

# Sent From the Father: A Case for Pre-Temporal Obedience

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## Introduction

Given the generally perceived understanding of 'subordination' as it relates to the Trinity (i.e. that the Son and Spirit are somehow inferior in their nature to the Father) perhaps it is better to speak of the 'obedience' of the Son and Spirit to the Father (although even this terminology is seen as problematic to some).<sup>1</sup> Nearly all parties are agreed (e.g. Unitarians, Egalitarians, Complementarians, etc.) that the Son was subordinate to the Father during his incarnation but there are those who argue that to reason this incarnational subordination back into eternity is to do violence to the Trinity. The question I want to explore is: was the Son obedient to the Father prior to the incarnation? If it can be shown that he was then there should be no problem affirming an eternal functional subordination within the Trinity no matter what camp you fall into.

## Function

At this point I should also define the terms 'functional' and 'subordination' as I am using them because I realize that my usage might differ from someone else's. By 'function' I mean the purpose or action for which each person of the Trinity is fitted. It is my contention that their purposes have been set from all eternity and realized in time so that the *activity* of the economic Trinity is coordinate with the *order* of the

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<sup>1</sup> See Kevin Giles' *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), 16-17.

immanent Trinity. The doctrine of perichoresis maintains that through their coinherence all three act as one. Nevertheless, it was the Son alone who became incarnate, died, and was resurrected, because it was proper for him to do so and not the Father or Spirit.

## Subordination

By 'subordination' I have in mind the eternal *order* of the Trinity, any idea of ontological inferiority such as expounded in Arian (or modern day Unitarian) thought is to be put far from your mind. It is imperative to recognize the *order* (τάξις) in the Trinity because how God has revealed himself in history is an extension of how God relates within himself in eternity. The Father begets, the Son is begotten (Jo. 1:14, 18), and the Spirit proceeds (Jo. 15:26). These are eternal distinctions between the persons of the Trinity that cannot be reversed. This eternal *order* is the basis for the understanding of the eternal 'subordination' of the Son and Spirit as seen in their being begotten of and proceeding from the Father. According to this *order* it is entirely proper that the Father would have sent the Son and the Spirit (through the Son). It is entirely proper that the Son and Spirit would express their love for the Father in obedience to his sending.

## My Thesis

I will argue that this obedience is seen in the 'sending-sent' language of the NT, in particular the Fourth Gospel. This language denotes an authority that the Father has over the Son and the Holy Spirit yet delegates to them for the purpose of accomplishing the redemption of his people. This authority in no way equates to ontological inferiority, I stand in line with the creeds of orthodoxy that state that the persons of the Trinity are ὁμοούσιος (of the same substance). The eternal obedience of the Son and Spirit is derived from the eternal Trinitarian τάξις and is best described as a willing obedience. The Father

commands without demanding. There is no coercion on the part of the Father, and the Son and Spirit do not obey begrudgingly.

I will not be addressing the modern gender debate in this essay but will leave the question open for further reflection and discussion at the end. It is my opinion that both egalitarians and complementarians overstate their case when arguing for the Trinity as the picture of male-female relations. It is also my judgment that it is a gross mixing of metaphor to take Father-Son language and apply to it the male-female roles in home and ministry. The husband-wife metaphor used of God-Israel/Christ-Church is much more appropriate for that particular debate.

### One Under Authority

Let's begin by looking at the Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew 8:5-13 // Luke 7:1-10 Jesus enters Capernaum and is approached by the centurion who seeks healing for his servant. Jesus agrees to go and heal his servant but the centurion replies:

Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. And I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my servant, 'Do this,' and he does it. (Matt. 8:9, cf. Lk. 7:6-8)

As a man with authority the centurion *sends* and summons while his subordinates obey his commands. The same is true of Jesus as one set under the authority of the Father. But in being under the authority of the Father he is also dispatched with the authority of the Father to perform God's work in the world. Jesus stated that whoever receives him receives the one who *sent* him (Matt. 10:40, cf. Mark 9:37 // Lk. 9:48). Conversely Jesus could say that whoever rejects him rejects the one who *sent* him (Lk. 10:16).

In his monograph *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, Simon Gathercole examines Jesus' "I have come" sayings in the Synoptic Gospels and builds a case for the preexistence of Christ from them. In the seventh chapter he turns attention to the "sending" statements (Matt. 10:40; 15:24; Lk. 4:18, 43; 9:48; 10:16; Mk. 1:38; 9:37; et. al.) and argues that while in and of themselves they don't prove preexistence, when read in conjunction with the "I have come" sayings they can and probably should be understood as evidence for such, given the high level of correspondence.

Preexistence is not what concerns us here so we will simply take it for granted that the Son preexisted his incarnation and move on to Gathercole's observation in regards to "sending" language. After examining some passages from various Jewish writings (Dan. 10:11-12; 4Ezra 7:2) Gathercole's notes:

[W]hen the language of "sending" is used, it is clearly to focus on the fact that the envoy stands under the authority of God. We noted above in chapter 4 that "coming" and "being sent" are not identical; the former focuses on much more on the action of the subject and the latter on the subordination of the one sent to the sender. In the case of the sayings in the Synoptic Gospels, then, the accent will not be on Jesus' own coming, but on the fact that his mission is the result of the action of the Father.<sup>2</sup>

So if Jesus' being *sent* is from his preexistence into his temporal existence then we have a pre-temporal obedience of the Son to the Father. Obedience prior to the incarnation should negate any argument that says Jesus only obeys the Father once incarnated. It should also cause us to ask why a belief in a mere temporal obedience/subordination is deemed necessary by some. What violation is there to the

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<sup>2</sup> Simon J. Gathercole. *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006) 179.

Trinitarian  $\tau\alpha\acute{\xi}\iota\varsigma$  if the Son obeys the Father in eternity? Why would we not expect to see God's activity in history as reflective of his eternal intra-Trinitarian relationship?

### **Sending-Sent Language in the Fourth Gospel**

John's Gospel is without a doubt the most pregnant with the "sending-sent" language in all of the NT. It is also in the Fourth Gospel that we see the clearest affirmations that the sender is greater in *some sense* than the one sent. It will not be possible to survey all of the sending statements in John's Gospel so instead we will focus on a few important passages noting John's usage of agency and his depiction of Jesus as unwaveringly obedient to the will of the Father.

In his magisterial two-volume commentary on John, Craig Keener notes that:

John portrays Jesus as God's agent, his authorized, reliable representative. Although John's Christology is incarnational, it is also a "sending" Christology, the latter theme reflecting the divine love that originates the sending.<sup>3</sup>

### **John 5:1-47**

In John 5 Jesus comes into Jerusalem and heals a man on the Sabbath which brought persecution from his Jewish opponents (5:1-16). They sought to kill him for healing on the Sabbath but he explained that his Father is working so he is as well. This brought a charge of blasphemy for making himself equal with God by claiming God as his Father (5:17-18). Jesus explains that he can do nothing of himself and it is because the Father loves him and shows him all things that he's able to perform the works of the Father, but those who do not honor the Son do not honor his Father who sent him (5:19-23).

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<sup>3</sup> Craig S. Keener. *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:315-16.

As in the synoptics, the Son is seen as the envoy of God. He represents the Father so rejecting him is equivalent to rejecting the Father. Jesus continues saying that the Father has given him power, life, and authority to resurrect and judge and that he can do nothing of himself but what he does do is proper because he seeks the will of the one who *sent* him (5:24-30). It is the sender's witness of the sent one (5:25-47) that establishes the validity of his works and Jesus points out the hypocrisy of his accusers in that they'd receive one who has come in his own name while rejecting he who has *come* in the name of the Father (5:43).

All throughout this scene we are given witness to the Son's dependence upon and obedience to the Father. But this is not a mere temporal obedience, the pre-temporality is reflected in the Son's being *sent into* the world (cf. Jo. 3:13, 17). A few chapters later we are given an explicit affirmation of this very point when Jesus says: "*If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me.*" (Jo. 8:42, NRSV) This is not to say that Jesus came against his will, but rather that his will is always in obedience to the Father's. It was the Father who sent the Son into the world.

As Allan Coppedge says in his recent volume on the Trinity:

Headship in the Trinity is not governed by God as King but by God as Father (of the Son). So the Father sends the Son and then the Spirit into the world as an expression of their threefold self-giving relationships to one another in love. The other-orientated love of the ontological Trinity expresses itself in the sending of the Son and the Spirit in the economic Trinity. So while there is a functional distinction within the economic activity

of the Father sending the Son and the Spirit, this external act arises from an eternal, mutual self-giving within God.<sup>4</sup>

### John 13:16

In this chapter we find Jesus at the height of his servitude. Here he stands washing his disciples' feet as an example of the selfless service that they should render toward one another and the world at large and in this midst of this act of humility he says:

Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. (Jo. 13:16, RSV)

Jesus acknowledges that as the *sent one* he is not greater than the one who sent him. Yet a few verses later we still see that the envoy represents the sender in that whoever receives Jesus receives the one who *sent* him (vs. 20). This sets the stage for Jesus' most explicit claim of subordination in John 14:28.

### John 14:6-28

Unitarians of all stripes have long used John 14:28 as a proof-text in proving that the Son is not God or at least not as much God as the Father, but they err in their understanding of Jesus' statement here. They understand Jesus to be making an ontological statement regarding his being. He is not. But as an aside, I believe that those who argue for a temporal/incarnational subordination only, also commit the same basic error of interpretation here. Jesus' statement is explained as him claiming that the Father is greater than

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Coppedge. *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 136. Cf. Kallistos Ware's statement: "To speak in this way of God as Son and Father is at once to imply a movement of mutual love . . . It is to imply that from all eternity God himself, as Son in filial obedience and love renders back to God the Father the being which the Father by paternal self-giving eternally generates in him." *The Orthodox Way* (Rev. ed.; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1995), 32.

him in his incarnate humanity, but in his eternal deity they are equal. But even this is not the thrust of Jesus' statement.

Jesus begins by making many statements concerning the perichoretic relationship between himself and the Father (vs. 6-11) which he then explains as extending to believers (vs. 20). He mentions the works that he does in the Father's name and the works that believers will do in his name (vs. 10-14). The theme of agency is clearly attested in these passages. This segues into a section in which Jesus speaks concerning keeping his commandments out of love for him and the Father (vs. 15-24) which will result in the dwelling of both persons with believers. Then a message of comfort is given in stating that the Father will send the Spirit in the name of the Son (vs. 25-27).

This leads into the verse in question in which Jesus says that the Father is greater than he is — but how one can discern anything by way of ontology here is beyond explanation. The context doesn't hint at the nature/substance of God in any sense — rather Jesus *returns* to the Father because it is the Father who has *sent* him (Jo. 4:34; 5:23-24, 30, 36-38; 6:29, 38-39, 44, 57; 7:16, 18, 28-29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42, etc.) — the Father is greater than the Son as the one who *sent* him into the world. It is the Father's pretemporal commanding of the Son and the Son's pretemporal obedience to the will of the Father that established this statement.<sup>5</sup>

## Conclusion

My original intention with this post was to provide a solid Biblical basis for my argument of pretemporal obedience on the part of the Son and then examine this idea in light of later Patristic interpretations. I had especially wanted to interact with Augustine's *De Trinitate* 2.5.7-10; 4.19.25-20.30,

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<sup>5</sup> This is adapted from another post on my blog in which I was arguing against a Unitarian interpretation of John 14:28. Cf. <http://rdtwot.wordpress.com/2007/08/09/the-trinity-defined-and-refuted-pt-2-conclusion/>



but the deadline of the summit and obscene amounts of procrastination seem to have ruined my chances of that. It was also my goal to be able to offer a reading of the Creeds (N-C & Athanasian) that was consistent with the thesis I have set forth.

What I was able to offer is a preliminary sketch of eternal subordination *via* the willing pre-temporal obedience of the Son from a select few passages of Scripture. I hope to use this post as a jumping off point for a series in which I will address everything that I had hoped to but couldn't in this particular post.