

ETERNALLY EQUAL: A HISTORICAL, BIBLICAL, AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
OF INTERTRINITARIAN RELATIONSHIPS

A Paper Presented at the 2016 ATS Yearly Meetings

San Antonio, Texas

by

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Introduction

The subject of subordination in the Trinity has become a strongly debated one in evangelical Christianity in recent times.¹ Some recent authors have been arguing that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father—that is, that there is and has always been a relational hierarchy among the three Persons of the Trinity which involves the eternal subordination of Christ and the Holy Spirit—that they are and have always been below the Father in both rank and function.² For these theologians, “the Father is, in His position and authority, supreme among the Persons of the Godhead” and “the submission of the Son in the incarnation is but a reflection of the eternal relationship that has always been true with his Father.”³ Millard Erickson refers to this position as the “gradational view”⁴ of the Trinity. On the other hand, Erickson and other theologians support what he calls the “equivalent authority” view, which he summarizes as follows: “eternally the Trinity is characterized by an equal authority structure in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit possess equal authority with one another and the submission or obedience of the Son and the Spirit to the Father is a temporary functional submission, for the purpose of executing a specific mission of the triune God.”⁵ Both of these positions, as well as various nuances of each, will be examined in this paper.

Various proponents of both sides seek to argue that their respective positions are in accordance with the traditional creeds and eminent theologians of Christian history. The first main section of this paper will provide a historical overview of the issue of subordination in the Trinity,

1. See e.g. Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009); Bruce Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005); Jowers and House, Eds., *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012); Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002); Bruce Ware and John Starke, Eds., *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

2. See Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 23 where a number of books from the subordinationist perspective are listed.

3. Ware, 46, 79.

4. Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* 17.

5. *Ibid.*, 19

followed by an analysis of how the creeds and theologians are being interpreted by those on both sides of the issue.

The second main section of the paper will analyze relevant biblical passages to the subject of subordination in the Trinity, with particular focus on issues of systematic theology and interpretation.

In this paper, I will seek to demonstrate that (1) the historical views and creeds on the doctrine of the Trinity, while relevant to the current debate, are interpreted differently by both sides, are claimed by both sides as support for their position, but are ultimately not determinative in that they result in a paradoxical, even contradictory position in which there is ostensible equality of “substance” among the three Persons of the Trinity, yet at the same time the concept of the Son being eternally generated from the Father inevitably entails a kind of ontological subordination; (2) that the biblical witness supports the “equivalent authority view”—which is to say that any functional subordination of Christ and/or the Holy Spirit is limited to Their willingly assumed respective roles in the economy of salvation (such as Christ had during His Incarnation); and that there never has been or will be any ontological or functional subordination in the Trinity outside of this unique context; and that the Trinity is a three-fold union of synergistic equals.

Historical Overview⁶

The Ante-Nicene Witnesses: The Apostolic Fathers

The New Testament writings (as well as the Old) were formative in aiding the early Christian church to understand the deity of Christ, His preexistence, and at least some aspects of the threefold nature of God, though this idea was not thoroughly pursued or theologically parsed.⁷ The

6. Significant works on the Trinity which include historical surveys of the development of the various concepts of the relationships among the Persons of the Trinity (drawn upon here) include William J. Hill, *The Three-Personal God* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982); Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995); Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God's Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Human Relationships*; (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002); Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*.

7. Hill, 29.

early *Didache* includes the tripartite baptismal formula of Matt. 28:19;⁸ the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* contains a doxology which glorifies the Father, Son and Holy Spirit equally;⁹ pseudo Clement of Rome refers to Christ as “God, . . . the judge of the living and dead;¹⁰ Ignatius of Antioch uses triadic formulae¹¹ and refers to Christ as “our God” and “God incarnate.”¹² However, there was very little attempt on the part of the Fathers to theologically grapple with the relationship among the Son, Holy Spirit, and the Father, and what it meant that there was one God—yet Christ, the Father, and the Holy Spirit are all referred to as Divinity in Scripture.¹³

The Ante-Nicene Witnesses: Justin Martyr

Christianity arose within in the first century cultural mix of Judaism and Hellenism. It is thus not surprising that Philo, a Jew who was thoroughly saturated with Greek philosophical thought constructs, was to have a lasting impact upon early Christian thought, including concepts of the Trinity.¹⁴ Justin Martyr was from a pagan Hellenistic background, and he sought to explain Christianity in terms that would be understandable in terms of Greek categories. “The Christian community no longer lives in the shadow of the synagogue but feels the influence of the thought-forms of Graeco-Roman philosophy.”¹⁵ Justin’s thoughts about the nature of God were influenced directly by Greek philosophy through Philo, particularly his idea of the Logos. For Justin, (related to, but ultimately contrasted with the Logos in the writings of John), the Logos was “the principle of reason in all things,” “a mediating principle between God and man,” “the rational principle within deity,”¹⁶ “the intelligence or rational thought of the Father, expressed in the person of the Son.”¹⁷

8. *Didache*, 7 in *The Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 1 of *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1943), 174.

9. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 14, in *Ibid.*, 154.

10. Anon., attr. Clement of Rome, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/2clement-lightfoot.html>

11. Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians* 9; *Magnesians* 13, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh: 1885), 53, 64-65.

12. Ignatius, *Ephesians*, 18; 7, in *Ibid.*, 57, 52.

13. Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 42.

14. Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, 127.

15. William J. Hill, *The Three-Personal God* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 30.

16. *Ibid.*, 31.

17. Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 43.

Justin “makes the Logos of St. John approximate the quite distinct Logos of Philo.”¹⁸ He also drew upon Platonic and Stoic concepts of the Logos as the “agent in creation” and the “intelligible structure immanent in nature.”¹⁹ The Logos only took on definite form at the time of the Incarnation of Christ.²⁰ The basic philosophical concept of God, shared by Justin, was that He was “nameless” and “unmoved.”²¹ This corresponds with Aristotle’s idea of the “unmoved mover” who could have no real contact with matter, but instead created the world through the “demiurge,” as Plato called it. Tatian, disciple of Justin, went further, and seemed to suggest that the Logos did not even exist until the moment of creation.²² And Theophilus, bishop of Antioch, though he was the first person to use the word “trinity,” wrote that God has “two hands,” Sophia [wisdom] and Logos, and that these are His agents that are sent where He wills.²³ These ideas of the Logos were thus conceptualized because of the need for an agent or part of God to interact with humanity in the world as God is clearly shown to do throughout Scripture. It seems evident that these ideas serve to both depersonalize and subordinate Christ’s position in the Godhead, since He was viewed as the Logos. He was “an agent of God, a lesser being.”²⁴ He even suggested that Christ was “the second God” in “secondary rank,”²⁵ and that the Holy Spirit was “third in order.”²⁶

The Ante-Nicene Witnesses: Irenaeus

Irenaeus was the church father who resisted the ideas of the Gnostics and the Docetists, who built upon certain philosophical concepts of God and viewed Christ as not having actually become human, but only appeared to do so. The Gnostics viewed the world as being filled with “emanations” from God, lesser deities who dealt with the physical world, unlike the great God above

18. Hill, 32.

19. *Ibid.*, 31.

20. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 5 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 164. *Second Apology*, 10 in *Ibid.*, 191.

21. Hill, 31.

22. Tatian, *Oration to the Greeks*, 5.1 in *The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 2 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh, 1885), 67.

23. Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolcum*, 2.22, in *Ibid.*, 103.

24. Whidden, Woodrow, Jerry Moon and John Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Human Relationships*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2002), 128.

25. Justin, *First Apology*, 13 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 166-167.

26. *Ibid.*

who was beyond space, time, and matter. Irenaeus' response to the Gnostics denied all of this in that he argued that God (all of Him) did create the world, and not through emanations. And while he used similar language to Theophilus in describing the Son and the Spirit as God's "two hands," "the Word and Wisdom," his concept was somewhat different.²⁷ Irenaeus has strong affirmations of the equality of Christ with the Father: "The Father is God, and the Son is God, for whatever is begotten of God is God."²⁸ "The Son reveals the knowledge of the Father through His own manifestation, for the Son's manifestation is the making known of the Father."²⁹ "The Father bears creation and His own Word simultaneously, and the Word borne by the Father grants the Spirit to all as the Father wills."³⁰ "God the Father is shown forth . . . the Spirit indeed working, and the Son ministering, while the Father was approving."³¹ There are perhaps hints here of a kind of subordinationism. The Son and Holy Spirit are acting according to the will of the Father. There does not seem to be a sense of the Trinity sharing a common purpose or will.

Irenaeus' emphasis was evidently upon the oneness of God.³² His thought has occasioned varied responses as to what his contributions to Trinitarian theology were. According to Hill, Irenaeus realized that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were God, but he did not seem to view them quite distinctly as "Persons" in the later Nicene sense.³³ He also views a passage in Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, III.19.3) as a kind of adoptionism. However, according to Erickson, Irenaeus' writing was "an advance on the thought of the apologists,"³⁴ though he raises a question about whether Irenaeus was a kind of modalist.³⁵ Letham, while noting that Irenaeus "does not consider at length the relations of the Son and the Spirit with the Father,"³⁶ views him as one who "prepares

27. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2.16.3; 4.20.1 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 380, 487-488.

28. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, 47 trs. Armitage Robinson, (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 112.

29. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.6.3 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 468.

30. Ibid. 5.18.1-3 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 546-547.

31. Ibid. 4.20.5-6 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 488-489.

32. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 96.

33. Hill, 33.

34. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 53.

35. Ibid., 52.

36. Letham, 94.

the way for a thoroughgoing Trinitarian approach.”³⁷ It seems evident that Erickson was correct that Irenaeus’ writings were an advance on Justin and Theophilus, that indeed he did, as Letham claims, lead toward a more coherent concept of the Trinity. It is unlikely that he was purely modalist, but he seems to err somewhat in that direction. His concepts of the Son and the Spirit seem to be (while viewed as divine) evidently subordinate to the Father—indeed they were virtually facets of the Father, His tools. He simply “lacked the tools and terminology” necessary to grapple with some of the deeper aspects of relationships in the Triune God and the divine-human nature of Christ.³⁸ He grasped the unity of God, the full divinity of Christ as the Word, but it does appear that he veered somewhat toward a modalist adoptionism, in which the Word aspect of God took over a man named Jesus for a time, and then returned to God. He seemed to grasp the deep unity of God, but was less strong concerning the distinct personhood of the Son and the Spirit. “Although the separate functioning of the Son and the Spirit, or the Word and Wisdom, began with the creation, they had always been immanent within the Father” but unlike in pure modalism, “they were not successive forms that He took.”³⁹

The Ante-Nicene Witnesses: Tertullian

Tertullian was an apologist against Praxeas, who was a modalist—one who believed that the Son and the Spirit were appropriated manifestations of the one God. In reacting to the emphasis on the unity of God in Irenaeus and Praxeas, Tertullian emphasized the distinct nature of the Persons of the Godhead. Tertullian was evidently subordinationist in his thinking. He wrote that the Son and Spirit only became “Persons” at the moment of creation. Before this time, they existed only as aspects of the mind of God, (similar to the earlier apologists).⁴⁰ The Father was the supreme monarch, and the Son and Spirit were 2nd and 3rd in rank, respectively.⁴¹ However, Tertullian did

37. Ibid. 95.

38. Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, 137.

39. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 51–52.

40. Tertullian, *Praxeas*, 5 in *Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, Allan Menzies, ed., vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh, 1885), 600-601.

41. Ibid., 7–9, in *Latin Christianity*, 601-604.

contribute terminology and insights into the development of Trinitarian understanding. It was he that first used the term “Trinity,” and he was also the first to conceive of God being “one substance” in three “Persons”⁴²—terms that have dominated Trinitarian theology ever since. But his formulations appeared to come short of recognizing the essential ontological *equality* of the three Persons in the one substance.

The Ante-Nicene Witnesses: Origen

Origen furthered what eventually became “orthodox” subordinationism—through the idea of “eternal generation”—as well as unorthodox subordinationism (in that he directly advocated a hierarchical Trinity with inferior Son and Spirit) which can be seen as at least somewhat of a precursor to Arius. Origen expressed the Trinitarian faith using the “categories of Platonism.”⁴³ This was not entirely new, as we have seen, but Origen carried certain ideas to their logical conclusions. The Father was seen as the “only true God” in the absolute sense—a kind of unmovable force or Mind that was beyond space, time, and matter.⁴⁴ The only way in which the Father could be related to the created world was through the Logos—the Son. Origen viewed everything done by the Father as being eternally present at all times. All souls were pre-existent, and were coeternal with Him.⁴⁵ Origen built on concepts already articulated by Irenaeus and Tertullian in writing of the Son being generated from the Father. But Origen viewed this as an eternal generation—the Father has always been generating the Son. This led inevitably⁴⁶ to the ontological subordination of the Son. The Son’s deity is forever *derived from* and *inferior to* the Father. Christ has forever been a “secondary God.”⁴⁷ “The Son, being less than the Father, is superior to rational creatures alone (for

42. *Ibid.*, 2, in *Latin Christianity*, 598.

43. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 70.

44. Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2.2 in *The Gospel of Peter, The Diatessaron of Tatian, The Apocalypse of Peter, The Vision of Paul, The Apocalypses of the Virgin and Sedrach, The Testament of Abraham, The Acts of Xanthippe and Polyxena, The Narrative of Zosimus, The Apology of Aristides, The Epistles of Clement (complete text), Origen’s Commentary on John, Books 1–10, and Commentary on Matthew, Books 1, 2, and 10–14*, vol. 9 *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh, 1885), 323.

45. Origen, *On First Principles*, 1.2.10; 1.7.4; 2.9.7-8 in *Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, vol. 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, (Edinburgh, 1885), 292-293.

46. This will be further elaborated upon and argued below.

47. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 5.39 in vol. 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 561; *Commentary on John*, 2.6 in vol. 9 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 328-329.

he is second to the Father); the Holy Spirit is still less, and dwells within the saints alone.”⁴⁸ Christ existed only as an act of the will of the Father,⁴⁹ and thus was (as was the Holy Spirit) divine only by derivation and participation, rather than ontological essence.⁵⁰ While it is true that Origen contributed substantially by arguing for the eternal preexistence and personhood of the Son, and the distinct personhood of the members of the Trinity in general, he significantly furthered the idea of subordinationism within the Trinity, and set the stage for all later formulations of it.

Athanasius and the Creeds

It was the controversy generated by Arius that led to the formulation of the Nicene Creed. Arius carried Origen’s subordination ideas even further and suggested that Christ was created in the distant past by God as a distinct being. He interpreted biblical passages which speak of Christ’s subordination during His Incarnation on earth as being representative of an eternal, ontological subordination of a kind even stronger than Origen and the other church Fathers. For Arius, Christ was a completely lesser being than God, and the Father and the Son were in fact not of one substance.⁵¹ Part of the problem for Arius was the philosophical presupposition that God could neither change nor suffer, but was rather immutable and impassible. So the ideas of God becoming incarnate and suffering were thought to be impossible.⁵²

Athanasius developed a doctrine of the Trinity to counteract these ideas, and his developments were related to the formulation of the Nicene Creed of 325 AD, both before and after its creation. Athanasius held strongly to the idea that God was a united triunity of coequal Persons who shared a common divinity. “There is an eternal one Godhead in a Triad, and there is one glory in the Triad.”⁵³ He ridicules the idea that the cherubim and seraphim, at “the first utterance of the

48. Justinian citing Origen in his *Letter to Menna against Origen*; referred to as “Fragment 9 [Koetschau] tr. Butterworth 1966, pp. 33-34, and footnote) <http://www.iep.utm.edu/origen-of-alexandria/#SH3a>

49. *On First Principles*, 1.2.2 in vol. 4 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 246; 4.28, in *ibid.*, 376-377.

50. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 72.

51. See Athanasius, *Of Synods*, 15-16 for what Arius believed.

52. Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, 142.

53. Athanasius, *Orationes Contra Arianos*, 1.6.18 in *Athanasius: Select Works And Letters*, Phillip Schaff, ed., vol. 4 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, 317

word, Holy, their voice is raised aloud, while in the second it is lower, but in the third, quite low,— and that consequently the first utterance denotes lordship, the second subordination, and the third marks yet a lower degree. But away with the folly of these haters of God and senseless men. For the Triad, praised, revered and adored, in one and indivisible and without degrees.”⁵⁴

But there is a tension, indeed even an inconsistency within Athanasius’ thought about the Trinity which is revealed in the following: “the Father alone being Head over the whole universe wholly, and over the Son Himself, and the Son subordinated to the Father,”⁵⁵ “For we do not place the Son in the Father's Order, but as subordinate to the Father; for He did not descend upon Sodom without the Father's will, nor did He rain from Himself, but from the Lord, that is, the Father authorizing it. Nor is He of Himself set down on the right hand, but He hears the Father saying, 'Sit on My right hand' Psalm 110:1”⁵⁶ and especially this:

And to none can it be a question that the Father is greater: for no one can doubt that the Father is greater in honour and dignity and Godhead, and in the very name of Father, the Son Himself testifying, 'The Father that sent Me is greater than I' John 10:29; 14:28 And no one is ignorant, that it is Catholic doctrine, that there are two Persons of Father and Son, and that the Father is greater, and the Son subordinated to the Father together with all things which the Father has subordinated to Him, and that the Father has no beginning, and is invisible, and immortal, and impassible; but that the Son has been generated from the Father, God from God, Light from Light, and that His origin, as aforesaid, no one knows, but the Father only.⁵⁷

In the above passages it appears that Athanasius was not simply referring to the status of Christ during the Incarnation, but rather His ontological status because of His being eternally generated, and he clearly refers to Him as being less great than the Father, and subordinate to Him, indeed, having to obey His orders. Athanasius was a disciple of Origen, and he retained a version of his idea of the eternal generation of the Son. This idea was implied in the creeds as well: “begotten of the Father before all worlds; God *of* God, Light *of* Light,” (Nicene); “begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead” (Chalcedon); “So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten.

54. Athanasius, *In illud Omnia mihi tradita sunt*, 6 in *Athanasius: Select Works*, 90.

55. Athanasius, *De Synodis, Councils of Armimium and Selucia, part 2, History of Arian Opinions*, 26.(7) in *Athanasius: Select Works*, 463-464.

56. *Ibid.*, 27, (18).

57. *Ibid.* 28

The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding” (Athanasian). Yet in this same creed it is affirmed that “in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped” (Ibid.).

It appears that for Athanasius (as well as for most previous and subsequent thinkers on the Trinity) the doctrine of eternal generation was both (1) a retention of Platonic concepts handed down through Origen, especially the concept of the One; i.e. that there could be only One supreme entity from which all else flowed and was generated and (2) the desire to avoid tritheism and modalism. The goal was to differentiate the persons of the Trinity while at the same time preserving the full deity of the Son. It would seem that for Athanasius, to deny the eternal generation of the Son would be to invite tritheism—He evidently could not envision how the Son could be God in the same manner that the Father is God—through their eternally *self-existent* nature—without inviting this criticism. Modalism was avoided by seeing the Son as a distinct person, but the only way Athanasius knew to preserve the deity of the Son and Spirit was to have their personhood to be generated from the Father.⁵⁸ This leads to a subordinate Christ (and Holy Spirit). “Relations of origin hint at subordination, in spite of the Father and Son being co-eternal and indivisibly God. . . . His [Athanasius’] metaphors seem to elevate the Father as source, with hints of subordination undermining the relational Trinity, in which there is a reciprocal love among equals.”⁵⁹ The implications of the eternal generation for subordinationism will be discussed further below.

Augustine

58. The Cappadocian Fathers had similar views to Athanasius in accepting the previous view of the Father as the sole source of operations in the Trinity, as well as the sole source of being for the Son and the Spirit. For them there is a clear “chain of command.” See Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, 1.34-36.

59. Norman Gulley, *Systematic Theology: God as Trinity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 110.

Augustine essentially retained the formulation of the Creeds and built upon Athanasius' conceptions. He also accepted the idea of the eternal generation of the Son, and the Spirit "proceeding" from the Father and the Son.⁶⁰ For Augustine, the Father "gives to the Son essence," and he writes of the Holy Spirit being given by the Son through His "derivation" from the Father.⁶¹ But Augustine also affirmed the profound unity of the Trinity in ways that even perhaps surpassed those of Athanasius. "The will of the Father and the Son is one, and their working indivisible."⁶² The sending of Christ and the Incarnation are viewed as joint actions of the Trinity. He also sought to veer away from subordination by differentiating the biblical passages concerning the Incarnation regarding Christ as the "servant" and those regarding His eternal status as God. He writes of the importance of "having mastered this rule for interpreting the Scriptures concerning the Son of God, that we are to distinguish them what relates to the form of God, in which He is equal to the Father, and what to the form of a servant which He took, in which He is less than the Father."⁶³ These were important contributions to the understanding of the Trinity. The question could still be asked of Augustine's as it was of Athanasius' writing (though in a far less degree): In what sense can the Son and Holy Spirit be ontologically equal to the Father if their essence is "given" to them by the Father and "derived" from Him through eternal generation and procession? Does not the concept of eternal generation stand in tension with the full equality of the Persons of the Godhead? Augustine eschewed functional subordination, in that he viewed the Trinity as acting together in union, but he still left room for ontological subordination by his retention of the traditional concept of eternal generation.

Calvin

60. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 15.26 (47-48) in *On the Holy Trinity; Doctrinal Treatises; Moral Treatises*, vol. 3 of *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series*, 225-226.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.* 2.5(9) in *On the Holy Trinity*, 41.

63. *Ibid.* 1.11(22) in *On the Holy Trinity*, 30.

Space precludes addressing the thoughts of the major theologians after Augustine preceding the Reformation, but Erickson notes that Augustine's conception of the Trinity "tended to be the dominant one through the Middle Ages and even through the Reformation."⁶⁴

There is some debate as to how original Calvin's contributions to Trinitarian thought are. Robert Letham raises the question of "how far Calvin was an innovator"⁶⁵ and then quotes from scholars who think he was and others that think he was entirely reflective of tradition. Gerald Bray posited that Calvin had "a vision of God which was fundamentally different from anything which had gone before, or which has appeared since."⁶⁶ But for Wendel, Calvin was "devoid of originality."⁶⁷ There is some truth to both of these ideas, in a sense. Calvin certainly sought to ground his doctrine of God, which was thoroughly based upon the Trinity,⁶⁸ in biblical, rather than philosophical or traditional terms. "His exposition is based almost entirely on the Bible, rather than on reason or ecclesiastical authority, as with Aquinas" and yet Calvin cites the Fathers frequently in his arguments as well.⁶⁹ This caused some inevitable tension in his doctrine of the Trinity, as will be shown by the following.

In the first section of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin provides a plethora of biblical evidence for the eternity, equality, and essential divinity of the Son and the Spirit.⁷⁰ He demonstrates from the Old and New Testament evidence that Christ is worshipped as God, referred to as God, and is the God of the Old and New Testament—He is God in the highest sense, as is the Holy Spirit. Here are just a few examples: "Again, if out of God there is no salvation, no righteousness, no life, Christ, having all these in Himself, is certainly God. Let no one object that life

64. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* 166.

65. Letham, 252.

66. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 197.

67. Francois Wendel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of his Religious Thought* (London: Collins, 1963), 168-169.

68. Letham, 255.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.7, 1.13.9-16, trs. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 1:115-

or salvation is transfused into him by God. For it is said not that he received, but that he himself is salvation."⁷¹

But though the Apostles spoke of him after his appearance in the flesh as Mediator, every passage which I adduce will be sufficient to prove his eternal Godhead. And the first thing deserving of special observation is that predictions concerning the eternal God are applied to Christ, as either already fulfilled in him, or to be fulfilled at some future period. Isaiah prophesies, that "the Lord of Hosts" shall be "for a stone of stumbling, and for a rock of offence," (Isa. 8:14). Paul asserts that this prophecy was fulfilled in Christ (Rom. 9:33), and, therefore, declares that Christ is that Lord of Hosts. In like manner, he says in another passage, "We shall all stand before the Judgment-seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." Since in Isaiah God predicts this of himself (Isa. 45:23), and Christ exhibits the reality fulfilled in himself, it follows that he is the very God, whose glory cannot be given to another.⁷²

"And now the Lord God, and his Spirit, has sent me," (Isa. 48:16), thus ascribing a share in the sovereign power of sending the prophets to the Holy Spirit. In this his divine majesty is clear." "And the Apostle says at one time that we are the temple of God, and at another time, in the same sense, that we are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Peter, when he rebuked Ananias for having lied to the Holy Spirit, said, that he had not lied unto men, but unto God. And when Isaiah had introduced the Lord of Hosts as speaking, Paul says, it was the Holy Spirit that spoke (Acts 28:25, 26)."⁷³ This whole section of the *Institutes* includes much affirming endorsement of the essential equality of the Persons of the Godhead.

However, when Calvin treats upon the subject of the distinctions among the Persons of the divine Trinity, he enters into some of the subordinationist, hierarchical language of tradition.

This distinction is, that to the Father is attributed the beginning of action, the fountain and source of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and arrangement in action, while the energy and efficacy of action is assigned to the Spirit. . . . The distinction of order is not unmeaning or superfluous, the Father being considered first, next the Son from him, and then the Spirit from both. For the mind of every man naturally inclines to consider, first, God, secondly, the wisdom emerging from him, and, lastly, the energy by which he executes the purposes of his counsel. For this reason, the Son is said to be of the Father only; the Spirit of both the Father and the Son.⁷⁴

It is perhaps significant in this next section regarding the distinctions of the Persons of the Godhead that Calvin deals with and quotes from the Fathers more than Scripture. Calvin is aware of the tension between the absolute equality of the deity of the Persons of the Trinity (affirmed by the

71. Ibid. 1.13.13, *Institutes* 1:121.

72. Ibid. 1.13.11, 1:119.

73. Ibid. 1.13.15, 1:123.

74. Ibid. 1.13.18, 1:126.

Fathers), and the claim that there is an order or hierarchy in the Trinity (also affirmed by them). He quotes Augustine with an attempt at a solution.

“By those names which denote distinctions,” says Augustine, “is meant the relation which they mutually bear to each other, not the very substance by which they are one.” In this way, the sentiments of the Fathers, which might sometimes appear to be at variance with each other, are to be reconciled. At one time they teach that the Father is the beginning of the Son, at another they assert that the Son has both divinity and essence from Himself, and therefore is one beginning with the Father.⁷⁵

Calvin follows tradition in differentiating between the common substance of the Trinity and the differences among the Persons. “For though we admit that, in respect of order and gradation, the beginning of divinity is in the Father, we hold it a detestable fiction to maintain that essence is proper to the Father alone, as if he were the deifier of the Son.”⁷⁶ “The Scriptures teach that there is essentially but one God, and, therefore, that the essence both of the Son and Spirit is unbegotten; but inasmuch as the Father is first in order, and of himself begat his own Wisdom, he, as we lately observed, is justly regarded as the principle and fountain of all the Godhead.”⁷⁷ Calvin went on to make apologies for and sought to explain problems in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian, though admitting that the latter could sometimes be “rugged and obscure.”⁷⁸ Calvin here appears to be involved in the same conundrum as the Fathers were regarding Christ’s (and the Holy Spirit’s) essential equality with the Father and His ostensible “begottenness” or “generation” from Him. How could Christ be fully equal with the Father if the Father is His “beginning” or “fountainhead”? How could the Father be called “first” (in a relational, ordered, hierarchical sense) if the three are truly One and entirely equal? While Calvin denied “eternal generation” as such,⁷⁹ he embraced a still somewhat hierarchical Trinity on the basis of the tradition of the Fathers.

75. Ibid. 1.13.19, 1:126-127.

76. Ibid. 1.13.24, 1:133.

77. Ibid. 1.13.25, 1:134.

78. Ibid. 1.13.27-28, 1:136-138

79. Ibid. 1.13.29, 1:139.

Summary and Analysis of the Historical Data in Light of the Current Debate

Though this historical survey has not been exhaustive, it has highlighted some of the major figures in Christian systematic thought on the Trinity from the early church Fathers until the time of the beginning of the Reformation. For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen not to treat upon the 20th century quasi-modalism of Barth and Rahner, the pantheism of Moltmann, or the quasi-adoptionism of Pannenberg.⁸⁰

The major question that arises from the above historical survey is that regarding the eternal generation or “begottenness” of the Son. As has been previously noted, there appears to be an irreconcilable tension between affirming the absolute ontological equality of the Persons of the Godhead while at the same time arguing for an *eternal* order or hierarchy among them in consequence of the Father eternally begetting the Son. “There is an unresolved tension between the co-inherence of the hypostases and the primacy of the Father in the fountainhead of Deity.”⁸¹ “If the Father is the ‘*Fons Trinitatis*’—the fountain or source of the Trinity—from whom both the Son and the Spirit are derived, it seems that in spite of all else we may say we have made the Son and the Spirit dependent upon another as their principal cause, and have destroyed the true and essential equality between the Persons of the Trinity.”⁸² Can there be true equality without true ontological equality? If the Son’s being in any way *derives* from the Father, is it not true that He is not fully God *in the same sense*? If the Spirit only *proceeds* from the Father and the Son, is He not devoid of actual life in Himself? Is not one of the very definitions of deity to be self-existent? Erickson has insightfully highlighted the problems with the concept of eternal generation. “Generation, thought of as an eternal occurrence, involves subordination of the Son to the Father” and an “attempt to separate eternal subordination and superiority from inferiority seems to be a verbal distinction to

80. For a helpful survey of these, see Letham, 271–321.

81. Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993), 164.

82. Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 122, quoted in Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 60-61.

which no real distinction corresponds.”⁸³ “Just what does it mean to say that the Father eternally generates the Son, yet that the Son is not therefore inferior to the Father? How can the Father be the basis of the Son’s being but without this constituting some species of creation of the latter by the former?”⁸⁴ Erickson also quotes from Christian philosopher Paul Helm, whose comments comport with the above historical survey:

There is no question but those who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of the begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit were influenced by Neoplatonism, particularly by the idea that from the One emanated Mind and Soul (corresponding to the begottenness and procession of the Son and the Spirit). . . . A closer look at the Nicene and Constantinopolitan formulations shows that there is, in fact, a tension within them between a hierarchical view of the Son’s existence, being begotten from the Father, in which the Son is caused to be, and a more egalitarian view, in which the equality and consubstantiality of the persons is stressed.⁸⁵

Those who are currently arguing for eternal functional subordination of Christ argue that “The Persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes. . . . The Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles.”⁸⁶ Bruce Ware denies that subordinationism entails a difference of “essence” between the Father and the Son, claiming instead that this is only referring to their “relationship;” Giles correctly points out the apparent inconsistency of this position:

Role or functional subordination is based on the premise that the Son, and likewise, women can be permanently subordinated in function or role without in any way undermining their personal worth or equality. Role subordination, we are told, does not imply inferiority. This is generally true, but once the note of permanency is introduced and competence is excluded, this is not true. If one party is forever excluded from certain responsibilities—no matter what their competency may be—simply on the basis of who they are, then this indicates that they lack something that only their superior possesses. In other words, they are inferior in some essential way.⁸⁷

In addition, as Erickson notes, the concept of eternal generation is really the only basis upon which it can be argued that the historical Christian orthodoxy supports subordinationism. “Many of the historical references that they [Grudem and Ware] cite as support for a historical belief in functional subordination actually rest upon this idea of eternal generation.”⁸⁸ But both Ware and

83. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 309.

84. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 182.

85. Paul Helm, “Of God, and of the Holy Trinity: A Response to Dr. Beckwith,” in *The Churchman* 115, no. 4 (2001): 350, quoted in Erickson, 183.

86. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 249.

87. Giles, 17.

88. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 184.

Grudem (as Erickson also notes) are not in favor of the idea of eternal generation. So they may claim that their view is correct based upon the Bible (which will be examined below), but they should not claim historical orthodoxy in support of their view unless this idea is embraced.

Conversely, Giles argues that historical orthodoxy supports *his* view of an egalitarian Trinity. “The tradition reflecting the conclusions of theologians such as Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine and Calvin, the formulation of the creeds and Reformation confessions . . . opposes the idea that the Son of God is eternally subordinated to the Father in being or function.”⁸⁹ But our historical survey has shown that this claim is significantly undermined by the consistent embracing of the eternal generation concept. It is here that the paradoxical nature of the historical sources is seen. Giles’ reading of the sources emphasizes the affirmations of equality in the Trinity, but he seems to insufficiently recognize the subordinationist stream that stems from eternal generation. Interestingly, he notes that he has no problem with this concept.⁹⁰ For Giles, the tradition and the creeds must be determinative. “The best guide to a right interpretation of the Scriptures in relation to any historically developed doctrine is *the theological tradition*, especially given in creeds and confessions.”⁹¹ Giles writes that “Athanasius rejects not only any suggestion whatsoever that the Son is subordinate in *being* to the Father, but also any suggestion whatsoever that the Son is subordinate to the Father in *function, role, or work*.”⁹² But this seems difficult to reconcile with the statements from Athanasius cited above. Proponents on both sides should recognize, as Erickson notes, that “neither position finds unequivocal support for its position” in history.⁹³ This is because the philosophical concept of eternal generation and begetting created an inconsistency and incoherence in the doctrine of the Trinity. So any attempts to ground a theology of the Trinity on the wholesale adoption of traditional orthodoxy seem fraught with difficulties

89. Giles, 25.

90. Ibid. 66, 67.

91. Kevin Giles, “A Trinity Without Tiers” in Jowers and House, 274.

92. Ibid., 38.

93. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 167.

because the tradition supports functional equality with one hand, and seemingly takes it away with the other through militating against ontological equality through the concept of eternal generation. As Erickson also notes, the emphasis historically was on ontology rather than function. “There is little or no emphasis on the obedience of the Son to the Father, except for the period of the Son’s earthly ministry. . . . Where eternal subordination of authority is held, it is generally combined with a metaphysical subordination, as in the case of Arians and Semi-Arians.”⁹⁴ But Ware and Grudem emphasize the functional subordination of Christ while denying any ontological subordination. Bruce Ware claims that the sending of Christ by the Father implies that he was “to obey and carry out the will of the Father.”⁹⁵ But Augustine denies this very thing in his disputes with those who sought to denigrate the position of Christ. “He was not sent in respect to any inequality of power, or substance, or anything that in Him was not equal to the Father; but in respect to this, that the Son is from the Father, not the Father from the Son.”⁹⁶ As we have seen, Augustine argues that any action of any person of the Trinity was in some way a joint action of all three, because they “have but one will and are indivisible in their working.”⁹⁷ As Keith E. Johnson points out in his chapter on Augustine’s view of the Trinity, “EFS [eternal functional subordination] proponents, therefore, misread Augustine when they sever his comments about the Father “sending” the Son from Augustine’s unequivocal affirmation that the divine persons act inseparably.”⁹⁸ The same is the case with Calvin. Calvin nowhere acknowledges any kind of functional subordination of Christ, but he does embrace the idea of the Father as the “source” (though, interestingly, he denies eternal generation), which inevitably implies a kind of ontological subordination (which he paradoxically denies, as did Augustine and others). Augustine and Calvin, while they unwittingly affirmed ontological subordination through eternal begetting (or in Calvin’s case the idea of the Father as

94. Ibid.

95. Ware, 80–81.

96. Augustine, *De Trinitate* 4.20 (27) in *On the Trinity*, 83.

97. Ibid., 2.5 (9), in *On the Trinity*, 41.

98. Keith E. Johnson, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son” in Jowers and House, 125.

source), were the most fervent in affirming the functional equivalency and mutuality of the Trinity. They seemed to view the Trinity as acting in a connected and synergistic manner, not with the Father giving orders to the Son. The Son was sent, but He also came on His own initiative since the decision was jointly determined.⁹⁹ For Augustine and especially Calvin, the ontological subordination entailed by eternal begetting or hierarchy (respectively) in the Trinity was a traditional holdover for them—their main emphasis was on functional equality and mutual relations, the very antithesis of what is currently being emphasized by subordinationists, and it is here that Giles' citation of history is more relevant. It seems doubtful to accept a claim for Augustine and Calvin as antecedents of the current view, with its “chain of command;” this would seem to be somewhat unrecognizable and problematic for them; but one could surmise that the ante-Nicene fathers as even Athanasius (at least in some cases) serve more readily as precursors to the current subordinationist line of thought.

Augustine and Calvin, despite their strongly affirmative endorsements of equality and mutuality in the Trinity retained the concept of divine impassibility. Thus they would only allow for God the Son to suffer pain and have emotions, while God the Father would not. This undercut the synergistic closeness of the Persons of the Godhead. The whole Trinity suffered when Christ was severed from their eternal fellowship while He bore the sins of the world. “The Platonic idea of an unchanging God resulted in an alleged eternal generation so the Incarnation would not be a change. The idea of an impassible God, one who is not affected by the suffering of others, seems incompatible with the revelation of the Father made by Christ, with a mission filled with suffering and compassion (John 14:9).”¹⁰⁰

Thus despite its relevant insights, historical orthodoxy, while important, cannot legitimately be *solely* determinative for the outcome of the current debate. Scripture must be allowed to arbitrate the question. This is not to deny the many scriptural and theological insights to be gained

99. See Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.12.2, 1:401-402; Augustine, 1.9 (19) in *On the Trinity*, 28.

100. Gulley, 156, 157.

from the luminaries of the past, particularly in the cases of Athanasius, Augustine, and Calvin. But we would be remiss to deny that there were certain aspects of their theologies of the Trinity that were colored by philosophical concepts that were not sufficiently grounded in the Scriptural witness. It is to this witness to which we now turn.

The Scriptural Evidence

This section of the paper will be a summary of the Scriptural evidence regarding the question of whether there is or is not an eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father. Thus the focus will not be to engage in every aspect of Trinitarian concepts in Scripture, but rather to those aspects which are germane to the current debate regarding ontological and functional equality and relational roles in the divine Persons of the Trinity.

Mutuality and Equivalence in Creation

All three Persons of the Trinity were involved in the creation. In Gen. 1:26, the mutual action of the Triune God is conveyed, “Let Us make man in Our image.” Christ is presented as the Creator in Col. 1:16; John 1:3; Heb. 1:2; Eph. 3:9; etc. The Father is presented as the Creator in Heb. 1:2; 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 3:14-15; Rev. 4:11; etc. The Holy Spirit is presented as the Creator in Gen. 1:2; Job. 33:4; Ps. 104:30; Rom. 8:11; etc. There appears to be no evidence that the Father commanded Christ and the Holy Spirit to create; but that this was a synergistic action performed by the Persons of the Godhead. Christ mentions the “the glory which I had with thee [the Father] before the world was;” and the Holy Spirit is referred to as the “eternal Spirit” (Heb. 9:14); the Spirit Who knows the mind of God (1 Cor. 2:10-12). In the divine act of creation, there is no evidence of eternal subordination of any of the three Persons in the Trinity. Each one has eternal creative power. Grudem suggests that it was the Father that supervened creation, on the basis of certain texts that mention that the world was made “through” Christ—John 1:1; Heb. 1:1-2; and 1 Cor. 8:6.¹⁰¹ But only the last verse mentioned (1 Cor. 8:6) mentions the joint activity of the Father. The other two

¹⁰¹ Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father” in Jowers and House, *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, 243.

simply mention that Christ was the One through Whom creation occurred. The question is what is implied by 1 Cor. 8:6. It is evidence that the Father had a role in creation, but as we have noted above, all three persons of the Trinity did. The text does not seem to indicate that the Father *alone commanded* or ordered Christ and the Spirit into creating as they did. It seems evident that it was a jointly planned and executed process.

Equivalence in Designations and Authority

In Scripture, the Father is called God (John 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 5:19; Eph. 1:3; 2 John 1:3); Christ is called God (John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Is. 9:6; Heb. 1:8-9; Titus 2:13; Col. 2:9; 1 John 5:20; John 20:28; Acts 20:28; etc.); and the Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor. 3:17; John 4:23-24; 1 Cor. 12:4-6). In addition, Christ is referred to (or refers to Himself) in terms that designate Him as the Yahweh God of the Old Testament. The New Testament writers consistently apply verses from the Hebrew Bible that refer to Yahweh as referring to Christ (Isa. 8:14-Rom. 9:33; Isa. 45:23-Phil. 2:9-10; Ps. 102:25-Heb. 1:10-12; Is. 44:6-Rev. 1:17; 1 Cor. 10:4; Ex. 3:14-John 8:58). So it could be reasonably concluded that any reference to Yahweh in the Old Testament is a reference which potentially includes Christ as part of the Trinity. The Angel of Yahweh is written of in the OT as a Being who is in fact Yahweh Himself, with completely equal authority, having the same divine power and Name (Gen. 16:7, 9, 11; 22:11-18; 31:11-13; Ex. 3:2-6; 23:20-23; 14:19; Judges 2:1-5; 13:2-23; Hos. 12:3-5; cf. Mal. 3:1). These appearances have been viewed as those of the pre-incarnate Christ.¹⁰² Even considering the term "Angel" or "Messenger," these narratives do not seem to imply a subordinate role. When the Angel is "sent," (Mal. 3:1; Ex. 23:20-23) it is also clear that this Angel is Yahweh Himself (which seemingly provides hints of not only the plurality of God, but also the joint manner of action in the Trinity). If eternal subordination of Christ is to be supported by any Old Testament evidence referring to Christ in His pre-Incarnate state, it is difficult to see where such support would be found. The Holy Spirit is equivocated with God by parallelism or

102. See e.g. Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 171-172.

contextual inferences in Ps. 51:11–12; Is. 40:13; 61:1; Zech. 4; etc., and the Holy Spirit was involved in inspiring the OT prophets (2 Pet. 1:19–21), as well as in helping people to perform superhuman acts (Judges 15:14–16; Ezek. 11:1; 3:14; etc.) and tell the future (Dan. 7–12; Ezek. 11:5; Micah 3:8; 2 Chron. 20:14–17; Isa.; Jer.; Nahum; etc.)—activities only made possible by divinity. If Christ and the Holy Spirit are seen to be equal with the Father in power, Name, and authority, especially in the sense that Christ is identified consistently in the OT and NT as the Yahweh of the OT; it can reasonably be asserted that there is no evidence for eternal subordination in the Old Testament. It is significant that neither Grudem nor Ware cite any OT passages in support of their thesis of eternal subordination. The name Yahweh (shown above to include any or all three members of the Trinity, including Christ and the Holy Spirit) is not used to indicate subordination. (Isa. 40:10–31; 45:5–25; etc.).

It should perhaps also be noted that the OT prophecies concerning Christ that speak of Him by implication as being obedient (Ps. 40:8; cf. Heb. 10:9) or the “Servant” passages in Isaiah (42; 49; 50; 53) are related to the time of the Incarnation, and hence cannot reasonably be adduced as supporting any kind of eternal subordination of Christ to the Father.

Both Ware and Grudem consider the designations “Father” and “Son” as evidence for eternal subordination. But as Norman Gulley points out,

The biblical context for these terms [“Son,” “only begotten,” and “firstborn”] has to do with aspects of the experience of Jesus Christ as the God-Man: (1) His birth, Luke 2:7; John 3:16; Hebrews 1:7; (2) His resurrection, Acts 2:29–33; 13:32–34; Romans 1:4; and (3) His enthronement in heaven, Hebrews 1:1–4; and Romans 5:5. They do not refer to His status prior to His becoming the God-Man. So any attempt to read His incarnational reality into time before His incarnation isn’t logical.¹⁰³

As noted above, there is no sense in which Christ could be considered a “Son” or subordinate before the Incarnation. He was Yahweh, the self-existent One, who was equal with the Father. It was during the Incarnation that He emptied Himself, humbled Himself, and became a Servant. When He was born, He became the only-begotten Son. “The fact that Scripture says the Father gave His Son in the incarnation (John 3:16) is a *statement about that historical event, and it has no relevance to the two*

103. Gulley, 122.

being related as Father and Son from eternity."¹⁰⁴ As Gulley also notes, this term *monogenes* refers to uniqueness in the Greek, not to any kind of generation.¹⁰⁵ Even if the term is related to the concept of being born, the reference would be concerned rather with Christ's being born as a human being of Mary as the unique God-Man, rather than any kind of eternal generation—a concept which, as we have seen, was based on certain philosophical categories of thought, and not upon biblical usages. In addition, Christ Himself is called both the "Son" and the "Father" in Isaiah 9:6, which is probably an indication about the flexibility with which these descriptive terms are used in Scripture.¹⁰⁶

But what about the NT passages which speak of activities of Persons in the Trinity before the Incarnation that use these terms? Is there any subordination of Christ or the Spirit to be found in these passages? Both Ware¹⁰⁷ and Grudem¹⁰⁸ view the passages which speak of the Father predestining the salvation process (Eph. 1; 3:9–11; Rom. 8:29; 2 Tim. 1:9; 1 Pet. 1:2) as evidence of His higher authority over the Son. First, it should be noted that it would be quite logical and consistent for the terms by which Christ and the Father came to be known since the Incarnation to be used for them in describing their acts prior to that event. Appellations used of persons describing past events need not be necessarily indicative that these terms were their names at the time of reference. As Erickson notes, "Because the references to these eternal matters were written within time and since the coming of Jesus Christ, the references to the names may be those used at the time of the writing but may not indicate that the persons actually had those names at the time to which the writing refers."¹⁰⁹ The Bible refers to Abraham doing things at a time when his name was actually Abram (Heb. 11:8). The name Jacob is used for that patriarch even after his name was changed to Israel (Heb. 11:21; etc.). And it is evident that there are many names for the persons of the Godhead throughout the OT and NT. References to the "Father" and "Son" in contexts referring

104. Ibid.

105. Ibid., 128–129.

106. See Erickson, *Who's Tampering*, 118.

107. Ware, 51-53.

108. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence" in op. cit., 232–234.

109. Erickson, *Who's Tampering*, 221.

to events prior to the Incarnation have no bearing upon whether there was functional subordination operative at that time. What is more determinative is the activity being described during the references in question. When Christ is called a Servant in Isaiah 53, or a Son in Psalm 2, the pertinent question is what activity is being described—in these cases, they are events related to the incarnational state. Regarding the references given by Grudem above in which he seeks to support the idea that the Father alone was the One predestining His purpose, the following should be considered: Given Christ's divine omniscience, Christ also foreknew those whom the Father did—the elect who were predestined to become conformed to His image (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1; 1 Pet. 1:2), and that He was involved with the purpose of God in saving and calling (2 Tim. 1:9). As Grudem notes himself, "Of course the Son was in full agreement with the Father regarding this eternal plan of salvation. We should never confuse the idea of the Father's *authority* with any thought that the Son disagreed with the Father's plan or reluctantly submitted to the Father's plan." But then in what sense could it be true that the "planning, directing, initiating, and choosing . . . belonged specifically to the Father"?¹¹⁰ And this is what is to be proven, not assumed. The texts do not indicate that it was the Father *alone* that was involved. Ephesians 1 indicates that all of God's purposes were "in Christ"—the passage says nothing about Christ being informed or commanded. While such a reading is theoretically possible, it is not compellingly derived from anything present. The whole passage seems to exhibit Trinitarian unity, in that all three members of the Godhead are involved in implementing the salvation process, including the bringing of all things together in Christ and under His rule (vv. 10-23), and the Spirit that enables believers to remain in Christ for salvation. Christ is the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8) because He Himself chose to become so in agreement with the Father and the Spirit (see below). If there is unity in the Trinity in terms of purpose, in what sense could there be any need for subordination of one to another? Would this not imply multiple, disconnected existence in the Trinity?

110. Ibid., 232–233.

As Augustine and Calvin had emphasized, actions of distinct Persons in the Trinity are not entirely exclusive of the other two. Erickson writes, “There are a large number of texts that attribute similar actions to more than one member of the Trinity.”¹¹¹ Christ also chooses and determines who will be saved on the basis of their response to the gospel (Matt. 11:27; John 5:21; 13:18; 15:19). The Holy Spirit determines whom to give gifts to (1 Cor. 12:11); while every perfect gift also comes from the Father (James 1:17). Both the Father and the Son are involved in the work of the Spirit (John 14:18, 26; 15:26). The judgment is implemented by the Father (Rom. 14:10), the Son (Matt. 25:31–32; John 5:22); and the Spirit (John 16:8). Also significantly, the throne of the Father is shared by the Son and They receive equal praise (Rev. 4:11; 5:12–13; 22:1–3). The Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11) is also the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9). The church of God (Gal. 1:13) is also the church of Christ (Rom. 16:16) to whom the Spirit speaks and supervenes (Rev. 3:1, 6, 13, 22). The Father, Son and Holy Spirit have one name (Matt. 28:18–20). Christ intercedes for us, and the Spirit intercedes for us (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:34), not to convince the Father to love us, but because the whole Trinity does (John 16:26–27) and agreed upon the propitiation and intercession of Christ as the God-Man Mediator who is “with” the Father (1 John 2:1). The Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit all give life (John 5:21; 6:63; Ps. 104:30). Seeing Christ is seeing the Father, and the Spirit reveals Christ to us (John 14:7–11, 26; 15:26). The Father is with us always through the Son and the Spirit (John 14:26; Matt. 28:18–20; John 14:23). Grudem claims that Christ’s station at the “right hand of God” implies subordination.¹¹² But this is not the case for two reasons. (1) Christ is seated on the throne *with the Father* (Rev. 3:21; 22:3) and (2) the right hand of God where Christ sits is a place of absolute authority (Heb. 1; Eph. 1:19–23; Phil. 2:9–11; Matt. 28:18–20; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 1 Pet. 3:22; Col. 1:15–18). The Father glorifies the Son (John 17:5; Phil. 2:9–11) and the Son glorifies the Father (John 12:28; Phil. 2:11), the Father and the Son exalt the Spirit and His significance (Matt. 12:31; Is. 42:1) and the Spirit glorifies both (John 16:13–14; Eph. 5:18–19; 1 Cor. 12:3). The unity of the

111. *Ibid.*, 137.

112. Grudem, “Biblical Evidence” in *op. cit.*, 248–251.

Trinity and the generally accepted biblical view that the Trinity has a united purpose (John 17:20–24; 10:30; Deut. 6:4; etc.) is not adequately recognized in the concept of subordinationism.¹¹³

Equivalence and Mutuality in the Plan of Salvation

Also significant are those passages which relate to the plan of salvation and its implementation. Concerning the plan of salvation, Christ is said to have offered Himself (Heb. 7:27; 9:14), given Himself (Gal. 1:4; 2:20; Eph. 5:25; 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14), willingly laid down His life as a ransom (John 10:18;¹¹⁴ 15:13; 1 John 3:16; Matt. 20:28), and purchased salvation (Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:14). In addition, the Holy Spirit is the One who enabled Christ to complete His divine mission (Acts 10:38; Heb. 9:14; Luke 4:18–21). And the Father was “in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” because of His love (John 3:16); a love shared by the Son (Gal. 2:20) and the Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 15:30). We are saved by the Christ (1 Thess. 5:9), the Father (Titus 3:4), and the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:3). All three members of the Trinity were intimately involved in both the planning and implementation of the plan of salvation, and Christ willingly gave Himself—He was not ordered to do so by the Father.

Christ did not take upon himself the task of world redemption because he was number two in the Trinity and his boss told him to do so or because he was demoted to a subordinate rank so that he could accomplish a job that no one else wanted to touch. He volunteered his life out of sacrificial love. . . . Scripture describes this process in these words: “He humbled himself” (Phil 2:8). He was not forced to become a servant; he was not compelled to be obedient; he was not dragged to his death against his will. The Bible puts it tersely: “He humbled himself.” Therefore it is much more appropriate, and theologically accurate, to speak of Christ’s self-humiliation rather than of his subordination.¹¹⁵

The Father and the Spirit were in accordance with this plan. This has been called the “Covenant of Redemption” in the Trinity, by which there was “an agreement reached among the Trinity

113. Christ’s submission to the Father’s will (“not My will, but Thine be done”) in the Garden of Gethsemane is not an exception to this. Christ sought to avoid, if possible, the horrible pain of separation from the Father that the propitiation was causing. He had agreed with the Father before time to go through with it, but in His human nature He sought to avoid suffering. His humanity made submission necessary because as a human, Christ could have refused to follow through with the plan of Redemption. His own will and divine-human nature was sinlessly pure and in line with the Father’s will, and it was not sinful for Him not to eschew pain, suffering, and death. It was in this sense that He could say, “Not My will.” His will to avoid suffering was submitted to the Father’s will that He complete the propitiation. And Christ’s eternally divine unity with the Father’s purpose remained intact because He refused to allow His sense of dread to outweigh His commitment to the plan of salvation that the Trinity had jointly devised from eternity past.

114. The “command” Jesus receives here was in accordance with His own volitional act as well as the will of His Father. Jesus says that He has “power” to lay His life down; and the texts alluded to indicate that He chose to do this. And as Gulley (146) points out, Jesus “learned obedience” (Heb. 5:8) during the Incarnational state, not before.

115. Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40:1 (March 1997), 59.

regarding the way to redeem humans. . . . It was an agreement in which each Person of the Trinity entered willingly.” This is in “opposition to the view that the Father, by His authority, decided the role that the Son and Spirit should play in the plan of salvation.”¹¹⁶ Isaiah 11:1-3; 42:1; 61 indicate that all three Persons of the Trinity were involved in the Incarnation.

This brings us to the question of what is intended by Christ saying that He was “sent” by the Father. Does this imply eternal subordination? As we have noted, Christ and the Holy Spirit were intimately involved with the Father in formulating the plan of salvation, thus the “sending” of Christ often referred to in the NT is an apt way of describing the onset of His temporary, voluntary, functional humility accepted in His incarnate state. God sent His Son in His earthly state to accomplish the joint mission of the Trinity. As a human being, Christ could do “nothing of Himself,” He obeyed His Father’s will, and did those things that God sent Him to do. But Christ came to earth of His own choice as part of the covenant of redemption formulated by the Trinity. But once He was here, He needed to make it clear that He was not acting alone. As Donald Macleod points out, the many passages in which Jesus refers to being sent by the Father and obeying Him (e.g. John 8:28; 5:19, 37; 6:38), even to the point of saying “My Father is greater than I” (John 14:28) were uttered in a certain context: Jesus, who was claiming to be God in the flesh (John 10:30; 5:18; 8:58) needed to demonstrate that He was not acting alone—that He was not a self-magnifying mere human who was claiming too much for Himself. No, He was the God-Man on a divinely ordained mission, and not concerned merely with His own glory.¹¹⁷ This was essential during the incarnation. Thus Christ as the One “sent” refers to His earthly, temporarily subordinate state.

As was noted above, the “Messenger” or “Angel” of Yahweh was sent in the OT (Mal. 3:1; Ex. 23:20–23), but this Being (Christ in His pre-Incarnate state) was Yahweh Himself, and spoke in a manner which precluded any hint of subordination. The Angel Himself identifies Himself as Yahweh and speaks with absolute authority (Ex. 3:2; 6:14; cf. Acts 7:30, 32; Judges 6:12-16; 13:1–24). As a

116. Gulley, 141.

117. Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 77–78.

human being, however, Christ could not simply act on His own authority; He needed to follow His Father's plans for Him. The balance between Christ's assertion of His absolute divinity and His obedience to the Father and Christ's reliance upon Him to glorify Him is shown in John 8: Christ Himself is the Light of the world (vs. 12); Jesus asserts His right to testify of Himself, but He also needs the testimony of the Father (vs. 18). If they do not recognize Jesus for Who He is, they have not recognized the Father (vs. 19). Jesus does nothing of Himself, but relies upon His Father (vs. 28); Jesus came Himself from God, but the Father has sent Him during His earthly mission; Jesus' honor comes from the Father, not merely from Himself (vs. 54). Yet Jesus Himself asserts His pre-existent full divinity by designating Himself by the covenant Name for God—"I AM"—Yahweh. The incarnational subordination of the Son in John resides in tandem with the assertions of His full divinity.

Distinctions Among the Persons

Grudem's recent response¹¹⁸ to all of these kinds of passages is to readily recognize that the members of the Trinity do in fact engage in similar or the same activities, but that there are certain activities that only one member does. Only Christ dies for the sins of the world. Only the Father spoke from heaven at the baptism, etc. He then suggests that Erickson is essentially a modalist¹¹⁹ because he emphasizes the *perichoresis* doctrine (the idea that each member of the Trinity is "in" the others—cf. John 10:38) to the point of suggesting that any act of any member of the Trinity is a joint one. Perhaps this might be overstating the case if this is to be defined to rigidly. But the biblical evidence above supports a basic affirmation of *perichoresis*, which Grudem's claims appear to perhaps insufficiently recognize. If the Spirit and the Son are coinherent in the Father in some sense, and all three share a united purpose (as the biblical evidence above suggests, and as Augustine asserted), all the attributes of deity, including omniscience and foreknowledge, then the

118. Wayne Grudem, "Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical Feminist Authors," in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, Bruce Ware and John Starke, eds., (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 17-45.

119. *Ibid.*, 24.

Father cannot be legitimately claimed to be the sole arbiter and initiator of divine actions. As McGrath writes, the *perichoresis* doctrine “allows the individuality of the persons to be maintained, while insisting that each person shares in the life of the other two. An image often used to express this idea is that of a 'community of being,' in which each person, while maintaining its distinctive identity, penetrates the others and is penetrated by them.”¹²⁰ Thus Grudem’s charge of modalism seems unfounded. He seems to be claiming that the *only* means to differentiate the Persons is to have an eternal hierarchy in the Trinity. But all that is needed at minimum is to affirm that the Godhead exhibits oneness nature, purpose, attributes of divinity, and character, but which also exists in Three Persons.

Two Controversial Passages Considered

The two most frequently cited passages of Scripture which subordinationists use to support their position are 1 Cor. 11:3 and 1 Cor. 15:24–28. It is thus important to examine these passages in order to determine their meaning and implications.

1 Corinthians 11:3 states: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.” The current subordinationist view of this verse is essentially that all men are subordinated to Christ, all women are subordinated to all men (or perhaps wives to husbands), and that Christ is subordinated (from all eternity) to God.

While it is evident that all of the biblical and theological evidence hitherto explored in this paper has militated against such a view, it is important to examine possible interpretations. The meaning of the word head (Gr. *kephale*) is hotly disputed in this verse, some taking it to mean “ruler”¹²¹ and others to mean “source.”¹²² Paul’s usages of this term in other contexts seem to imply

120. Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 325

121. Grudem, The Meaning of Head: An Evaluation of New Evidence, *JETS* 44:1 (March 2001), 25–65.

122. See Colin Brown, “Head, NT, 3” *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, II (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), 160;

that both meanings are at least possible.¹²³ Eph. 1:22 refers to Christ as the “head of all for the church.” This could be read in either sense of authority or source or both. In Eph. 4:15-16, Paul uses the metaphor of the head to denote that from which everything originates and grows. In Eph. 5:21-33, Paul uses *kephale* to refer to the relationship of Christ to the church, and husbands to their wives. In Col. 1:15-18, the context primarily emphasizes the idea of creation or source, though there is also a reference to Christ becoming preeminent through His resurrection.

In all of these passages the meaning of “integrally connected source of life” seems to fit each context somewhat better than “authority.” The Eph. 5 passage, which would seem at first to exclude this nuance, actually fits this meaning well when the context is considered—the husband loving and being willing to give his life to save and nourish his wife as Christ gave His life to save and nourish the church.

Regarding God being the head of Christ in 1 Cor. 11:3, with this meaning of *kephale* in mind, the following would be what is implied: Christ is the integrally connected source of life for all people; the first man Adam (cf. verses 8-12 that support the “source” emphasis suggested here) was the source of his wife Eve—she being taken from his rib; and God is the source of *the Messiah*—the meaning of the Greek *Christos*. The Trinity sent Jesus into the world (recall above regarding this mutual Trinitarian act) and gave Him His life as the God-Man. It is rather unlikely that this verse could be understood to imply eternal generation, which, read thusly, would contradict the affirmations of the equality of the Trinity hitherto explored. After His resurrection, Christ is shown to have all power and authority, (Matt. 28:18–20; Eph. 1:20–23; Col. 1:15–20) equal with the Father as He was before the Incarnation (John 17:5). Even if *kephale* is taken to mean primarily authority, the situation Paul is describing regarding God and Christ is not stated to be something that extends into eternity past. It could be that he was referring to the role of Christ as Mediator in the economy

123. See Teresa Reeve, “First Corinthians 11:2-16 and the Ordination of Women to Pastoral Ministry” in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, John Reeve, ed., (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press, 2015), 243-257.

of salvation (as Calvin suggested;¹²⁴ see below as well), in which there might be a kind of eternal forward subordination due to the continuing humanity of Christ. While I tend to favor the view that the only subordination of Christ was due to His earthly sojourn, and that He resumed His full equality in the Trinity upon His ascension (as implied by the texts just cited), this alternative view is also possible as well as consistent with the previously examined Scriptural data. It thus does not appear that there is sufficient evidence from this verse to convey the idea that Christ was eternally subordinate to the Father.

1 Cor. 15:24–28 is another passage that has been used as evidence for the eternal subordination of Christ to the Father. Indeed, Erickson refers to this passage as “the strongest text of all in support of the gradational position.¹²⁵ Christ, at “the end” is going to hand over “the kingdom” to the Father, will rule over all things “under His feet”, and will then “be subject” to the Father.

What is helpful in understanding this passage is recognizing its relationship to similar passages as well as examining the immediate context. The initial source of the “under His feet” terminology is Psalm 8:3–8. In this passage, the Psalmist draws upon imagery from the creation account in Genesis 1. Adam and Eve, representatives of mankind as a whole, were given dominion over the works of God’s creation. But this dominion was lost through the Fall; and in the New Testament, Christ is seen as being the ideal representative of humanity, the One to restore what Adam lost. Thus these words are applied to Jesus as the Second Adam in Heb. 2:6–9; Eph. 1:22; as well as this passage. What is particularly germane in 1 Cor. 15 is that Christ is specifically set forth as the 2nd Adam: “Since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (vss. 21–22). Christ’s rule is an eternal rule (Dan. 7:14; Luke 1:33; Rev. 11:15); so Christ delivering up the kingdom to the Father at “the end” is not a break or inception of Christ’s rule, but a continuation of it. What are being given to God are the

124. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 1:353.

125. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 115.

resurrected dead who are raised by virtue of Christ's life, death, and resurrection (vs. 23, which immediately precedes the passage in review).

Accordingly, I would suggest that the most plausible explanation for the subjection of verse 28 is that Christ is here subjecting Himself as the Representative of humanity, the ideal Man who reversed the curse of the Fall, gave life to the dead, and is restoring all things. He is fittingly referred to as "the Son" (a term quite rare for Paul in reference to Christ),¹²⁶ in which there is an evident contextual textual connection with Adam (vss. 21–22; the Son of Man—the Son of Adam) as well as with the Psalm 8, Dan. 7:14, and Heb. 2:6–9 related passages in which Jesus, the ideal Man, the Second Adam, is the One Who restores the Edenic dominion to all saved human beings. Perhaps significantly, it is this same Hebrews passage which underscores the solidarity of Christ's humanity. He is "not ashamed to call [us] brethren" (Heb. 2:11). And Heb. 2:8 contains words of almost exact parallel to 1 Cor. 15:24, 27–28 regarding the absolute nature of the dominion of Christ. These passages are thus intimately related and connected through common references and eschatological restoration focus. Christ comes to the Father with all of resurrected saints—"they that are Christ's at his coming"—and submits them into the eternal kingdom. Christ then submits Himself to the Father, as the Representative of humanity—with the purchased people gained through His own life, death, and resurrection. God the Father subjects all things under Christ, and Christ submits Himself with His kingdom of redeemed saints to the Father. Christ submits what He already owns to the Father, and the Father submits what He already owns to the Son. This passage primarily deals with Trinitarian mutuality. The only reason that Christ is the One who is described as submitting Himself is because of His role as the 2nd Adam—the Representative of a submitted kingdom of humanity. Finally, it should be noted that even if this passage implies a kind of forward eternal

126. Macleod, 86, notes that it is only 15 times.

subordination—due to the role of Christ as Mediator in the economy of salvation, it cannot be logically extrapolated to apply to eternity past.¹²⁷

Summary and Conclusion

This paper has attempted to demonstrate that there is no biblical basis for eternal subordination in the Trinity, either of Christ or the Holy Spirit. While it has been shown that there is evidence for subordinationism in some of the great theologians of Christian history, including hints of it in the Creeds, it has also been suggested that this history also contains strong affirmations of mutuality and cooperation among the Persons of the eternal Trinity (particularly Augustine and Calvin) which preclude the kind of “chain of command” view which is currently being argued for. Ultimately, historical orthodoxy, while informative, cannot be solely determinative for deciding the question.

The survey of the biblical materials above indicated that there is an eternal ontological and functional equality in the Trinity, excepting the time of Christ’s earthly sojourn, in which He, as a Servant and human Example, had the necessity of obeying and submitting to His Father. He emptied Himself and became an obedient Servant in a state of humiliation in order to uplift and save the human race through His life, death, and resurrection. Upon entering His glorified resurrected state, Christ returned to His former glory with the Father, though He is now forever possessing a human (albeit glorified) body.

The weight of evidence presented here suggests that the Trinity has acted from eternity past as a unified triadic Entity of synergistic love. Each member is never prohibited by any ontological status from performing and participating in any joint divine act. The three are One in creation, One in purpose and planning, One in the salvation process, and One in eternity future.

127. See Macleod, in which he suggests there is a kind of “forward” eternal subordination because of Christ’s eternal humanity. “So long as Christ remains human, and so long as he functions as Servant-Messiah and as head of the church, subordination is unavoidable. It was modified but not eliminated by his resurrection and ascension” (87). I would tend to argue that this view is not ultimately supportable in light of the exalted language of absolute dominion and authority used in Scripture for the resurrected Christ (e.g. Matt. 28:18–20, John 17:5; Rev. 3:21; 22:3); but I would suggest that Macleod is insightful in suggesting the following: “Yet we should not overlook the complexities of the situation. In the New Testament, service is greatness; and one may even ask (using the terms of later theology) whether the persons of the Godhead do not seem to vie with one another for the privilege of serving” (88).

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