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NEO-SUBORDINATIONISM:
THE ALIEN ARGUMENTATION IN THE GENDER DEBATE

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ABSTRACT

Over the last forty years, the debate over gender roles in the home, church, and society has unprecedentedly escalated among Evangelical Christians—including Seventh-day Adventists—due to the introduction of an alien argumentation that grounds the permanent functional subordination of women to men ontologically in the being of God. This argument, which I have termed “neo-subordinationism,” states that women are ontologically equal but functionally subordinate to men because of a prescriptive hierarchical order that exists in the immanent Trinity and is recognizable through the economic Trinity. In this Trinitarian hierarchy the Son and the Holy Spirit are said to be ontologically equal but eternally subordinate in role and authority to the Father with the Holy Spirit also functionally subordinate to the Son. This novel argument has shifted the gender debate from anthropology and ecclesiology to theology proper, a shift that has been called the “turn to the Trinity.” While theology proper should inform all other areas of theological studies, reading perceived differences of gender roles into the immanent Trinity has serious systematic consequences.

This paper argues that the unified equality of the Trinity must be preserved by excluding neo-subordinationism from the discussion on gender roles. This is accomplished first by briefly reviewing the history of the gender debate with particular focus on the emergence of modern complementarian and egalitarian perspectives and the entrance of neo-subordinationism into complementarian argumentation among Evangelicals generally and Seventh-day Adventists specifically. Second, four significant problems of neo-subordinationism for Christian theology

are discussed: (1) its failure to adequately account for the whole of canonical data, (2) its inherent logical inconsistencies, (3) its inaccurate reporting of church history, and (4) its ramifications for soteriology and the character of God. Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations for how to proceed in the gender debate without injuring intra-Trinitarian ontology.

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Introduction

The role of women in the home, church, and society has been an intensely debated issue within Christianity at large for centuries. Over the last forty years, the gender debate has unprecedentedly escalated among Evangelical Christians—including Seventh-day Adventists—due to the introduction of a new argumentation by some complementarian theologians that grounds the permanent functional subordination of women to men ontologically in the being of God. This present-day nuance of an ancient heresy, which will be termed “neo-subordinationism” hereafter,¹ states that women are ontologically equal but functionally subordinate to men because of a prescriptive hierarchical order that exists in the immanent Trinity and is recognizable through the economic Trinity. In this Trinitarian hierarchy the Son and the Holy Spirit are said to be *ontologically* equal but *eternally* subordinate in role and authority to the Father with the Holy Spirit also *functionally* subordinate to the Son. This novel argument has shifted the gender debate from a discussion of anthropology and ecclesiology to theology proper, a shift that has been called the “turn to the Trinity.” While theology proper should inform all areas of systematics (since it is the foundation upon which the edifice of systematic theology is built), reading perceived differences of gender roles into the immanent Trinity has serious consequences for Christianity.

Purpose and Methodology

This paper will argue that the unified equality of the Trinity must be preserved by excluding neo-subordinationism from the contemporary discussion on gender roles because of its

¹ The ancient heresy of subordinationism taught that the Son is eternally and ontologically subordinate and inferior to the Father (see the discussion in Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 244–245). This paper will refer to the contemporary version of subordinationism as neo-subordinationism because of its different nuance that the Son is ontologically equal but eternally subordinate in role/function to the Father. Though the two are similar and arguably equivalent (see the section on logical inconsistencies below), a distinguishing technical term is used in greater fairness to the proponents of contemporary subordinationism—many of which claim to reject the ancient heresy.

systematic destructive impact on orthodox Christian theology. This will be accomplished first by briefly reviewing the history of the gender debate with a particular focus on the emergence of the two primary perspectives in the post-Reformation gender debate—complementarianism and egalitarianism. Then, the entrance of neo-subordinationism into complementarian argumentation will be traced among Evangelicals generally and Seventh-day Adventists specifically. Finally, four significant problems of neo-subordinationism for Christian theology will be highlighted in some detail: (1) its failure to adequately account for the whole of the canonical data, (2) its inherent logical inconsistencies, (3) its inaccurate reporting of the history of Christian thought, and (4) its ramifications for the essential Christian doctrines of salvation and the character of God. Finally, the paper concludes with some recommendations for how to proceed in the gender debate without injuring intra-Trinitarian ontology.

Historical Context of Neo-Subordinationism in the Gender Debate

As this discussion is entered, it is important to note that the present-day gender debate did not suddenly emerge in a vacuum; rather a long historical progression of events and societal changes has led up to these current discussions. While slight variations of views regarding gender roles existed among pre-Reformation Christians, a significant consensus thrived in this period of Christianity. The traditional theological view espoused was “simply that women should not take up leadership roles in the church or society because they are defective in some ways by their very nature.”² Though different in the details, primarily an *ontological* reason was set forth for why men were permitted to lead and women were prohibited from leading in the home and church. Thus, a qualitative *ontological* difference between men and women was believed to

² Alan G. Padgett, “The Bible and Gender Troubles: American Evangelicals Debate Scripture and Submission,” *Di* 47.1 (2008): 22.

exist, which resulted in *functional* subordination of women to men. Yet a new understanding on gender roles began to surface during and progress after the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformation's new understanding of the priesthood of all believers and other key theological differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic thinkers stimulated a discussion that led some to revise the previous traditional stance of an *ontological* difference between men and women. New argumentation began to be advanced "on the grounds of Scripture and right reason that women are called to ministry and gifted by the Spirit just as men are."³ "Although women became more involved in ministry following the Reformation, they still experienced limitations."⁴ Nevertheless, views regarding gender roles continued to evolve, gaining further ground for gender equality.

Emergence of Two Sides

After World War II, the rise of the women's rights movement and secular feminism in the 1960s ignited greater fervor to the debate, especially in the United States. "[S]ome American Evangelical scholars began to argue on a number of fronts—including biblical interpretation—for the full equality of women in the church, home, and society" *ontologically* and *functionally*.⁵ In the 1970s, they formed the Evangelical Women's Caucus to further the cause of women's equality. These Evangelicals were referred to as "Christian feminists" or their preferred self-designation, "egalitarians."⁶ In 1988, egalitarians formed a non-profit organization named

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nancy Hedberg, *Women, Men, and the Trinity: What Does It Mean to be Equal?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 63.

⁵ Padgett, "Bible and Gender Troubles," 23.

⁶ Richard M. Davidson, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 259; see also Christians for Biblical Equality, "History of CBE," <http://www.cbeinternational.org/content/cbes-history>.

Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), and produced their position document entitled “Statement on Men, Women and Biblical Equality” in 1989 in response to their opposition.⁷

Not long after the rise of the egalitarian view of gender roles, “fundamentalists and conservative Evangelicals responded to this challenge with their own arguments and publications.”⁸ However, the pre-Reformation traditional view for which they advocated was revised due to the changing cultural views of women’s *ontological* equality with men. This nuanced argument asserted that “men and women are equal in *essence*, but that in *function* women are subordinate” permanently.⁹ Thus, they revised the traditional *ontological* reason for the subordination of women by upholding the biblical, *ontological* equality argued by their counterparts, yet continued to maintain permanent, *functional* subordination of women to men. Since the 1970s, this group of Evangelicals has been referred to as “patriarchalists,” “hierarchalists,” “traditionalists,” and their preferred self-designation, “complementarians.”¹⁰ Triggering their opposition to form the CBE (as was discussed above), complementarians organized the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) in 1987 in Danvers, Massachusetts, and published their manifesto on gender roles in 1988 called the “Danvers Statement.”¹¹ Out of this historical context arose the modern on-going gender debate between these two main groups of American Evangelicals.¹²

⁷ Ibid., 284; see Christians for Biblical Equality, “Men, Women and Biblical Equality” (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 1989).

⁸ Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 23.

⁹ Hedberg, *Women, Men, and the Trinity*, 2; Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 23–24.

¹⁰ Davidson, “Headship, Submission, and Equality,” 259.

¹¹ Ibid., 284; see Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Our History,” <http://cbmw.org/history>. The “Danvers Statement” can be found at idem, “The Danvers Statement,” <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement>.

¹² Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 22.

Entrance of an Alien Argumentation

Most of the gender debate between egalitarians and complementarians prior to the 1970s had focused on identifying proper hermeneutical principles that should be utilized in biblical interpretation, evaluating the roles of important female biblical characters,¹³ and doing exegesis on key scriptural passages that address the dynamics of male-female relations.¹⁴ However, an alien argumentation was introduced into the debate in the 1970s by some complementarian theologians causing the discussion to take a surprising turn. Alan G. Padgett refers to this twist as the “turn to the Trinity.”¹⁵

George W. Knight III initiated this turn when he published a book entitled *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* in 1977 that espoused the complementarians’ perspective on gender roles.¹⁶ What was novel and noteworthy concerning Knight’s argumentation was his usage of the economic and immanent Trinity, particularly the relationship between the Father and the Son, as an analogy of male-female relations.¹⁷ Even more significant was its new understanding that the Son—though fully God *ontologically*—is eternally subordinate in *function* to the Father. Knight wrote:

The apostle Paul in his appeal to the relation of God the Father to God the Son does not regard Christ’s Sonship and resultant incarnation as implying His inferiority to the Father. Although Christ the Son’s submission is expressed in the areas of action and of incarnation (the areas of service and of the accomplishment of salvation; cf. also I Cor.

¹³ Such as Deborah, the five daughters of Zelophehad, Philip’s five daughters, Pheobe, Junia, etc.

¹⁴ See Gen 1–3, Luke 8:1–4; 1 Cor 11:2–16, 14:34–36; Eph 5:18–33; Gal 3:28; 1 Tim 2:8–15.

¹⁵ Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 24.

¹⁶ George W. Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56. Knight writes, “For the basis of man’s headship over woman and woman’s submission to man, the apostle Paul appeals to the analogy of God the Father’s headship over Jesus Christ, His incarnate Son (I Cor. 11:3). ... With full authority and with absolute and permanent reasons, Paul argues for the form of this relationship between man and women” (*ibid.*, 26).

15:24–28), it is also an expression of the ontological relationship of preincarnate, submissive Sonship (cf., e.g., John 5:18–23, 30).

The ontological relationship analogous to that between man and woman, writes Paul, is that between Father and Son (I Cor. 11:3). That Christ submits as Son and as incarnate, i.e., because of certain ontological aspects, does not mean therefore that He is inferior to the Father, nor does it cast into doubt His deity. Likewise, that the woman submits as woman does not mean therefore that she is inferior or that her humanity as an image-bearer is threatened. In both cases, it is equals in relationship to one another. In both cases, one, because of His or her ‘ontological’ and ordained role in relation to the other, acknowledges headship and submits. Just as no inferiority may be asserted or assumed for Christ in His submission, so also no inferiority may be asserted or assumed for woman, and no objection may be justly made because of her submission rests on her cocreated identity as woman in relation to man.¹⁸

Kevin Giles notes that Knight’s claim is the “first formulated...argument” to utilize neo-subordinationism, arguing that “just as women are *permanently* subordinated in authority to their husbands in the home and to male leaders in the church, so the Son of God is eternally subordinated in authority to the Father.”¹⁹ To arrive at this conclusion, Knight employed 1 Cor 11:3 as the foundation for his linkage of male-female relations to the relationship between the Father and the Son.²⁰ 1 Cor 11:3 became the keynote passage that later complementarian writers utilized to argue that the permanent, *functional* subordination of women to men is analogously connected to the eternal, *functional* subordination of the Son to the Father.

The publication of Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* in 1994 further developed and popularized Knight’s neo-subordinationism stating, “[W]hile the persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes, they nonetheless differ in their relationships to the creation. The Son and the Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles. Moreover, these differences in role are not temporary but

¹⁸ Ibid., 55–56; see also 32–33.

¹⁹ Kevin Giles, “The Evangelical Theological Society and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *EvQ* 80.4 (2008): 324, 323.

²⁰ Knight, *The New Testament Teaching*, 26.

will last forever....”²¹ Giles believes that it “was the first evangelical systematic theology to enunciate the doctrine of the *eternal subordination of the Son in function/role and authority*.”²² Since then, other systematic theologies written by conservative Evangelicals have followed suit, such as Norman Geisler’s *Systematic Theology*, which states, “All the members of the Trinity are equal in *essence*, but they do not have the same roles... [I]t is clear that there is a *functional subordination*; that is, not only does each member have a different function or role, but some functions are also subordinated to others.”²³ For Geisler, this functional subordination “is not just temporal and economical; it is essential and eternal.”²⁴ This neo-subordinationist conception of the immanent Trinity has even penetrated the thinking of some scholars of biblical theology. A notable example is Bruce K. Waltke’s *An Old Testament Theology*, in which he asserts that hierarchy “exists eternally in the Godhead itself, wherein the Son is always voluntarily subservient to the Father’s will and the Spirit to both. In the mystery of the Godhead, in which the three person are one and equal, the Son obeys the Father, and the Spirit obeys both.”²⁵

Calvinists—particularly Southern Baptist scholars and seminaries—have been the primary advocates of utilizing neo-subordinationism in their complementarian argumentation.²⁶ In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention took a definitive stand in favor of the complementarian

²¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249.

²² Giles, “The Evangelical Theological Society,” 325.

²³ Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 548.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 549.

²⁵ Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 243.

²⁶ The reason for this strong representation of neo-subordinationism among denominations of Calvinistic background would be an interesting topic for another paper. Perhaps this phenomenon is related in some way to a theology of hard determinism regarding the eternal decrees of God that some Calvinists maintain.

perspective on gender roles in its 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.²⁷ Even so, the neo-subordinationist argument has not exclusively remained in Southern Baptist or other Calvinist circles. Scholars of other faith traditions have adopted it despite the fact that it is out of sync with the representative teachings of some of their denominations. Giles points out that “In America, Australia, and to a lesser extent in England, this teaching has swamped the evangelical world. It seems to be what most Evangelicals now believe.”²⁸

Neo-Subordinationism in Seventh-day Adventist Circles

A most interesting example is the rise of neo-subordinationism among a few Seventh-day Adventist scholars. Since the late 1800s and early 1900s, Seventh-day Adventists have affirmed the full equality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit both ontologically and functionally.²⁹ However, some Seventh-day Adventist scholars began to use neo-subordinationist argumentation borrowed from Grudem in the 1970s and 1980s to support their personal complementarian perspective. “On July 19, 1973, the General Conference Committee voted to establish an *ad hoc* committee on the role of women in the church” that met at Camp Mohaven in Danville, Ohio, during September 16–20, 1973.³⁰ One of the papers presented there may have been the first time a neo-subordinationist argument was used in the gender debate among Seventh-day Adventists. The paper entitled “The Relationship of Man and Women in the Beginning and at the End” written by Gerhard Hasel connected the relationship of the Father as head over the Son to the

²⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 51; cf. Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 25.

²⁸ Giles, “The Evangelical Theological Society,” 326.

²⁹ See the discussion in Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *JATS* 17.1 (2006): 125–139.

³⁰ Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, “1973 Role of Women in the Church Committee: Mohaven Documents,” <https://www.adventistarchives.org/1973-5-mohaven#.U0OAMcdO0lo>.

husband's relationship as head over his wife in the marriage context.³¹ While Hasel did preserved the Father and Son's ontological equality, he readily pointed out the Son's submission to the Father. However, the exact nature of this subordination cannot be determined conclusively because the paper lacks further clarification. Since Hasel was more egalitarian and favorable of women in ministry throughout the paper—as was the committee to which he presented—the subordination he had in mind was likely only functional and temporary. Nonetheless, it is significant that he interpreted 1 Cor 11:3 as dealing with authority and hierarchy, even though he seemed to understand these as confined to the time after the Fall and prior to the eschaton.

Due to the aforementioned committee's favorable recommendation to incorporate more women into ministry, one Seventh-day Adventist scholar, Samuele Bacchiocchi, became very concerned with this “new” direction.³² He self-published a book entitled *Women in the Church* in 1987 that opposed women in pastoral ministry and introduced Grudem's headship theology and neo-subordinationism into Seventh-day Adventism for the first time.³³ Bacchiocchi's book was indeed the turning point for many in Seventh-day Adventist thinking regarding neo-subordinationism in the immanent Trinity and headship in the male-female relationship. Gerry Chudleigh perceptively observes:

The extensive bibliography in Bacchiocchi's anti-women's-ordination book, *Women in the Church*, lists no supporting Adventist references, and later books condemning women's ordination list none before Bacchiocchi's book. Current anti-women's

³¹ Gerhard Hasel, “The Relationship of Man and Women in the Beginning and at the End” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Role of Women in the Church Study Committee, Danville, OH, 16–20 Sept 1973), 18.

³² Gerry Chudleigh, *A Short History of the Headship Doctrine in the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (Los Gatos, CA: Smashwords, 2014), 53.

³³ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study of the Role of Women in the Church* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1987), 76, 126–128.” In the preface of the book, Bacchiocchi directly attributed his understanding to Grudem by stating, “Among the hundreds of authors I have read in the preparation of this book, two stand out as the ones who have made the greatest contribution to the development of my thoughts, namely, Prof. Wayne Grudem of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Prof. James B. Hurley of Reformed Theological Seminary” (ibid., 16–17).

ordination websites that offer publications for further study offer nothing written by Adventists before Bacchiocchi's 1987 book.³⁴

Because of Bacchiocchi's influential teaching position at Andrews University at that time, other Seventh-day Adventist scholars and members began to embrace neo-subordinationism. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim wrote *Searching the Scriptures* in 1995 employing the same neo-subordinationist argumentation of Bacchiocchi to prevent women from serving as pastors.³⁵ Five years later, a group of Seventh-day Adventist scholars and pastors prepared a book entitled *Prove All Things* to counteract the influence of *Women in Ministry*, a book favorable toward women's ordination that was published in 1998 by an *ad hoc* committee of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary.³⁶ *Prove All Things* contained two articles by Bacchiocchi and C. Raymond Holmes that utilized neo-subordinationism in the Trinity to argue against women's ordination.³⁷ Most recently, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists established a committee in 2012 called the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) to conduct an official church study of ordination and its implications for women.³⁸ Both egalitarian and complementarian Seventh-day Adventist scholars presented papers arguing for their theological positions in the gender debate. Some of the complementarians introduced the neo-

³⁴ Chudleigh, *A Short History*, 31.

³⁵ Samuel Koranteng-Pipim, *Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 1995), 52. It is intriguing that Koranteng-Pipim recommends Grudem's writings to those interesting in learning more about headship theology and states that they have enriched the writing of this book (ibid., 53n1).

³⁶ Mercedes H. Dyer, ed., *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000); Nancy Vyhmeister, ed., *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998).

³⁷ See Samuele Bacchiocchi, "Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture," in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 81; C. Raymond Holmes, "Does Paul Really Prohibit Women from Speaking in Church?" in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 172.

³⁸ Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, "Theology of Ordination," <https://www.adventistarchives.org/ordination>.

subordinationism of Bacchiocchi into these discussions.³⁹ An example is Edwin Reynolds claim that “[t]here is no essential conflict between ontological equality and submission, for God and Christ are ontologically equal, yet Christ submits to His Father. The submission is functional, providing for different role relationships; it does not express any ontological inequality.”⁴⁰ Contradictorily, he states later that “the role relationships between Christ and His Father [are] extended from eternity past to eternity future.”⁴¹

As can be seen by this brief history, Grudem’s popularization of Knight’s neo-subordinationism has gone a long way in penetrating the theology of many Evangelical denominations, even some of the most text-centered of them, such as Seventh-day Adventism. This has led to a significant shift in the focus of the gender debate.

Shift of the Debate

The rapid spreading of this new neo-subordinationist view of the immanent Trinity since its introduction into the gender debate by Knight and its popularization by Grudem, has led many complementarians to use this foreign argumentation to prove the position that Scripture supports the permanent role subordination of women. This has radically shifted the gender debate from

³⁹ P. Gerard Damsteegt, “Headship, Gender, and Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Springs, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 12–15; P. Gerard Damsteegt, et al., “Interpreting Scripture on the Ordination of Women” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Springs, MD, 21–25 January 2014), 12, 16; Paul S. Ratsara and Daniel K. Bediako, “Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3: Ontological Equality and Role Differentiation” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Springs, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 1–65; John W. Peters, “Restoration of the Image of God: Headship and Submission” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Springs, MD, 21–25 January 2014), 50–60. See also Stephen Bohr, “Reflections on Women’s Ordination,” *Secrets Unsealed Ministry Update 2* (2012): 19.

⁴⁰ Edwin Reynolds, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship in First Corinthians” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Springs, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 22.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23. See also Council of Adventist Pastors, *The Adventist Ordination Crisis: Biblical Authority or Cultural Conformity?* (Spokane, WA: Council of Adventist Pastors, 2015), 53–54, where it is stated, “Jesus’ submission to the Father extends into eternity, even after the sin problem has been resolved. ... Not only does the Son’s submission to the Father extend into the future, it has always existed. ... The principles revealed by the incarnation and death of God the Son—including the submission of the Son to the Father, even though both are co-eternal and both are God—have always been “the foundation of God’s throne.”

primarily arguing over gender issues to fierce debating over the nature of intra-Trinitarian relationships. Egalitarians have now found themselves forced to do more than advocate for the equality of women. Now they must also defend the functional equality of the Persons of the Trinity.⁴²

The Problems of the Neo-Subordinationist Argumentation

Though neo-subordinationism postures to be a useful argument for the complementarian viewpoint in the gender debate, it carries with it insurmountable systematic problems for Christian theology as a whole. The rest of this paper will argue that neo-subordinationism is problematic for Christian theology in four main areas: (1) its failure to adequately account for the whole of the canonical data, (2) its inherent logical inconsistencies, (3) its inaccurate reporting of the history of Christian thought, and (4) its ramifications for the essential Christian doctrines of salvation and the character of God.

Inadequate Account of Canonical Data

Neo-subordinationist complementarians utilize and interpret many Scriptural passages to substantiate the eternal, functional subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both the Father and the Son, and connect it to the male-female relationship. However, when one looks more carefully at the texts they employ to support neo-subordinationism, it is clear that questionable hermeneutics are in use. Due to the limited scope of this paper, a discussion entertaining every instance in which these complementarians use Scripture to argue a neo-subordinationist viewpoint cannot be provided. However, the key passages frequently used in

⁴² For examples, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, “Equal in Being, Unequal in Role,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 301–333; Kevin Giles, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and Subordinationism,” *ERT* 28.3 (2004): 270–284.

complementarian literature will be explored to demonstrate some of the problems with their hermeneutics.

1 Cor 11:3 and Subordination?

As mentioned earlier, the keynote passage that many complementarians use to suggest hierarchal order in the immanent Trinity and between men and women is 1 Cor 11:3, “But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”⁴³ There are some problems with the complementarian interpretation of this text. First, this passage isn’t ordered in a *hierarchal* manner from highest to lowest levels of perceived authority: God-Christ relation, Christ-man relation, and man-woman relation.⁴⁴ Payne explains that when “Paul wanted to make a hierarchical series elsewhere, he did so in a logical sequence.”⁴⁵ A notable example of this is found one chapter later in 1 Cor 12:28. Here Paul plainly ranks and orders the spiritual gifts that God has appointed in the church from first to last. No such hierarchical ordering is found in 1 Cor 11:3. Rather, Paul appears to order the relations *chronologically*: Christ-man relation (Gen 1:26–27, 2:7), man-woman relation (Gen 2:21–25), and God-Christ relation (John 1:1–3, 14). Payne asserts that this chronological ordering of this text argues strongly for interpreting κεφαλή or “head” as meaning “source” instead of “authority” in the following way: “man came from Christ’s creative work, woman came from

⁴³ All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., Publishers, 1982), unless noted otherwise.

⁴⁴ It is interesting to note that in order to make a neo-subordinationist argument that women should refrain from ministering in the office of pastor/elder, Gregg R. Allison, completely changes the order of the text into his preferred hierarchical order: “The apostle draws an analogy between (1) the subordination of Jesus Christ, the Son, to God the Father, who is his head, or authority; (2) the subordination of every man to Christ, the Lord, who is their head, or authority; and (3) the subordination of a wife to her husband, who is her head, or authority” (*Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 228). This rearrangement, of course, affects Paul’s truly intended meaning.

⁴⁵ Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 129.

‘the man,’ Christ came from God in the incarnation.”⁴⁶ This is further supported by Paul’s use of ἐκ or “from/out of” in 1 Cor 8:6 and 11:8, 12 where the source of woman being man and the source of man being Christ/God are predicated.⁴⁷

Even if Paul intended κεφαλή to mean “authority” rather than “source,” one should not interpret 1 Cor 11:3 as a support for neo-subordinationism, because the God-Christ relation is a reference to Jesus’ life and ministry on earth. Gilbert Bilezikian argues, “[T]he passage nor its context contains any indication that this headship [of God to Christ] describes an eternal state. In this text, Paul is referring to the relationship that prevails between God and Christ in the context of Christ’s ministry to men and women within human history.”⁴⁸ Undoubtedly, this passage exclusively addresses the context of the incarnation and cannot be understood in any eternal sense. Finally, the reader must realize that 1 Cor 11:3 can be a very difficult passage to interpret (especially due to the metaphorical use(s) of the controversial word κεφαλή) as evidenced by the diversity of interpretations and applications in scholarship and the lack of unanimity. Consequently, it is unfitting that neo-subordinationist complementarians should make this text the foundation of their major argument. Therefore, the complementarian usage of this text to support neo-subordinationism is unwarranted.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Teresa Reeve points out that κεφαλή has three primary clusters of metaphorical meanings—authority, source, and prominence/representation—and that each of these meanings are employed by Paul in various places throughout his epistles (“First Corinthians 11:2–16 and the Ordination of Women to Pastoral Ministry,” in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, ed. John W. Reeve [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2015], 243–262). She identifies the uses of κεφαλή in Eph 4:15–16 and Col 2:18–19 as having the meaning of “source” (ibid., 248–249). Thus, this metaphorical meaning is not foreign to Paul. Concerning the debated usage of κεφαλή specifically and all word usages generally, Reeve makes this very important exegetical and hermeneutical point that is often violated by those who demand that κεφαλή always—or at least in most cases—means “authority”: “it is essential to allow the context to point to the meaning of words in a specific usage, rather than insisting on interpreting every word in a rigidly unvarying way” (ibid., 250).

⁴⁸ Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS* 40.1 (1997): 61.

Intra-trinitarian Subordination in Johannine Literature?

In addition to 1 Cor 11:3, many complementarians have interpreted Jesus' statements in the Gospels such as John 14:28, "... for My Father is greater than I;" John 5:30, "I can of Myself do nothing;" and others⁴⁹ as indicating that Jesus is eternally subordinated to the Father's authority.⁵⁰ The problem here is that these complementarians have overlooked the obvious context in which Jesus made these statements—namely, the period of His incarnational ministry. Hence, it cannot be assumed that these statements have an eternal quality. To suggest otherwise is to deny the literary context of these passages. Additional clarity concerning these passages is manifested when they are balanced with passages like John 5:18, 8:58, 10:30, 14:9, 17:5, and others wherein Jesus emphasizes His oneness and equality of divinity and glory with the Father prior to, during, and after the incarnation.

The Incarnation as the Model for Intra-trinitarian Subordination?

Thirdly, neo-subordinationist complementarians claim that Christ's incarnation serves as a biblical example of His eternal functional subordination and obedience to the Father's commands. This too falls short of the Scriptural evidence. Phil 2:6, 9–11 make it clear that prior to and following the incarnation Jesus was fully equal to God *ontologically* and *functionally*.⁵¹ Additionally, the New Testament never describes the period of the Son's incarnation in terms of hierarchal subordination, but rather as voluntary, self-inflicted *functional* humiliation. Phil 2:8 (ESV) declares this explicitly: "... he humbled *himself* by *becoming* obedient to the point of

⁴⁹ See also John 4:34, 6:38, 14:31, etc.

⁵⁰ See Wayne A. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 408.

⁵¹ See also John 17:5.

death.”⁵² The Father did not humble Him; the Son humbled *Himself*. Moreover, when this text says that the Son *became* obedient, it implies that He did not offer obedience prior to His self-humiliation in the incarnation.⁵³ Heb 5:8 (ESV) suggests this very same idea. “*Although* he was a son, he *learned* obedience through what he suffered.”⁵⁴ Bilezikian pinpoints the significance of this text:

Three remarks must be made about this text. (1) The fact that he learned obedience “although” he was a Son indicates that the nature of his Sonship excluded the necessity of obedience. He learned obedience despite the fact that he was a Son. (2) The fact that he “learned” obedience indicates that it was something new in his experience as Son. Obedience was not a mark of his eternal relation to the Father. He learned it for the purpose of ministry. (3) The fact that he learned obedience “through” what he suffered indicates that obedience was required in relation to his suffering and that it was not an eternal condition. Christ’s experience of obedience was confined to his redemptive ministry as suffering servant.⁵⁵

Therefore, Christ’s incarnation is not an example of His eternal functional subordination to the Father as is claimed. The functional subordination that He experienced during the incarnation was voluntary and was contextually limited to that period of time, not extending to His existence prior to or after it. Thus, it is most biblically and theologically accurate to describe Christ’s

⁵² Emphasis mine. All Scripture quotations marked as ESV are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001). In Phil 2:8 Paul used the active aorist indicative of ταπεινώω to indicate that it was the Son—Χριστός Ἰησοῦς in 2:5 is the obvious subject of the active verb—and not the Father performing this action. To emphasize this further, the accusative reflexive pronoun ἐαυτόν is employed to function as the direct object of ἐταπεινώσεν. Phil 2:7 also uses an active verb and the accusative reflexive pronoun as the direct object when it speaks of Jesus’s self-emptying: ἀλλὰ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν.

⁵³ Paul could have easily used the static verb of being, εἰμί, to indicate that the Son’s obedience was a state that was true of Christ prior to His incarnational self-emptying and self-humiliation. However, he utilized the dynamic verb of being, γίνομαι, to indicate a change process of the Son’s state from not rendering obedience prior to the incarnation to becoming obedient at the time of His incarnational self-emptying and self-humiliation.

⁵⁴ Italics supplied. The concessive conjunction καίπερ is used to clarify the concessive nature of the participial clause ὄν υἱός.

⁵⁵ Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 65.

incarnation not as subordination, but as temporary, voluntary self-humiliation that revealed the profound love of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for the world.⁵⁶

A Unilateral Intra-trinitarian Hierarchy?

Finally, neo-subordinationist complementarians argue biblically for an eternal hierarchy in which the Son is *exclusively* subordinated to the Father and the Holy Spirit *exclusively* subordinated to the Father and the Son.⁵⁷ This hierarchy of relationships is said to always function in this form in Scripture without exception. The same is said to be mirrored between males and females. But these assertions crumble when Scriptural data is analyzed carefully.

No Consistent Ordering

First, there is no consistent unilateral ordering of the Trinity in Scripture of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, such as that found in Matt 28:19. A small handful of passages is sufficient to demonstrate this reality (see Table 1). In 1 Pet 1:2 and Rev 1:4–6 the Father is listed first, like the traditional ordering, but the Holy Spirit is mentioned before the Son. However, Paul changes up the traditional ordering even more. In the benediction of 2 Cor 13:14, the Son appears first, followed by the Father and then the Holy Spirit. But in 1 Cor 12:4–6 and Eph 4:4–6, Paul reverses the traditional ordering by placing the Holy Spirit first, the Son second, and the Father last. Like the last two passages, Jude 20–21 has the Holy Spirit first, but the Father is listed second and the Son third. Thus, the Scripture does not have a unilateral hierarchical ordering of the Persons of the Trinity.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁷ Some complementarians deny any mutual functional subordination in the economic Trinity. For example, the Council of Adventist Pastors writes, “We do not read anywhere in the inspired writings about mutual submission among members of the Godhead” (*Adventist Ordination Crisis*, 62).

Table 1. Ordering of the Trinitarian Persons in Scripture

Passage	Ordering of Trinitarian Persons		
Matt 28:19	τοῦ πατρὸς (Father)	τοῦ υἱοῦ <i>(Son)</i>	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος <i>(Spirit)</i>
1 Cor 12:4–6	τὸ ... αὐτὸ πνεῦμα <i>(Spirit)</i>	ὁ αὐτὸς κύριος <i>(Son)</i>	ὁ ... αὐτὸς θεός (Father)
2 Cor 13:14	τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ <i>(Son)</i>	τοῦ θεοῦ (Father)	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος <i>(Spirit)</i>
Eph 4:4–6	ἐν πνεῦμα <i>(Spirit)</i>	εἷς κύριος <i>(Son)</i>	εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ (Father)
1 Pet 1:2	θεοῦ πατρὸς (Father)	ἁγιασμῷ πνεύματος <i>(Spirit)</i>	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ <i>(Son)</i>
Jude 20–21	πνεύματι ἁγίῳ <i>(Spirit)</i>	θεοῦ (Father)	τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ <i>(Son)</i>
Rev 1:4–6	ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (Father)	τῶν ἑπτὰ πνευμάτων <i>(Spirit)</i>	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ <i>(Son)</i>

Shared Trinitarian Activities

Second, when one looks carefully at the economic interactions of the three Persons in Scripture the clearly defined hierarchy of the neo-subordinationist complementarians' argument is absent. This is well illustrated in Millard J. Erickson research, which points out that the Bible has a wealth of texts that speaking of two or more of the Persons of the Trinity functioning in the same redemptive role or accomplishing the same salvific task.

“It is also interesting to observe that many of the functions of the Father that the [neo-subordinationist complementarians] consider an indication of his superiority are also attributed to the Son and in some cases to the Holy Spirit as well. The Son chooses persons to salvation (John 5:21; Matt. 11:27) as well as service (John 6:70), and the Spirit chooses to whom to give which gifts (1 Cor. 12:11). Both the Father (John 14:16, 26) and the Son (John 15:26; 16:7) send the Holy Spirit. The judgment will take place at the judgment seat of the Son (2 Cor. 5:10) and the Father (Rom. 14:10). The love from which

nothing can separate the believer is both that of the Son (Rom. 8:35) and of the Father (v. 39), and no one can pluck the believer out of the hand of Jesus (John 10:28) or the hand of the Father (v. 29). The believer is indwelt by the Spirit (John 14:27), the Son (2 Cor. 13:5), and possibly even the Father (John 14:23; 1 Cor. 3:16). Both the Son and the Father give life (John 5:21), as does the Spirit (John 6:63).”⁵⁸

There is much more canonical data available than what is quoted here from Erickson, which identifies overlapping roles and shared activities of the economic Trinity throughout salvation history. For example, in his book on the Holy Spirit, James M. Hamilton Jr. provides a comprehensive table, which features all of the many actions that are common to two or more of the persons of the Godhead just in John’s gospel.⁵⁹ “Thus the position advocated by both Augustine and Calvin seems most helpful: the actions of any one of the persons of the Trinity are actually actions in which all three persons participate.”⁶⁰

Mutual Intra-Trinitarian Subordination

Additionally, there are several lines of biblical evidence that there is *mutual* subordination among the Persons of the Trinity in the plan of redemption instead of a hierarchical order of authority and subordination.

Father and Son. First, consider the economic relationship of the Father and the Son. While there is indeed a temporary, voluntary, functional humiliation of the Son during the incarnation in which He offered obedience to the Father’s will, Fernando L. Canale points out an equalizing temporary, functional “subordination” of the Father to the Son that he refers to as

⁵⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 308. See idem, *Tampering with the Trinity?* 123–132, for a much fuller discussion.

⁵⁹ James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2006), 56.

⁶⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 308. Erickson references Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.9.19, and John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.12.2, to support this assertion.

“delegation.”⁶¹ Notice the following three texts from the gospel of John: (1) John 3:35 states, “The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into His hand,” (2) the first clause of John 13:3 reads, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands,” and (3) the first part of John 16:15 says, “All that the Father has is mine.” The Father has surrendered everything pertaining to the plan of redemption to the Son’s authority, including the judgment, which determines the salvation of all (John 5:22). Canale points out that “In delegating everything to the Son, the Father is binding Himself to the results of Christ’s salvific mission.”⁶² This subordination or “delegation” of the Father is the precise counterpart of the Son’s subordination in the economic Trinity.

This mutual functional subordination of the Father and Son is most apparent in the complex Pauline passage of 1 Cor 15:24–28. While complementarians have used this passage to support functional subordination of the Son to the Father into the coming eternity,⁶³ the passage speaks of no such future intra-Trinitarian reality. Martin Hanna, maps out clearly the mutual submission that takes place between the Father and the Son in this passage.⁶⁴ First, “[t]he Father

⁶¹ See Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, vol. 12 of *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary Reference Series* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2001), 126.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶³ For examples, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249; Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 549–559.

⁶⁴ Norman R. Gulley also sees mutual Trinitarian submission present in this passage. He writes, “In love the Father makes all enemies subject to Christ (lifting the crucified Christ which draws all to Christ, and causes them to bow and proclaim His justice). Thus, in love, the Father makes Christ the head of all things in heaven and on earth which will continue in the age to come (eternity). The other reference [1 Cor 15:28] says that the Son subjects Himself to His Father, whom He loved to glorify when on earth. Here is an insight into the mutual magnification of each other, which is compatible with Trinitarian reciprocal love” (*God as Trinity*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* [Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011], 153). Also seeing this mutuality of subordination, Reeve suggests that this passage “must be balanced with the recognition that ‘all the fullness dwelt in Christ’ (Col 1:19) and the Father likewise places all things under Christ (Eph 1:22) and places Christ’s name above all names (Phil 2:9–10)” (“First Corinthians 11:2–16,” 250–251).

has put (*hupotasso*, submitted) all things under Christ's feet (1 Cor 15:27)."⁶⁵ This is the "delegation" of the Father to the Son about which Canale writes.⁶⁶ Second, "Christ also submits 'when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father' (15:24). Therefore, 'When all things are made subject (*hupotasso*) to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject (*hupotasso*) to Him who put (*hupotasso*) all things under Him, that God may be all in all' (15:28)."⁶⁷ To clarify this subordination of the Son to the Father at the *eschaton*, Hanna notes an important contextual qualification in his endnote 19 that makes sense of the exception at the end of 15:27, namely that all except the Father is put under Christ's feet. He states that the "submission of the Father [to the Son] is complete, but He is not in submission under the feet of Christ as an enemy."⁶⁸ Norman R. Gulley points out that understanding this passage in light of the reciprocal love of the Trinity and this mutual subordination and magnification between the Father and the Son harmonizes the apparent contradiction between this passage's subjugation of everything under the Father so that "God may be all in all" and the subjugation of everything under the Son in Eph 1:10, 20–23 so that He may "fill all in all."⁶⁹ This eschatological act of the Father and the Son

⁶⁵ Martin Hanna, "Men and Women in Church Order," in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, ed. John W. Reeve (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2015), 299. See also the more compressed discussion in Martin Hanna and Cindy Tutsch, eds., *Questions and Answers about Women's Ordination* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2014), 33–34.

⁶⁶ Canale, "Doctrine of God," 126.

⁶⁷ Hanna, "Men and Women," 299.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁶⁹ What is the nature of this subordination of the Son and His kingdom to the Father at the end of time? John Calvin observed that this passage is "at first view at variance with what we read in various passages of Scripture respecting the eternity of Christ's kingdom" (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 2 vols., trans. John Pringle [Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1848], 2:31). He asks, "For how will these things correspond—*Of his kingdom there will be no end*, (Dan 7:14, 27; Luke 1:33; 2 Pet 1:11) and *He himself shall be subjected?*" (*ibid.*, 31). He resolves this by stating, "But Christ will then restore the kingdom which he has received, that we may cleave wholly to God. Nor will he in this way resign the kingdom, but will transfer it in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity" (*ibid.*, 32). To explain what he means by this, Calvin quotes John Dick: "The mediatorial kingdom of Christ... will end when its design is accomplished; he will cease to exercise an authority which has no longer an object. When all the elect are converted by the truth, and, being collected into

completes the plan of redemption and places all under God so that “the Father, Son, and Spirit as God will be all in all.”⁷⁰

Son and Holy Spirit. Also consider the economic relationship of the Son and the Holy Spirit. As previously noted, the Holy Spirit supposedly offers a “one-way” eternal, functional subordination to the Son as well as to the Father. While this is indeed the case in the post-ascension and *pre-parousia* period,⁷¹ there is biblical evidence that prior to this time the Holy Spirit was not subordinated to the Son, but the inverse was true. In specific, during the incarnation the Son is described as living obediently to and dependently upon the Holy Spirit. Gulley comments, “As the Son of Man on earth, Christ was subordinate to the Holy Spirit who made His incarnation possible (Matt 1:18–20; Luke 1:35).”⁷² After the Son’s anointing of the Holy Spirit to His earthly ministry at His baptism (Matt 3:16), He was led into the wilderness by the Spirit where the devil severely tempted Him. In his account, Mark employed the strong term ἐκβάλλω meaning “to throw out” to communicate the idea of the Holy Spirit “driving” or “compelling” the Son to enter into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Furthermore, the Son’s earthly

one body, are presented to the Father ‘a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing;’ ... nothing will remain to be done by the power with which our Saviour was invested at his ascension; and his work being finished, his commission will expire. ... so our Redeemer, who now sways the sceptre of the universe, will return his delegated power to him for whom he received it, and a new order of things will commence under which the dependence of men upon the Godhead will be immediate; and Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, one in essence, counsel, and operation, will reign for ever over the inhabitants of heaven” (John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 2 vols. [n.p.: M. W. Dodd, 1850], 2:141). Thus, both Calvin and Dick connect this subordination of the Son to the Father to the consummation of Christ’s mediatory ministry for humanity so that human beings can once again commune directly with all the Persons of the Trinity. This makes God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—“all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). For this particular discovery on this passage, I am indebted to Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 154.

⁷⁰ Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 154.

⁷¹ During this period, the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father (John 14:16–18) and by the Son (John 16:7), gets the truth content He is to give to disciples from both the Son (John 16:13) and the Father (John 16:14–15), and is supposed to testify of and glorify the Son (John 15:26; 16:14). Thus He is functionally and temporarily subordinate to Them until this redemptive role is accomplished (see *ibid.*, 147–148).

⁷² *Ibid.*, 145.

ministry was a perpetual submission to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.⁷³ He was “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1), who anointed and sent Him to “preach the gospel to the poor,” “to heal the brokenhearted,” “to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD” (Luke 4:18–19), and to “cast out demons by the Spirit of God” (Matt 12:28). Thus, when the Son declared in John 5:30, “I can of Myself do nothing,” He was not only voluntarily, temporarily subordinate in function to the Father in His incarnated ministry but also implicitly to the Holy Spirit (John 5:19). Finally, the Son is dependent on the Holy Spirit to represent Him, to testify of and glorify Him, and to make His presence available to His disciples during His absence between His ascension and second advent (John 14:16–19; 15:26; 16:5–8, 14). “So the Spirit is dependent upon Christ to be sent, to know what to say, and to bring glory to Christ. But at the same time Christ is dependent upon the Holy Spirit to be made spiritually present on earth while He ministers bodily in heaven’s sanctuary.”⁷⁴

All of these representative scriptural evidences—and those not discussed due to present limitations—lead to the conclusion that the functional subordination in the economic Trinity is qualified by being *mutually experienced* among all the Persons of the Godhead and *temporally limited* to the time in which the plan of redemption is implemented for the saving of humanity. It does not affect the ontological equality of the immanent Trinity because it is not an inner-history of eternity past nor is it carried into eternity future. Once the plan of redemption is completed, the functional subordination in the economic Trinity is likewise ended.⁷⁵ Therefore, an exclusive

⁷³ See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 29–30, 34.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷⁵ See discussion above on 1 Cor 15:24–28.

“one-way” eternal functional subordination model of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son is not reflected in the biblical text. Neo-subordinationist complementarians have employed deficient hermeneutics that have provided an inadequate model for understanding the Trinity from Scripture in order to buttress their position of eternal subordination of women to men in the gender debate.⁷⁶

Logical Inconsistencies

In addition to biblical problems, the ne-subordinationist argumentation contains inherent logical inconsistencies, some of which will be discussed below. One of these inconsistencies can be seen in the following statement by Bruce A. Ware, a representative complementarian scholar, who subscribes to the subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father:

An authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. ... The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. As such, the Son submits to the Father, just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence.⁷⁷

Grudem also uses the idea of equal essence but eternal subordinate roles between the Father and the Son as the model for how husbands and wives are to relate:

Just as the Father and Son are equal in deity and equal in all their attributes, but different in role, so husband and wife are equal in personhood and value, but they are different in

⁷⁶ The complementarian, Robert Letham recognizes the magnitude of grounding the subordination of women to men “ontologically in the being of God,” and how it strongly reinforces the complementarian position by essentially eliminating any past or future possibility for functional equality between men and women (“The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52 [1990]: 74). He writes, “Consequently, the headship of the man is not a punishment on the woman deriving from the fall and is not therefore something which redemption in Christ is designed to erode and to replace. It is not a past phenomenon which we have a duty and privilege to eradicate. Instead, it belongs to the future. Since it is grounded ultimately on the eternal relations of the Trinity and is native to man from creation, sin has not introduced it but spoiled and defaced it, while redemption is not to replace it but to fulfill and to purify it. It is to be embodied increasingly and progressively in this present age. ... It will be perfected at the parousia” (ibid.).

⁷⁷ Bruce A Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 21.

their roles God has given them. Just as God the Son is eternally subject to the authority of God the Father, so God has planned that wives be subject to the authority of their husbands.⁷⁸

Herein lies a major logical problem. The question must be asked of them: how can one who is permanently subordinate due to an intrinsic quality, be equal in essence to the one to whom he/she is subordinated? Adam Omelianchuk highlights this complementarian inconsistency in the context of male-female relations:

Woman is subordinated to man solely by virtue of her femaleness; this is the decisive factor that assigns her to a place of subordination. Although woman is said to be equal [to man] in her essential being, she is considered subordinate (unequal) because of her essential being. Such a contradictory conclusion is incoherent and denies that the Bible is logical.⁷⁹

Applying Omelianchuk's argument to the neo-subordinationist view of the Trinity identifies the same logical inconsistency. If the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father because of His intrinsic and essential quality of Sonship, then it follows that the Son is not equal in essence to the Father. Erickson's reasoning leads him to the same conclusion:

If the Father's authority over the Son and Spirit and the Son's and Spirit's subordination to the Father is a part of the very structure of the Trinity, so that it could not be otherwise, then this superiority and subordination are not contingent, but necessary, characteristics of each of the persons. That means that they are not accidental but essential qualities, and the essence of the Son is different from and inferior to that of the Father. In other words, invariable and inevitable differences in authority imply ontological, as well as functional, subordination.⁸⁰

Thus, it is inconsistent and circular reasoning to suggest that the Son is equal in essence yet eternally subordinate in function to the Father because He is ontologically the Son, just as it is to

⁷⁸ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 46.

⁷⁹ Adam Omelianchuk, "The Logic of Equality," *Priscilla Papers* 22.4 (2008): 25.

⁸⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 308. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis echoes this same concern: "If Christ's subordination is not limited to a specific project or function but characterizes his eternal relationship with God, then Christ is not merely functionally subordinate; he is by nature subordinate. Subordination is what he is, what he always has been, what he always will be. It is a matter of ontology (i.e., being), not merely of function" (*Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997], 57).

say that women are equal in nature but permanently subordinate in function to men because of their ontological “femaleness.” As Omelianchuk perceptively notes, such an assertion would imply that the Bible is an illogical book.

Additionally, finding an analogous connection between the Father-Son and male-female relationships in the first place is a questionable leap of logic that is certainly not biblically warranted.⁸¹ There seems to be no obvious or necessary parallel between the two. Even if the Father and the Son’s relationship correlated with human relationships it would seem most obvious for it to be applied to those between father and son or parent and child, not between male and female. Giles identifies some additional logical issues involved with this analogy proposed by neo-subordinationist complementarians:

The Trinity is a threefold relationship; the man/woman relationship is twofold. In only appealing to the Father/Son relationship, this argument leaves out the Holy Spirit. He is forgotten. If God’s threefoldness were stressed, and it was agreed the Trinity was prescriptive of human relations, then threesomes would be the ideal! Furthermore, the Father/Son relationship is a picture of a male/male relationship, not a man/woman relationship. Most of us would not want to build on this observation! ... It seems the correlation between the Trinity and the man/woman relationship simply does not make sense.⁸²

Paul C. Maxwell demonstrates that some actually have gone as far as making the parallel between the Father-Son relationship and male-male relationships—a more logical but theologically dangerous parallel—by building on the analogy between the Trinity and sexual

⁸¹ Paul C. Maxwell states that “[t]he ‘analogy’ between Father-Son and husband-wife does not exactly fit. ... The minimalistic dynamics of oneness and sameness among the relative persons do not carry over into marriage. The claim that there is an analogy between the Trinity and marriage emerges as a more seriously strange concept the more the specifics of the claim are considered. ... The line of analogical continuity and discontinuity is drawn in such a convenient place [only a corresponding authority analogy] that it should put the clear lack of evidence, combined with the sheer hermeneutical gymnastics these appeals require, in a light of theological suspicion. There is radical discontinuity intertwined with the very terms claimed to have continuity in these sorts of appeals, which should at the very least give both camps [complementarians and egalitarians] pause to reflect on whether their appeals are biblical” (“Is There an Authority Analogy Between the Trinity and Marriage? Untangling Arguments of Subordination and Ontology in Egalitarian-Complementarian Discourse,” *JETS* 59.3 [2016]: 566).

⁸² Kevin Giles, “CBE and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Priscilla Papers* 25.4 (2011): 21.

relations that the twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar had established.⁸³ While Balthasar did not intend the sexualization of the Trinity (which he rejects), says Maxwell, “in painting such a strong ontological analogy between human sexual difference and the Trinitarian relations, Balthasar may have opened an analogical door which he cannot shut.”⁸⁴ Indeed he did.

To illustrate what modern theologians have done with this open door, Maxwell uses an article by Gavin D’Costa in which D’Costa argues that “queer relationships are at the ontological heart of the Trinity” because of Balthasar’s “analogy between the Trinity and human gender relations.”⁸⁵ “Thus, queer relationships are divinely sanctioned as long as such relationships also represent an overflowing love to the wider community.”⁸⁶ Maxwell concludes “In a sense, it is difficult to refute D’Costa’s basic Trinitarian point: that if the Trinity is an archetype for sexual difference ... , and if at its very heart is a male-male relationship between a Father and Son, then there seems to be a closer one-to-one analogy between a homosexual relationship than a heterosexual one. The point here is merely that an established authority analogy between the Trinity and marriage opens the door to granting an uncomfortable amount of theological

⁸³ According to Maxwell, Balthasar “wrote that the foundation for sexual difference between husband and wife should be located in the ontological relationship ... between the Father and the Son” (Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?” 566; see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5 of *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998], 91).

⁸⁴ Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?” 567n69. See also Barbara K. Sain, “Through a Different Lens: Rethinking the Role of Sexual Difference in the Theology of Hans Urs Balthasar,” *Modern Theology* 25.1 (2009): 72, quoted in Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?” 567.

⁸⁵ See Gavin D’Costa, “Queer Trinity,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 272–279, quoted in Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?” 567–568. Maxwell cites a few other examples (ibid., 567n72): Kathy Rudy, who additionally argues for communal sex (“Where Two or More Are Gathered: Using Gay Communities as a Model for Christian Sexual Ethics,” *Theology and Sexuality* 2 [March 1996]: 81–99); and Robert E. Gross (“Proleptic Sexual Love: God’s Promiscuity Reflected in Christian Polyamory,” *Theology and Sexuality* 11 [2004]: 52–63).

⁸⁶ Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2001), 56, quoted in Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 202.

legitimacy for queer theology.”⁸⁷ Megan K. DeFranza provides several more examples of how widely modern theologians have opened the door with the Trinity and human gender analogy to include incest, polygamy, and communal sex, in addition to homosexuality.⁸⁸ This is not a logical door that neo-subordinationist complementarians would want to leave open!

Moreover, Stanley J. Grenz with Denise Muir Kjesbo assert that the connection of the Son’s incarnational subordination to the Father with male-female relations misses entirely the point of Christ’s obedience to the Father.

[T]he complementarian argument misunderstands the intent of Christ’s example. Nowhere does the New Testament assert that the Son’s obedience to the Father is a model of how one gender (women) should relate to the other (men). ... Jesus’ obedience to the One he called ‘Abba’ serves as the model for how all human beings—male or female—should live in obedience to God.⁸⁹

Thus, a connection between the Trinity and male-female relations is logically inconsistent and nowhere asserted in Scripture; as such it should not be utilized in the gender debate.

Inaccurate Reporting of Church History

Besides the biblical and logical problems with neo-subordinationism, the argumentation has little orthodox support in the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian thought. Grudem and other neo-subordinationist complementarians claim that the “Christian church throughout history has affirmed both the subordination of the Son to the Father with respect to their roles, and the equality of the Son with the Father with respect to their

⁸⁷ Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?” 568.

⁸⁸ DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 186–239. She highlights Marilyn McCord Adams, who makes a case for polygamy and incest (though she recognizes that inequality is a problem in the case of incest) in addition to homosexuality, as one of these examples that build divine acceptance of unbiblical sexuality on the analogy of the Trinity and human gender (“Trinitarian Friendship: Sam-Gender Models of Godly Love in Richard of St. Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers Jr. [London: Blackwell, 2002], 352; see DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 200).

⁸⁹ Stanley J. Grenz with Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 153. See also Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 57.

being.”⁹⁰ However, this is not an accurate reporting of orthodox Christian thought down through the ages. Due to the limited scope of this paper, a complete survey of Christian tradition throughout church history cannot be included. However, a few key issues will be highlighted.

The extensive research of Kevin Giles, Nancy Hedberg, Millard J. Erickson, and Gary W. Deddo on historical Christian teachings has rendered Grudem’s assertion and that of other neo-subordinationist complementarians concerning church history flawed.⁹¹ Their studies show that the primary Trinitarian and Christological controversies in church history arose in the early centuries when the first Christians “were forced to rethink the doctrine of God they had inherited from Judaism because of Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit.”⁹² They had to formulate a logical model that affirmed both the oneness of God (Deut 6:4) and the full deity of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit (John 1:1–3; Acts 5:3–4). This necessarily ruled out tritheism. Sabellius proposed one of the first models, namely modalism, which “denied all distinctions within the Godhead...and affirmed that the Son and the Spirit were simply modes in which God appeared.”⁹³ The church did not adopt Sabellius’ model for the obvious reason that it rejected the distinct personhood of both the Son and the Holy Spirit. Subordinationism was another early model proposed to explain the Trinity, which excluded modalism by affirming the full personhood of the Son and the Spirit but “implied that the Son

⁹⁰ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 415.

⁹¹ For a more thorough accounting of orthodox Christian tradition throughout church history, see Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 21–117; Hedberg, *Women, Men, and the Trinity*, 25–48; Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity?* 139–168; Gary W. Deddo, “The Trinity and Gender: Theological Reflections on the Differences of Divine and Human Persons,” *Priscilla Papers* 22.4 (2008): 4–13.

⁹² Giles, “Trinity and Subordinationism,” 272.

⁹³ Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 1:145.

and the Spirit were secondary and tertiary subordinates to the one true God” ontologically.⁹⁴

Arius is most well known for the fourth century controversy he agitated by his extreme subordinationist theism, which asserted that since the Son is not an emanation of, consubstantial with, or a being similar to the Father, He must out of necessity have a beginning.⁹⁵ Thus, there was a time when He did not exist.

In response to these controversies the Council of Nicaea in AD 325 was called, out of which came a Christian creed that excluded both modalism and subordinationism and declared that the Son is “of one substance with the Father.”⁹⁶ Augustine, Athanasius, and others rigorously upheld that “the being/nature/essence and the works/operations/functions of the Father and the Son are one. The three divine persons are one in being and one in action. *Who they are* and *what they do* cannot be separated.”⁹⁷ The problem was that some of these early Christians asserted the eternal begetting or generation of the Son—based on an incorrect reading of the Greek word *μονογενής* as “only-begotten” instead of “one-and-only”—as well as the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁸ Thus, the Persons of the Trinity were distinguished not by authority, role, or function, but by origination and causality.⁹⁹ This teaching of Trinitarian derivation left the door open for some Christian thinkers down through time to teach some form of subordination in the Trinity. Interestingly, some modern day complementarians have rejected

⁹⁴ Giles, “Trinity and Subordinationism,” 273.

⁹⁵ González, *History of Christian Thought*, 1:262–263.

⁹⁶ John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green, 1950), 215–216, quoted in González, *History of Christian Thought*, 1:267.

⁹⁷ Giles, “Trinity and Subordinationism,” 275.

⁹⁸ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 307–308.

⁹⁹ Nonna Verna Harrison demonstrates this in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa (see “Gregory of Nyssa on Knowing the Trinity,” in *The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Khaled Anatolios, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014], 55–61).

the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son while maintaining neo-subordinationism.¹⁰⁰

They turn to early Christian theologians who used the eternal generation of the Son to argue for subordination in the Trinity in order to support their contemporary belief in neo-subordinationism without eternal generation. This appears to be a case of “grasping” for historical authorization.¹⁰¹

A careful survey of Christian history will likely lead one to similar conclusions as those of Hedberg:

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 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 ... to see how hierarchists can claim that the timeless, orthodox Christian view is that the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father.¹⁰²

Erickson comes to similar conclusions stating that “It is difficult to contend that throughout its history the church has taught the eternal functional subordination of the Son (and the Spirit) to the Father.”¹⁰³ However, as helpful as historical considerations may be in understanding the development of Christian thinking on the Trinity over time, in the end, these historical

¹⁰⁰ See Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 162; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 254.

¹⁰¹ Curiously Giles, an egalitarian who has written much to oppose neo-subordinationism, is supportive of eternal generation of the Son, but he asserts that it excludes the idea of subordination (*Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 239–240). Rather he claims that it serves merely to differentiate the Father and the Son in Their intimate, loving, and coequal relationship. Even if the Son is said to be generated timelessly or eternally, the logical implication of subordination in the concepts of derivation and origination cannot be avoided. Therefore, it seems difficult for him—or anyone else for that matter—to uphold the full ontological and functional equality of the Father and Son and yet continue to believe in the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. This teaching of derivation in the Trinity is foreign to Scripture. Thankfully, Giles sees eternal generation as “not directly taught in Scripture” even though he still sees it as implied there and rightly states that the “eternal procession of the Spirit does not seem to be mentioned at all in Scripture (ibid., 239n166). In this case, Grudem is correct in saying that the idea of eternal generation should be taken out of our modern theological conceptions of intra-Trinitarian relationships (*Systematic Theology*, 1234).

¹⁰² Nancy Hedberg, “One Essence, One Goodness, One Power,” *Priscilla Papers* 25.4 (2011): 9.

¹⁰³ Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity?* 167.

considerations are not dogmatic evidences for supporting one view over the other. In fact, both sides may find some historical support for their perspectives. Even so, it is fair to say that neo-subordinationist complementarians have over exaggerated their orthodox historical support for neo-subordinationism.

Ramifications for Soteriology and the Character of God

Finally, neo-subordinationism has several negative implications for Christian theology, only a few of which will be assessed here due to present constraints. Bilezikian identifies the profound harm done to Christian theology by neo-subordinationism by saying that “[a] low Christology results in a weak soteriology.”¹⁰⁴ Neo-subordinationism inevitably lowers Christ to the position of a subordinate of the Father. This lowering of Christ logically leads to grave systematic consequences for the doctrine of salvation and the character of God.

First of all, Scripture teaches that only God Himself could truly redeem the world from sin as the needed perfect and blameless sacrifice since “all have sinned” (Rom 3:23). If Jesus is lowered, His eligibility to serve as Sacrifice and Savior begins to crumble. Because “the redemptive power of the cross derives from the fact that the One who died on it was fully God,” Christ’s death on the cross is undermined and minimized when Christ is made merely a subordinate of the Father.¹⁰⁵ God Himself must be in Christ to pay the penalty for sin (Rom 6:23) so to reconcile the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:19).

Secondly, neo-subordinationism can deeply taint the character of God because of the way it affects the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Rom 3:22–25 describes the sacrifice of Christ for human sin as an expiation and propitiation—or ἱλαστήριον—that satisfies divine

¹⁰⁴ Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 66.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

justice and turns aside the wrath of God.¹⁰⁶ When Christ is understood, as the Scriptures teach, as being one ontologically and functionally with the Father and Spirit, the passage portrays God as appeasing His own wrath by Himself, suffering the death penalty in place of humanity (Rom 6:23). Thus, He is both the subject and object of divine wrath. In this way, a rich witness is given concerning the character of God and His profound love in the plan of redemption.

However, viewing Christ as a subordinate of the Father, emphasizes His role as the object of wrath and can diminish his balancing role as the subject. In such a case, God could be

¹⁰⁶ The verbal cognate ἰλάσκομαι in Heb 2:17 and the masculine nominal cognate ἰλασμός in 1 John 2:2, 4:10 are also used concerning Christ's sacrifice for sin. In the classical era and in Greco-Roman literature, the Greek word ἰλαστήριον was indicative of an implement by which one achieves both expiation to remove what is offensive and propitiation to appease a god or ruler's wrath. ἰλαστήριον was largely used substantively by contemporary authors of Paul as a technical term to refer to the golden lid of the ark of the covenant of the Hebrew sanctuary—commonly called the “mercy seat”—which was the place where propitiation and expiation were accomplished. Of the 28 occurrences of ἰλαστήριον in the Septuagint (LXX) 21 of them (Ex 25:17–22; 31:7; 35:12; 38:5, 7–8; Lev 16:2, 13–15; Num 7:89) are used substantively to translate the Hebrew Old Testament word מִזְבֵּחַ, which is the Hebrew name for the “mercy seat” (six of the other occurrences are also connected to other parts of the Hebrew sanctuary: five appearances are in Eze 43:14, 17, 20 in reference to the side of the altar of burnt offering and one in Amos 9:1 referring to the top of the pillars in the Jewish sanctuary). Philo used ἰλαστήριον a total of six times, all of which are references to the “mercy seat” (*Quis Rerum Divinarum Heres*, 166; *De Fuga et Inventione*, 100, 101; *De Cherubim*, 25; *De Vita Mosis*, II, 95, 97). However, it may also indicate an implement of a propitiatory and/or expiatory function. The last remaining occurrence of ἰλαστήριον is in 4 Macc 17:22 in speaking of martyrdom. Importantly, ἰλαστήριον is used attributively in this passage to modify θανάτου in the context of sin, God's wrath against that sin, a divinely provided ransom and purification through blood, and the giving up of life to achieve the ransom. Hence, a clear propitiatory and expiatory usage emerges from this passage. Josephus uses ἰλαστήριον substantively as an object of propitiation/expiation (*Jewish Antiquities*, bk. XVI, 179–182). In the New Testament (NT), ἰλαστήριον appears only once outside of Rom 3:25—in Heb 9:5. The author of Hebrews uses ἰλαστήριον substantively in alignment with the tradition of the LXX, to simply indicate the lid of the ark of the covenant.

In order to harmonize the use of ἰλαστήριον in Rom 3:25 with all of this data, it must be concluded that ἰλαστήριον in this text also carries both expiatory and propitiatory senses. First of all, according to Isaiah 59:1–2 (LXX) ἁμαρτία separates humanity from God. In Rom 1:18–3:20, Paul has made it abundantly clear that universal sin makes all human beings worthy of a revelation of God's wrath and judgment and deserving of the punishment of death (1:18, 32; 2:12, 19). Thus, in order for humanity to stand justified before God and experience reconciliation in their relationship with Him, the sin-barrier must be expiated—removed and cleansed. The use of πάρεσθιν along with ἁμαρτυμάτων in 3:25 clearly indicates that Jesus' death is addressing the sin problem—to “pass over” it—thus, expiation.

Second, Rom 3:25 follows a lengthy description of the revelation of the wrath of God in Rom 1:18–3:20. In order for God to be just and demonstrate His righteousness, a key concern of this passage (3:25–26), sin cannot simply be excused. God's wrath and judgment must be satisfied; in other words, someone must bear sin and that someone must experience God's wrath against it. Isaiah states in Isa 53:4 (ESV) that Jesus as the suffering sin-bearing Servant was stricken, smitten, and afflicted by God. Furthermore, Paul writes later in Rom 5:9—seemingly to expound on what he wrote in 3:25 since their content are very similar—that believers are saved from God's wrath through Christ's blood sacrifice. This implies that Jesus bore God's wrath on the cross so that those who believe don't have to—thus, propitiation. In sum, Paul's use of ἰλαστήριον in Rom 3:25 to refer to Jesus' sacrificial death indicates that it served as an expiation of the sin barrier between God and humanity as well as a propitiation to turn divine wrath away from humanity.

regarded as bloodthirsty, demanding the life of His Son in order for His wrath to be dissuaded; and indeed He has been. D. Glenn Butner, Jr. notes that there is “widespread concern” with such a model of the atonement because of its potential for promoting “a culture of violence against the powerless.”¹⁰⁷ This over emphasis of the Son as the object of wrath, which honors a “power structure resulting in suffering of the subordinate,” can easily be “echo[ed] in the created order in ways that harm the weak and powerless.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, neo-subordinationism can legitimize the major objection against the biblical penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Conversely, maintaining the ontological and functional equality of the Trinitarian Persons and, thereby, keeping the balance of Christ as both subject and object of divine wrath, prevents this objection. Therefore, as demonstrated here, neo-subordinationism undermines the loving and sacrificial character of God.

Finally, by implication, neo-subordinationism presents the incarnation and passion of Christ as merely obedience to the authority of the Father. This has a significant impact on the way one understands the motivation of Christ in the work of redemption. Bilezikian points out that “[i]t makes a lot of difference whether God in Christ offered his life out of sacrificial love, as the Scriptures affirm he did, or whether Christ acted out of obedience because he had no choice but to subject himself to the authority of the Father.”¹⁰⁹ If neo-subordinationist thinking indeed suggests that Christ was motivated by command (coercion) of the Father to serve as a sacrifice for the world, then a motivation of love is precluded. Thus, the cross event no longer is a demonstration of the love of God and Christ for the world, but rather a demonstration of

¹⁰⁷ D. Glenn Butner, Jr., “Crumbling Cathedrals of the Mind: How Eternal Functional Subordination Undermines Transactional Atonement Theory,” *Preserving the Trinity* (2016): 13.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 66.

Christ's subordination to the Father's authority over Him. Such thinking is a significant deviation from Scripture; it devalues the atonement made for humanity through the ministry of Christ and warps Christ's purposes of the cross.¹¹⁰

Summary

In summary, the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both the Father and the Son is a relatively new argumentation that some complementarians have introduced to strengthen the foundation of their position in the gender debate. This neo-subordinationist argumentation creates some serious unwarranted problems for Christian theology. It fails to provide the Evangelical community with an adequate Trinitarian model for all the theological, Christological, and Pneumatological data revealed in Scripture. It lacks inherent logical consistency. It offers a quite different account of the development of orthodox Christian thought throughout the ages of church history from that shared by the majority of current scholarship. It also can severely undermine the atonement of Christ and mar the true character of God.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Because of these weighty implications for Christianity, no analogy between the Father-Son relation and the male-female relationship should be made and neo-subordinationism should be excluded from the discussion on gender roles. While theology proper should inform one's entire system of theology, it is inappropriate to read perceived differences of gender roles back into the economic functions and then into the immanent relationships and being of the Persons of the Trinity in order to have a stronger grounding for a complementarian position. To move

¹¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the impact that neo-subordinationism can have on transactional theories of the atonement, see the full discussion in Butner, Jr., "Crumbling Cathedrals," 9–15.

forward, Christians who are involved in the gender debate should carefully consider Bilezikian's three recommendations.¹¹¹ First, do not muddle with the triune Godhead, especially do not lower the majesty of Christ when Christians are called to exalt Him. "If some people's belief system requires the subordination of women, they should not build their hierarchy at the expense of Christological orthodoxy."¹¹² Secondly, allow the term "subordination," which is reminiscent of Arianism, to be laid to rest and speak of Christ's voluntary self-humiliation in its place. Lastly, "[l]et us not use God to push our ideological agendas. ... Let the Father be God, let Christ be God, let the Holy Spirit be God—all three in one, 'equal in power and glory' for all eternity."¹¹³

Therefore, while theology proper should have its say in the gender debate because one's study of God should positively impact faith and practice, this influence should only go as far as Scripture allows. This entails affirming the ontological equality and "relationality"¹¹⁴ (unity in plurality) of all humanity—no matter a person's gender, ethnicity, age, etc.—because all bear the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–27).¹¹⁵ Also, the analogy between the Father and the Son and male and female relations should be dropped from the gender debate, since there is no biblical or logical warrant for such an analogy.¹¹⁶ Beyond these suggestions, the discussion on gender roles should return to biblical and historical studies that explore relevant data in the areas of anthropology and ecclesiology and avoid reading the ontology of humanity and the church into the ontology of the triune God.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 66–68.

¹¹² Ibid., 67.

¹¹³ Ibid., 68.

¹¹⁴ For a discussion on what is meant by "relationality" and "plurality," see Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 29–72.

¹¹⁵ Every fallen human being does bear the *imago Dei* even though sin has marred it to some degree.

¹¹⁶ See Maxwell, "Authority Analogy?" 565–569.

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