (trans. E. Hill; New York: New York City Press, 1991), 1.3.14 (p. 74), 1.4.22 (p. 82), 2.1.2 (pp. 98–99), etc.

25. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 279.

26. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 280.

27. Christopher W. Cowan, “‘I Always Do What Pleases Him’: The Father and Son in the Gospel of John,” in *One God*, 48.

28. Cowan, "The Father and Son in the Gospel of John," in *One God*, 48, 51, 53 (twice), 59, 61, 64.
29. See further, K. N. Giles, "Defining Subordinationism," *EQ* 72, no. 3 (2015): 207–24.
30. See further on this K. N. Giles, "The Evangelical Theological Society and the Doctrine of the Trinity," *EQ* 80, no. 4 (2008): 323–38.
31. I note that Grudem does refer to the creed of Nicaea and the later Nicene Creed (*One God*, 28), but only in passing, and the conclusion he draws is false: The eternal begetting of the Son is not mentioned in these creeds to prove that Jesus was always the Son of God and thus, like a true son, subordinate. The eternal begetting of the Son is in fact confessed because it makes the Son God, God in the same sense as the Father—omnipotent God.
32. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 147. See also pp. 383, 400, 484, 489, 491–93.
33. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 2.2.7 (p. 101).
34. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 4.29 (p. 174).
35. See my argument in *Jesus and the Father*, 119–21, and my appeal to scholarly opinion in support.
36. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 658. Italics added.
37. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 661.
38. Who could possibly deny that the two sexes together complete what it means to be human and that procreation is not possible without the complementary contribution by both sexes?
39. See Kevin Giles, "The Genesis of Confusion: How 'Complementarians' Have Corrupted Communication," *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 27–28.
40. Clyde Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ: Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 Ground Gender Complementarity in the Immanent Trinity?" in *One God*, 67.
41. Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 88–89.
42. Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 76–78.
43. So C. Hodge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 208. We should also note that Paul says in 1 Cor 12:28 that prophecy is "second," teaching "third."
44. Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 67.
45. Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 90–91.
46. See further, Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 109–10. See also Durst, *Reordering the Trinity*, op cit.
47. Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 90.
48. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 1.1 (p. 65).
49. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 3.12 (p. 197). For extensive documentation from Augustine's writings on these matters see Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 152–56, 190–94, 227–30 and K. N. Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 151–63.
50. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 5.9 (p. 195).
51. Claunch, "God is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 88.
52. After I wrote this review, late in the editing stage I read Wesley Hill's superb book, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). For a convincing theological interpretation of 1 Cor 15:24–28 in conformity with the Nicene faith, I could not recommend his work too highly.
53. James Hamilton, "That God May Be All in All: The Trinity in 1 Corinthians 15," in *One God*, 102.
54. Hamilton, "That God May Be All in All," in *One God*, 95–96, 105, 106, 108.
55. Hamilton, "That God May Be All in All," in *One God*, 106.
56. See Giles, "The Genesis of Confusion," 23–24.
57. Letham, "Eternal Generation," in *One God*, 123, 125.
58. Hamilton, "That God May Be All in All," in *One God*, 95.
59. Hamilton, "That God May Be All in All," in *One God*, 108.
60. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015.
61. Letham, "Eternal Generation," in *One God*, 123.
62. Letham, "Eternal Generation," in *One God*, 123, 125.
63. Letham, "Eternal Generation," in *One God*, 123–24.
64. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 179 and n. 29, 259, 383.
65. Letham, "Eternal Generation," *One God*, 122.
66. For an extended critical review of Ovey's chapter see <http://www.psephizo.com/gender-2/complement-arianism/>.
67. Michael J. Ovey, "True Sonship—Where Dignity and Submission Meet: A Fourth-Century Discussion," in *One God*, 130–31. He restates his thesis on p. 50.
68. Ovey, "True Sonship," in *One God*, 129. For the full text of these creeds see Hanson, *The Search*, and Athanasius, "On the Councils," Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol. 4 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892), henceforth quoted as NPNF.
69. Hanson, *The Search*, 286; NPNF 4, "On the Councils," 23 (p. 461).
70. Hanson, *The Search*, 309–10.
71. Hanson, *The Search*, 326–29; NPNF 4, "On the Councils," 27 (p. 464).
72. Here we need to note that in the middle of the fourth century most bishops were wary of the term *homoousios*. They feared it opened the door to Sabellianism (modalism) and they noted the word was not found in the Bible.
73. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 273.
74. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 199.
75. John Starke, "Augustine and His Interpreters," in *One God*, 171.
76. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 6.1.6 (p. 209).
77. See my detailed account of Augustine on the sending of the Son with many quotations from his writings in *Jesus and the Father*, 191–92 and *The Eternal Generation of the Son*, 152–62.
78. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 4.5.27 (p. 172). See also 4.5.29 (p. 174).
79. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 1.2.7 (p. 69).
80. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 1.1.1 (p. 65).
81. *Saint Augustine: The Trinity*, 1.3.14 (p. 74), 1.3.15 (p. 75), 1.4.22 (p. 82), 1.4.24 (p. 83), 2.1.3 (pp. 98–99), etc.
82. Philip R. Gons and Andrew David Naselli, "An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity," in *One God*, 205; Bruce A. Ware, "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*? A Response to Millard Erickson and Tom McCall," in *One God*, 243, 245, 247.
83. Thomas McCall, "Gender and the Trinity Once More: A Review of *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*" (ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke; Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), *TJ* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2015).
84. K. Scott Oliphint, "Simplicity, Triunity, and the Incomprehensibility of God," in *One God*, 223.
85. Oliphint, "Simplicity," in *One God*, 229.
86. Oliphint, "Simplicity," in *One God*, 233. See also, for the same point in other language, p. 234.
87. Dennis Jowers, "The Inconceivability of Subordination within a Simple God," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (ed. Dennis Jowers, W. Jowers, and H. Wayne House; Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 375–410.

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# One Essence, One Goodness, One Power

Nancy Hedberg

In the late 1970s, I first came across the claim that within the Trinity the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father.<sup>1</sup> I had been taught—and still believe—that the Father and the Son are equal. Period. This counterclaim challenged that assumption and planted a question in my mind. For the most part, I put the question aside for many years. I had my hands full as a stay-at-home mom, freelance writer, and part-time student at our community college. My general attitude toward the doctrine of the Trinity during those years could be summed up in Carl Henry's rhetorical question: "Is the doctrine of the Trinity a futile intellectual effort to resolve inherently contradictory notions of divine unity and divine plurality? Are orthodox evangelicals driven to say that anyone who rejects this doctrine may lose his soul whereas anyone who tries to explain it will lose his mind?"<sup>2</sup> I did not get it, and I did not have time to think about it. Nevertheless, a question had been planted, and although it went underground for many years, it never quite went away. As is often true in such cases, when the question reappeared later, it was not with a vengeance exactly, but certainly with renewed urgency. It became the focus of my doctoral dissertation and the topic of my book, *Women, Men, and the Trinity*.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the core distinctives of the Christian faith—some would say *the* core distinction of Christianity. Although it is impossible to grasp completely, it is important and worthy of exploration. In addition, in 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul links the relationships between God as the head of Christ, and man as the head of woman, in a way that suggests that a better understanding of the relationship within the Trinity can impact our understanding of human relations, especially the male/female relationship.

Our primary source for understanding the nature of the Trinity, and for obtaining God's perspective on the relationship between men and women, is the Bible. Although less important than the Bible, the historical, orthodox Christian view is also important. That is what we will be exploring in this article. The orthodox Christian view is the conventional set of beliefs held by Christians down through the ages. Among today's theologians, there is disagreement regarding the orthodox view of the Trinity. Has the Son historically been considered functionally subordinate to the Father? Did the early church fathers consider the Father and Son equal in both essence and function? Is the Son equal to the Father in who he is, but subordinate in his authority, works, and operations?

To be subordinated is to be placed below another in power or importance. Subordinationism, on the other hand, often refers to a distinct doctrine, the view that there is a hierarchy within the Trinity and that the Son is eternally and ontologically subordinate to the Father. Most evangelicals would agree that this type of subordinationism, the belief that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in the essence of his being, was proposed in the fourth century and condemned as heretical. At the same time, many current gender hierarchists<sup>3</sup> claim that *functional* subordination is part of our orthodox evangelical

heritage.<sup>4</sup> Everyone agrees the Son submitted to the Father during his incarnation. The current debate is between those who believe the Father and the Son are eternally equal in both essence and function (egalitarian) and those who say that, although the Son is eternally equal to the Father in the essence of his being, he is eternally subordinate in function and authority (hierarchist).

Of course, in this brief article, it is not possible to present an exhaustive review of Christian theologians. Instead, I have selected a few—Augustine, Warfield, Athanasius, Basil, John of Damascus, John Calvin, Karl Rahner, and Karl Barth—to represent the orthodox view. When we explore the views of these prominent theologians in regard to sonship, authority, and function, we will see that they do not support the hierarchal claim regarding functional subordination. But, before I address those specific topics, let us observe how the doctrine of the Trinity developed.

## Development of church doctrine

One of the most critical issues the early church faced was the clarification of church doctrine. The early years of the church were marked by debates, persecution, heresies, religious abuse, and the formation of various creeds. Today, we hold the doctrine of the Trinity as a basic tenet of Christianity. But one of the challenges of the early church was to formulate this doctrine in a way that upheld the deity of Christ without threatening the Old Testament belief that there is only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity is not spelled out in Scripture, and disputes in the early church abounded as theologians went from one extreme to another, sometimes defining God as three loosely connected Gods (tritheism) and at other times melding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into one God who manifested himself in different modes (modalism).<sup>5</sup>

Up until the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, the doctrine of the Trinity was somewhat fluid. One of the major debates at that time involved Arianism. Arianism was rooted in the belief that the Son was subordinate to the Father. This view eventually evolved into teachings that denied the deity of Christ. Moving away from the subordinationist doctrines of these early speculative theologians, the Council of Nicaea condemned Arius and his teaching.<sup>6</sup>

The creed written at Nicaea stressed the equality of the Father and the Son and the deity of Christ, stating that Christ was "the only-begotten of the Father . . . begotten, not made, of one substance [Greek *homoousian*] with the Father."<sup>7</sup> The Creed of Nicaea is widely recognized as foundational to Christian orthodoxy in regard to the Trinity. For the most part, the doctrine of the Trinity clarified during the fourth century has been defended down through the years.

At the time of the Reformation, numerous theological premises were thoroughly debated, so it should be no surprise that one of the issues that surfaced was the doctrine of the Trinity. Opponents of the doctrine considered it unscriptural and irrational.<sup>8</sup> Although the

doctrine itself came under attack, it does not appear that subordination within the Trinity was a major issue for those who supported the Trinitarian doctrine itself. It seems the Reformers considered equality among the members of the Trinity an issue settled by early church creeds and treated it as a given.<sup>9</sup>

In the current debate among theologians regarding the historical, orthodox view of the Trinity, several themes recur. The first one that I want to explore is the issue of sonship. Closely related to sonship are the issues of begottenness and being sent.

### Sonship, begottenness, and being sent

Both hierarchists and egalitarians consider the Creed of Nicaea to be a critical document outlining orthodox doctrine. And, interestingly, both egalitarians and hierarchists use it to support their points of view. This is possible because they come to the creed with different assumptions. Hierarchists assume that concepts such as sonship, begottenness, and being sent indicate subordination.<sup>10</sup> Egalitarians, on the other hand, believe that these concepts in and of themselves simply indicate aspects of Trinitarian relationship having to do with distinctions of function in human redemption, not subordination or lesser authority.<sup>11</sup> Since hierarchists and egalitarians see this so differently, I was eager to see what early theologians actually had to say about begottenness and sonship.

Basil (330–397), a prominent early theologian, understood being sent and being begotten as matters of distinction and identification, not subordination. He took the phrase “begotten, not made” to suggest equal glory.<sup>12</sup> Augustine (354–430), recognized widely as one of the most important Christian theologians of all time, pointed out that references to the Son being sent by the Father and begotten of the Father do not suggest subordination or inequality. He said, “His being sent was the work of both the Father and His Word; therefore the same Son was sent by the Father and the Son, because the Son Himself is the Word of the Father.”<sup>13</sup> Augustine stressed the indivisibility of both the substance and works of the Godhead and argued that being sent or begotten did not indicate that one person of the Godhead is greater and one is lesser.<sup>14</sup> Augustine consistently points out that *sonship* does not necessitate inferiority or subordination.<sup>15</sup>

We can see this illustrated even on the human level. For instance, would we say that the authority of Jesse was greater than that of his son David? That Abraham remained subordinate to his father, Terah? Although authority and submission characterize a *father/child* relationship for a given time or in certain circumstances, they are not the defining characteristics of earthly *father/son* relationships, much less relationships within the Trinity. Mark Strauss, an advocate for inclusive language, explains why it is not accurate to substitute *child* for *son* in gender-inclusive biblical translations. Although he is speaking to a different issue, the point he makes is significant: “The use of ‘Child’ could carry implications of immaturity that ‘Son’ does not. Jesus is the mighty Son of God in all the glory and magnificence of his exaltation as heir of all things (see Heb 1:3). He is not an immature child.”<sup>16</sup>

This is in contrast to those who believe that the Father and Son relationship is inherently one of submission and authority and that this submissive/authoritative aspect of their relationship primarily differentiates the persons of the Godhead from one another.<sup>17</sup> For Augustine, the sending of the Son was a joint endeavor involving both

the Father and the Son. It was about diversity, equality, and unity, not authority and submission.

As I mentioned earlier, during and following the Reformation, there was not much debate about the doctrine of the Trinity. However, Benjamin B. Warfield (1851–1921), a professor who taught at the theological seminary at Princeton, took pains to explain how he understood begottenness in relationship to equality. In addition to clarifying that begottenness did not necessitate subordination, Warfield asserted that the Son’s coming to earth in human form was voluntary and that biblical passages referring to the Son’s subordination during the incarnation did not reflect on his eternal standing within the Godhead.<sup>18</sup>

Augustine, Basil, and Warfield are three influential theologians who addressed sonship, begottenness, and being sent. Far from advocating the functional subordination of the Son to the Father, these prominent theologians argued that the Father/Son relationship within the Trinity is marked by unity and equality. But what did early theologians have to say about the Son’s authority?

### Power and authority

Of particular interest is whether it has been historically understood that the Father and the Son are equal in power and authority. Although there is a slight difference in meaning, I am assuming that, unless specified otherwise, references to God’s power also reference his authority.

Athanasius (300–373), who in his time sometimes stood alone against Arianism, pointed out that, although during the incarnation Jesus submitted himself to the Father, when it came to the resurrection, the Son raised his own body<sup>19</sup>—that he was an active, rather than a passive, participant along with the Father.<sup>20</sup> He said that no one should doubt that “He is very Son of God, having His being from God as from a Father, Whose Word and wisdom and Whose Power He is.”<sup>21</sup> Athanasius saw the Father and the Son united in their power.

In *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil also affirmed the equality of Christ’s power. Writing in response to the argument that the Son received commandments from the Father in a way that would suggest his inferiority, Basil says that the Father and the Son are equal in essence, power, and works.<sup>22</sup> Basil also argued that being seated at the right hand of the Father (Heb 1:3) is not a seat of inferiority, but a station of equality.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to imagine Basil supporting the idea that the Son is equal to the Father in essence, but permanently subordinate in power and authority. Both Athanasius and Basil take pains to explain that the Father and the Son are eternally united and equal in rank, power, and works.

About three hundred years after Athanasius and Basil, John of Damascus (c. 675–c. 749) wrote *Fountain of Wisdom*. His purpose was to collect and condense the quintessential opinions and works of the great theologians who had preceded him. His book *Concerning the Orthodox Faith* has been described as the most important of his writings and “one of the most notable works of Christian antiquity.”<sup>24</sup> In a chapter on the Trinity, John of Damascus says that the unity of the persons of the Trinity in regard to authority is demonstrated by their “being identical in authority and power and goodness. . . . For there is one essence, one goodness, one power,

one will, one energy, one authority, one and the same, I repeat, not three resembling each other.”<sup>25</sup>

It seems significant that, in a work written for the express purpose of epitomizing the opinions of the early theologians, John of Damascus adamantly affirms that within the essential oneness of the Trinity there is also oneness of *authority*. How can the Father and Son be “identical in authority” and yet be differentiated by the Father’s authority and the Son’s submission, as some claim?

John Calvin, one of the most influential Reformation theologians, acknowledged ordering within the Trinity, but in his commentary on 1 Corinthians, he noted that any implied subordination is restricted to Jesus’ incarnation. He said that Christ was “inferior to the Father, inasmuch as he assumed our nature.”<sup>26</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin again refers to the relationship between the Father and the Son, this time in regard to the future: “God will then cease to be the head of Christ, and Christ’s own Godhead will then shine forth of itself, whereas it is now in a manner veiled.”<sup>27</sup> Calvin understood that Jesus submitted during the incarnation and in his role as mediator, but he saw this submission as temporal, not eternal. He believed that, when we see God as he is, we will see that the Father is no longer “the head of Christ,” but that the persons of the Trinity are equal in their glory and majesty. While I do not necessarily agree with Calvin’s understanding of “headship,” it is clear that he saw Christ’s submission during the incarnation as temporal and not an indication of his eternal authority and status within the Godhead.

There is considerable agreement among theologians down through the centuries that the persons of the Trinity are equal in power and authority. In the next section, we will explore the amazing unity within the Godhead and consider what theologians have had to say about equality in regard to their functions and operations.

## Function

As has already been noted, Basil was one of the early theologians who recognized the equality of power within the Trinity and understood begottenness to indicate equal glory rather than subordination. He also defended the functional equality and unity within the Godhead. Citing John 5:19, he said that the Son does whatever he sees the Father doing and that there is no distinction between their works.<sup>28</sup> This was Athanasius’s understanding as well: “When the Son works, the Father is the Worker. . . . when the Father gives grace and peace, the Son also gives it.”<sup>29</sup> Athanasius saw the Father and the Son functioning together, not one in subordination to the other.

We have noted that there is no debate about the Son’s submission during the incarnation. Everyone recognizes that, during his time on earth, the Son submitted to the Father. But, in his commitment to clarify the eternal equality of the persons of the Trinity, Augustine makes a mind-bending observation: He says that the Son’s subordination during the incarnation was in part subordination to himself.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, Augustine insisted that Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 15:27–28 about the Father subjecting all things to the Son does not have implications regarding a top-down delegation within the Godhead, but rather indicates an inseparable, reciprocal type of subjection: “Let him not think that the words ‘He has subjected all things to the Son,’ are to be understood of the Father in such a way as to think that the Son has not subjected all things to Himself. . . . For the operation of the

Father and the Son is inseparable.”<sup>31</sup> In Augustine’s view, the oneness of the Father and Son is so complete that, if the Father is subjecting all things to himself, the Son is participating in that act of subjecting. In another place, Augustine noted that the “will of the Father and the Son is one, and their operation is inseparable.”<sup>32</sup>

Prominent early theologians such as Augustine, Athanasius, and Basil described the functional equality of God the Father and God the Son and articulated that their operations could not be separated. If there is no indication of a separation between the operations of one and the operations of the other, it is difficult to see how one could be eternally functionally subordinate to the other.

Even so, there is another matter that comes up in regard to the Trinity. Many theologians make a distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. The immanent Trinity has to do with the intrinsic nature of the Triune God. The economic Trinity can be identified with the acts of the Trinity as revealed to us in creation and redemption.<sup>33</sup> Kevin Giles points out that God’s revelation to us is marked by both truth and restraint: “This distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity allows that there is more to God than what is revealed to us but that what is revealed is true and accurate. God is not other than he is in revelation.”<sup>34</sup>

Some theologians assume a hierarchy within the economic Trinity.<sup>35</sup> The temptation is to equate the immanent Trinity with equality of essence and the economic Trinity with subordination of function. However, that is a mistake. Although the incarnation has a prominent place in God’s revelation regarding redemption, and we all understand the Son submitted to the Father during his time on earth, God’s revelation to us regarding the operations of the Son within the economic Trinity goes well beyond that. When we consider what the Bible reveals to us about the role of the Son in creation<sup>36</sup> (Col 1:15–20), sanctification (Eph 5:26), judgment (2 Tim 4:1), and mediation (Heb 4:14–16), we can say with some assurance that the function of the Son within the economic Trinity as revealed through God’s work in creation and redemption is larger in scope than Jesus’ time on earth during his incarnation. The function of the Son is not limited to his submission as fleshed out in the incarnation, and the economic Trinity as a whole is not necessarily distinguished by a hierarchy of roles.

Karl Rahner (1904–1984) was a Catholic theologian who gave the economic Trinity careful consideration. Karl Barth (1886–1968) was another fairly recent theologian who weighed in regarding the Trinity. Both place heavy emphasis on unity within the Godhead. Karl Rahner was concerned with assuring that the doctrine of the Trinity remained relevant. One of Rahner’s primary concerns was to make a connection between the Trinity and humanity.<sup>37</sup> To that end, he makes the statement that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.”<sup>38</sup> Although this statement could suggest that any subordination within the economic Trinity would mean eternal ontological subordination as well, that does not seem to be his intent. He explains, “There has occurred in salvation history something which can be predicated only of one divine person,”<sup>39</sup> suggesting that only the Son could have participated in the incarnation. But it is not clear that he is at the same time saying that, because only the Son could have participated in the incarnation, and that during the incarnation the Son was subordinate to the Father, it means that the Son is eternally subordinated, because he clarifies, “[T]

here exists in God only *one* power, *one* will, only one self-presence, a unique activity, a unique beatitude, and so forth.<sup>40</sup> Clearly, his primary concern has more to do with making a *real* connection between the Trinity and humanity, and he thus attempts to erase what may be a false and misleading distinction between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity.

Karl Barth maintained that the three persons of the Trinity act together: “No attribute, no act of God is not in the same way the attribute or act of the Father, the Son and the Spirit.”<sup>41</sup> In a discussion regarding the Son’s participation in creation and redemption, Barth says, “If the Son has a share in what was called the special work of the Father, if He works with the Father in the work of creation, then this means, at least in the sense of Athanasius and the theology which finally triumphed in the fourth century, that He is of one essence with Him.”<sup>42</sup> Far from suggesting that the Son is equal in essence but subordinate in works, Barth says that it is the Son’s very participation in God’s works that confirm his oneness with the Father: “In order that all things might be made by Him, in order that He might be the Mediator of creation, He Himself had to be God by nature.”<sup>43</sup> If I understand Barth correctly, he is saying that the Son’s function confirms his essential equality with the Father. This is a total about-face from the hierarchal view of functional subordination. Far from understanding the works of the Son as assigned to him by his authoritative Father, Barth understands the works of the Father and the Son to be one, the works of the Son confirming his deity.

There is relationship, and an ordering of relationship, but unless one assumes that ordering implies hierarchy, or that “sonship” implies less authority, these formulations I have cited do not indicate eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father.

## Summary

The question at hand is whether there is an eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father. Certainly, over the years, there have been theologians who have supported functional subordination or whose views are so ambiguous it is impossible to discern their perspective on this topic. However, in my reading, and especially in examining the thinking of prominent theologians such as Augustine, Athanasius, Basil, John of Damascus, Warfield, Calvin, Rahner, and Barth, I have detected far more emphasis on equality of both essence and function than on functional subordination. It is difficult for me to see how hierarchists can claim that the timeless, orthodox Christian view is that the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father. Furthermore, embedded in the debate of whether there is an eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father is a troubling question. Is it possible for the Son to be *eternally functionally* subordinate without also being *ontologically* subordinate? Eternal ontological equality is assumed by both egalitarians and hierarchists. However, if the Father and Son are united in their attributes, works, word, will, thought, deeds, authority, operations, power, rank, glory, majesty, truth, goodness, and mercy, as these early theologians we have cited claim, then what is meant by functional subordination? Is permanent functional subordination even possible without ontological inequality (meaning that being subordinated is permanently a part of the essence of one or two of the persons of the Trinity and subordinating and ruling is a permanent part of another, so that the essences are not exactly the same)?

I believe this is a critical underlying question that is largely responsible for the current impasse between hierarchists and egalitarians regarding the Trinity. It is obvious that, in 1 Corinthians 11:3, Paul is trying to make some sort of connection between God as the head of Christ and man as the head of woman. But I do not believe we can assume he is referring to a relationship that is hierarchical or based on one person having authority over the other. Instead, I believe he is using the term *head* as part of a head-and-body metaphor, illustrating unity and interdependency. This is consistent with the way Paul uses this metaphor throughout the book of 1 Corinthians, and it seems consistent with the views of these earlier theologians who viewed the persons of the Trinity as united in their authority and works. Thus, although a number of prominent theologians today claim that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in function and authority and posit that this is the historical orthodox view of the church, I do not see this theory supported by the church fathers or by the majority of theologians throughout the history of Christianity. Therefore, church history does not support the claims of hierarchists regarding functional subordination within the Trinity, and their claims should not be used as an argument for the functional subordination of women.

We conclude with this wise summary from John of Damascus: “For there is one essence, one goodness, one power, one will, one energy, one authority, one and the same, I repeat, not three resembling each other.”<sup>44</sup>

## Notes

1. George Knight, *The New Testament Teaching Regarding the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977), 55–56.
2. Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 5 (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 165.
3. The terms *complementarian* and *egalitarian* are most commonly used within the gender debate. For terms specifically related to the Trinity, see Millard Erickson’s book *Who’s Tampering With the Trinity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009). Erickson uses the term *gradational authority* to describe those who believe there is an eternal hierarchy with the Father in authority over the Son. He uses the term *equivalent authority* for those who believe the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally equal and the subordination of the Son was limited to a specific time and purpose.
4. Thomas R. Schreiner, “Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 129.
5. P. P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 1997), 199.
6. Enns, *Moody Handbook*, 199.
7. Enns, *Moody Handbook*, 420.
8. Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 3 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1975), 101–02.
9. Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 167.
10. Bruce A. Ware, “Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority and Submission among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead” (paper presented at the 58th annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Washington, DC, November 16, 2006), 12.
11. Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 52.
12. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1980), 31.
13. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, II.5.9, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130102.htm>, cited June 27, 2007.
14. Augustine, *Trinity*, IV.20.27.
15. Augustine, *Trinity*, II.1.3.
16. Mark L. Strauss, *Distorting Scripture?* (Downers Grove, IL:

InterVarsity, 1998), 181.

17. Ware says that the distinction of persons in the Godhead is “manifest by the inherent authority of the Father and inherent submission of the Son.” Bruce Ware, “Equal in Essence,” 10. Grudem makes this same point, assuming the Father/Son relationship is necessarily one of authority/submission. *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 251. Also, Grudem sees the authority/submission relationship within the Trinity as the “means by which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit differ from one another and can be differentiated from one another.” *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 433.

18. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 39, 56.

19. See, for example, John 2:19.

20. See, for example, Rom 10:9.

21. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1996), 63–64.

22. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 39.

23. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 30.

24. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Saint John Damascene,” <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/o8459b.htm>, cited December 7, 2007.

25. John of Damascus, “Concerning the Holy Trinity” in *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book I, Chapter VIII, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf209.iii.iv.viii.html?highlight=john,37>, cited December 7, 2007.

26. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, trans. John Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), 353.

27. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.xiii.3, trans. Henry Beveridge, esq. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

28. Basil, *On the Holy Spirit*, 39.

29. Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, Discourse III, XXV, 11, in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.21.ii.iv.iii.html>, cited November 10, 2007.

30. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, II.2.

31. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, I.15, 22.

32. Augustine, *On the Trinity* in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 45, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 61.

33. Wayne Grudem says that, when speaking of the *economy of the Trinity*, the word *economy* is used in the sense of *ordering of activities*: “The ‘economy of the Trinity’ means the different ways the three persons act as they relate to the world and . . . to each other for all eternity.” Grudem, *Systematic Theology*,

248. Kevin Giles explains the economic and immanent Trinity as follows: “The former refers to the Trinity as revealed in God’s unfolding work of creation and redemption in history; the latter refers to the essential being of the triune God, which no human could ever completely comprehend.” Giles, *Trinity*, 28.

34. Giles, *Trinity*, 28.

35. “Within the Holy Trinity the Father leads, the Son submits to Him, and the Spirit submits to both (the Economic Trinity). But it is also true that the three Persons are fully equal in divinity, power, and glory (the Ontological Trinity).” Raymond C. Ortlund, Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 103.

36. In regard to creation, Augustine says, “For if some things were made by the Father, and some by the Son, then all things were not made by the Father, nor all things by the Son; but if all things were made by the Father, and all things by the Son, then the same things were made by the Father and by the Son. The Son, therefore, is equal with the Father, and the working of the Father and the Son is indivisible.” Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1:12.

37. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York, NY: Seabury, 1974), 73.

38. Rahner, *Trinity*, 22.

39. Rahner, *Trinity*, 23.

40. Rahner, *Trinity*, 75, emphasis original.

41. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 375.

42. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 442.

43. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 442.

44. John of Damascus, “Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 9, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wallace (New York, NY: Cosimo, 2007), 10.

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- *We believe* in the full deity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ.
- *We believe* that eternal salvation and restored relationships are only possible through faith in Jesus Christ who died for us, rose from the dead, and is coming again. This salvation is offered to all people.
- *We believe* the Holy Spirit equips us for service and sanctifies us from sin.
- *We believe* the Bible is the inspired word of God, is reliable, and is the final authority for faith and practice.
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- Patriarchy (male dominance) is not a biblical ideal but a result of sin.
- Patriarchy is an abuse of power, taking from females what God has given them: their dignity, and freedom, their leadership, and often their very lives.
- While the Bible reflects patriarchal culture, the Bible does not teach patriarchy in human relationships.
- Christ's redemptive work frees all people from

patriarchy, calling women and men to share authority equally in service and leadership.

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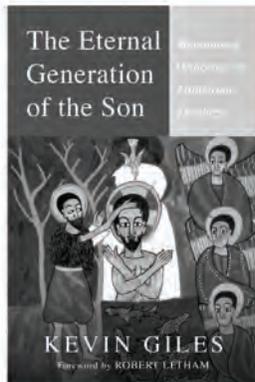
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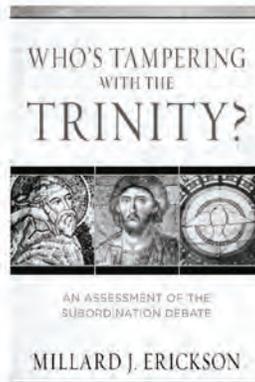
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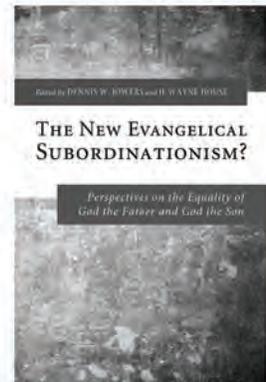
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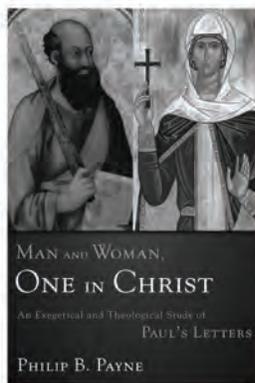
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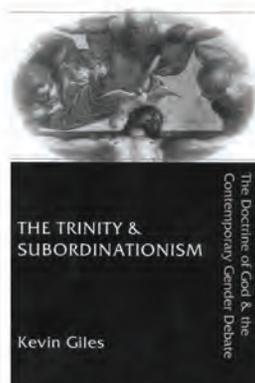
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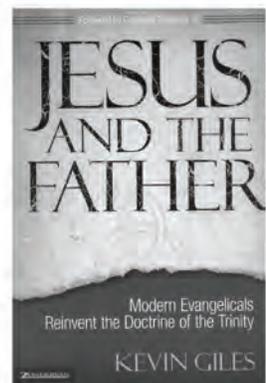
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