

The Father and the Son Divided or Undivided in Power and Authority?

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In the Evangelical Theological Society Doctrinal Basis only two matters are made fundamental to the evangelical faith: belief in the inerrancy of the Bible in its original autographs and belief in a Trinity of Father Son and Holy Spirit, three “uncreated” persons, who are “one in essence, equal in power and glory.” In the history of the ETS the first fundamental belief has caused many a painful disruption in the evangelical family, the second has not. In this paper I argue it is high time we critically considered what many members of the ETS are teaching on the Trinity because I maintain it directly contradicts what the ETS statement of faith says on the Trinity. ETS members are bound to believe that the three divine persons are *one in essence and equal in power*. To argue that the Son is eternally subordinate in authority, set under the Father, denies both that he is one in power with the Father and the Spirit and by implication, that he is one in essence/being with the Father and the Spirit. To deny, explicitly or implicitly that Jesus is one in being/essence with the Father is of course the Arian heresy.¹

The novel post 70’ doctrine of the eternally subordinated Son.

George Knight III in his highly influential book *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women*, published in 1977,² first formulated the novel argument that, the just like 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. He thus speaks of a “chain of subordination”³ in the Trinity adding that the Son’s subordination in authority has “certain ontological aspects.”⁴ This last comment is somewhat surprising because one of the completely new elements in his seminal case for the permanent subordination of women is that women are not (ontologically) inferior to men, only role or functionally differentiated. By this, he means, *permanently subordinated in authority*. This new teaching on the Trinity came to full fruition in 1994 with the

¹ In more detail see Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Mich., Zondervan, 2006).

² George Knight III, *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1977).

³ Ibid. 33.

⁴ Ibid. 56.

publication of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.⁵ The impact of this book on evangelicals cannot be underestimated. It is one of the most widely used theology texts in evangelical seminaries. He is emphatic that the *eternal subordination* of the Son in authority stands right at the heart of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. For Grudem, the Father has "the role of commanding, directing, and sending," and the Son the role of "obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us."⁶ It is differing authority, he says, that primarily distinguishes the divine persons. He writes, "Authority and submission between the Father and the Son ... and the Holy Spirit, *is the fundamental difference* between the persons of the Trinity."⁷ And again, "If we did not have such differences *in authority* in the relationships among the members of the Trinity, then we would not know of any differences at all."⁸ For Grudem, nothing is more important than the authority structure both in the Trinity and between men and women. It is, he says, "the *most fundamental* aspect of interpersonal relationships in the entire universe."⁹

Bruce Ware is of the same opinion. In his book, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*,¹⁰ he argues that the eternal subordination of the Son in authority to the Father "marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three Persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority ... the Son submits to the Father."¹¹ Thus he concludes that a "hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead."¹² Robert Letham in his book *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* more carefully words his case, but he too makes the eternal *submission* of the Son to the Father basic to his doctrine of the Trinity.¹³ "The Son

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995).

⁶ Ibid. 250.

⁷ Wayne Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossways, 2002) 31.

⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2004) 433.

⁹ Ibid. 429. Italics added.

¹⁰ (Wheaton, Ill. Crossway, 2005) 21.

¹¹ Ibid. 21.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004).

submits in eternity to the Father.” “Being God he serves the Father.”¹⁴ “His human obedience reflects his divine submission.”¹⁵

Similarly, the English evangelical theologian Thomas Smail in his book, *Like Father, Like Son*, distinguishes and divides the Father and the Son on the basis of differing authority. He says, “The distinctive function of the Father”¹⁶ is his “initiating sovereignty.”¹⁷ He is the “prototype of leadership.”¹⁸ The Son’s self-defining characteristic is his “attentive responsiveness.”¹⁹ Obedience to the Father is what is “proper to his Sonship.”²⁰ He sums up his position in these words: “The Father sovereignly initiates, the Son obediently executes.”²¹

In my own Australian context this teaching dominates in evangelical circles. The 1999 *Sydney Anglican Diocesan Doctrine Commission Report*, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and Its Bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women,”²² makes the eternal subordination of the Son in authority the most fundamental issue in the doctrine of the Trinity. The whole document is predicated on the premise that the Father is (authoritatively) “head” over the Son just as husbands in the home and men in the church are (authoritatively) “head” over women. In this synodically endorsed statement of faith the eternal subordination of the Son in authority is predicated on the differences in the being or nature of the person of the Son, not simply in differing roles or functions. What is more his obedience is involuntary. These evangelical theologians assert that, “The Son’s obedience to the Father arises from the *very nature of his being as Son*. His freedom consists in doing what is natural to him, which is to submit to his Father ... *he is incapable of doing other than the Father’s will.*”²³ His obedience to the Father is not “voluntary, temporary, and personal.”²⁴ Rather it reflects “the

¹⁴ Ibid. 402.

¹⁵ Ibid. 403.

¹⁶ Thomas Smail, *Like Father, Like Son* (Milton Keynes, Bucks.: Paternoster, 2005) 159.

¹⁷ Ibid. 103.

¹⁸ Ibid. 161.

¹⁹ Ibid. 104–5.

²⁰ Ibid. 105.

²¹ Ibid. 107.

²² This document is quoted in full in my book *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Westmont, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002) 122–37. For the original see *Year Book of the Diocese of Sydney* (Sydney, NSW.: The Diocesan Registry, 2000) 538-550.

²³ Par. 18. Italics added.

²⁴ Par. 32, 33.

essence of the eternal relationship between them.”²⁵ Robert Doyle, a key contributor to this report, wrote in 2004 in support of this confession of faith, of “the priority of the Father” in authority in the Godhead. He designates the Father the “eternal Monarch,” or sole ruler, and says the Son defines himself “in subordination to that monarchy.”²⁶

Surprisingly, the editors of the *Journal of the Evangelical Society* in the last few years have accepted a significant number of articles that also argue that the Son of God is *eternally* subordinated in authority to the Father despite the fact that the ETS doctrinal statement so clearly says the three divine persons are one in power.²⁷ Reading the recent tub thumping article in *JETS* by Russell D. Moore one might even get the impression that the journal endorses strong patriarchy in heaven in the divine family and on earth in the human family. In speaking of the Trinity, Professor Moore accuses Gilbert Bilezikian and me of rejecting the “orthodox doctrine of God”²⁸ by arguing for co-equal divine persons (I for one had thought I was exactly reflecting the Athanasian Creed in speaking of “co-equal” divine persons!)

At this point two observations need to be made. First, virtually everyone who advocates the *eternal* subordination of the Son is committed to the *permanent* subordination of women. The latter seems to give rise to belief in the former and determine the terminology used (roles, authority etc). Second, this teaching on the Trinity is now widely assumed by conservative evangelicals to be orthodox. The evangelical leaders who have questioned this teaching could be counted on one hand with fingers to spare.

²⁵ Ibid. italics added

²⁶ Robert Doyle, “Are We Heretics? A Review of *The Trinity and Subordinationism* by Kevin Giles,” *The Briefing* (April 2004) 13.

²⁷ John V. Dahms, “The Generation of the Son,” *JETS*, 32/4 (1989) 493-501, John V. Dahms, The Subordination of the Son, *JETS*, 37/3 (1994) 351-364; Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, “A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” *JETS*, 42/31 (1999) 461-76; Scott Horrell, “Towards a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity: Avoiding Equivocation of Nature and Order,” *JETS*, 47/3 (2004) 399-421; Christopher Cowan, “The Father and the Son in the Fourth Gospel: Johannine Subordination Revisited,” *JETS*, 49/1 (2006) 115-35. In this period one counter article has appeared. See G. Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS*, 40/1 (1997) 77-68. When I submitted an article of this opinion in 1999 the editor, Andreas Kostenberger, returned it saying it was unacceptable.

²⁸ “After Patriarchy, What? Why Egalitarians Are Winning the Gender Debate,” *JETS*, 49/3, (Sept. 2006) 569-76. Quote p. 574.

Terminology.

In the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity a number of words used of God as one and three gradually became technical terms and agreed synonyms in differing languages (Greek, Latin English) were recognized. In speaking of God as one, the terms “being”, “substance”, “essence”, and “nature” were accepted as synonyms. In speaking of any one of the divine three the words “person”, “*hypostasis*” and “subsistence” were taken as synonyms. Given this fact the ETS doctrinal affirmation that God is “one in essence” means exactly the same as if it was said that God is one in “nature, “being” or “substance.”

In developing their doctrine of the Trinity to correspond to their case for the permanent subordination of women Knight and Grudem introduced a number of terms not found in the historic doctrinal tradition. For example, in speaking of what the divine persons *do*, the tradition speaks of the “works” or “operations” of Father, Son and Spirit. Evangelicals who follow Knight and Grudem on the other hand speak of the “functions” or “roles” of the divine persons. The terms “power” and authority” are another example. The doctrinal tradition predominantly uses the term “power” – God is omnipotent, all powerful. In contrast, the Knight and Grudem theological tradition speaks of the subordination of the Son in “authority.” Men have “authority” over the women set under them and the divine Father has “authority” over the Son.

The word “authority,” carefully defined implies that someone has the right to exercise leadership, whereas the word “power” implies the ability to assert leadership or achieve an end. However, the words may be used synonymously and often are in everyday speech. This is the case in the Bible (e.g. Lk 4:36, 9:1). It also seems this is the case with those with whom I am debating. When they speak of the differing *authority* of the Father and the Son they seem to mean much the same as if they had spoken of the differing *power* of the Father and the Son. I cannot see how anyone could object to the equating of these two words in reference to God because if the divine three are equal in power then they must be equal in authority and vice versa.

Whether or not these two words can be distinguished when used of the triune God is in any case academic. The words “power” and “authority” in this discussion both designate divine attributes. Orthodoxy unanimously and unambiguously rejects distinguishing or dividing the

divine persons on the basis of differing attributes. The Christian God is one in being and attributes, three co-equal persons.

In what follows I will therefore assume that when the ETS doctrinal statement speaks of the triune God as “one in essence” it means the same as if it had said *one in being*, the expression Knight, Grudem and most English speaking theologians today prefer. And when it speaks of the divine three as “equal in power” it means the same as if it had said *equal in authority*, what Knight, Grudem and large numbers of contemporary conservative evangelicals deny.

The Bible.

The New Testament puts the confession, “Jesus is Lord,” right at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. This confession declares the resurrected and exalted Son of God is God in the fullest sense and as such has absolute authority (Matt. 28:18, Eph.1:20-21, Col.2:10). He functions as the supreme ruler because he *is* the supreme ruler: function indicates ontology. The title “Son” in the New Testament speaks of the supreme authority of Jesus,²⁹ as well as intimacy with his Father. When the Father addresses Jesus as “my beloved Son”³⁰ he is indicating that he is to reign as the king’s son in all power and authority. This title should not be understood on the basis of human experience to suggest subordination as the original Arians did and contemporary evangelical subordinationists to a man do today.³¹ Often in the New Testament the ruling authority of the Son is spoken of in the imagery of him “sitting at the right hand of God” (Acts 2:33, Col 3:1 etc). In the book of Revelation the imagery is different. The Father and the Son rule from the one throne “for ever and ever” (7:10–12; 11:15; cf. 1:6, 18).

For Paul the Son’s obedience is strictly limited to his work as the second Adam who is perfectly obedient (Rom 5:12ff, 1 Cor 15:22, Phil 2:8), or in the book of Hebrews to the “days of his flesh” (Heb 5:7-9). In the gospel of John the Son gladly does the Father’s will (4:34; 5:30; 6:38–39; etc.), but the evangelist never suggests that Jesus is under compulsion to do as the Father commands, or can do no other. Rather, says Thompson, John thinks of

²⁹ So John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NY.: P&R, 2002) 658-661.

³⁰ Mk 1:11.

³¹ I will come back to this matter.

Jesus as the “instrument or expression of the Father’s will.”³² The word *obedience* is never actually used in connection with the Father-Son relationship in John.

Without seriously discussing the dominant biblical teaching I have just outlined that ascribes to the exalted Christ absolute authority my debating opponents take as proof of their position 1Cor.11:3, “God is the head of Christ.” In both the patristic debates about the Trinity and in Calvin this text gains little attention because it is not taken to suggest the eternal subordination of the Son. In contrast in the contemporary evangelical case for the eternal (authoritative) “headship” of the Father over the Son, 1Cor. 11:3 is central and much discussed. Grudem tells us this verse is “decisive” for his understanding of the Trinity and women.³³ He says that Paul here refers to a “relationship of authority between God the Father and God the Son, and he is making a parallel between that relationship in the Trinity and that between a husband and wife in marriage.”³⁴ Basic to Grudem’s case is his thesis that the Greek word *kephale* when used metaphorically (usually translated into English as “head”), always means a “person in authority over.” Grudem’s premise seems to be that words have one fixed meaning and that the context in which they are found does not matter. Virtually all linguists are of another opinion. Any given word has a range of meanings, and the context is the most important indicator of that meaning. Thiselton holds that Paul is playing on the “multiple meanings” of *kephale* in 1Cor. 11:3ff.³⁵ No single meaning for the word can be dictated. Whatever it means in v. 3, he says, “it does not seem to denote a relation of ‘subordination’ or ‘authority over.’”³⁶ If Paul is arguing that women, not simply wives as Grudem holds,³⁷ are set under men in authority, it is unlikely he would then say in v. 4 that

³² Marianne Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster, 2000) 150.

³³ Wayne Grudem, *Biblical Foundations*, 47. The importance of this verse for this case is seen in that there are eleven references to 1Cor.11:3 in the “Scripture References” at the back of the book, most of them discussing this verse for over a page.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 49.

³⁵ A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2000) 812–23, quote p. 820. For a full overview of studies on this word see Alan A. Johnson, “A Meta Study of the Debate over the Meaning of “Head” (*Kephale*) in Paul’s Writings,” *Priscilla Papers*, 20/4 (2006) 21-29. He concludes that “the actual evidence” for *kephale* meaning authority over “is shrinking” (p. 27).

³⁶ *Ibid.* 816.

³⁷ Throughout this passage Paul has, at least in the first instance, men and women in mind, not husbands and wives. The evidence is as follows: (1) he is here ruling on how men and women as such should dress when leading in church; marriage never comes into view; (2) he speaks of “every man” and “every woman” in vv. 3, 4, 5; (3) in vv.11–12 men as such

women can lead in prayer and prophesy in church, the two most important ministries, so long as they cover their “heads.” On a theological level, it is also worth noting that whatever it means for man to be the “head” of woman, it cannot be exactly the same for the God-Son pairing, or the Christ-man pairing. The Father and the Son do not relate to one another in exactly the same way as a man and a woman might do, and to suggest so is bad theology.

In 1Cor.11:3 Paul does not allude to a fourfold hierarchy, God-Christ-man-woman, but to three paired relationships in which in each case one party is the *kephale* of the other. They are not ordered hierarchically. Paul speaks first of Christ and man, then man and woman, and last of God and Christ. Rather than subordinating the persons in a descending “chain of command,”³⁸ or “hierarchy of headship,”³⁹ Paul is differentiating the persons paired to introduce the main point he wants to make in the whole passage, namely that what a man or woman has or has not on their “head” when they lead in church should reflect God-ordained sexual differentiation. 1Cor.11:3 is a difficult text to understand, but to interpret it to mean that the Father eternally has authority over the Son is unconvincing. Such an idea is nowhere else suggested by Paul and would contradict his teaching that Christ now reigns as Lord and as “head over all things” (Eph.1:22; Col.2:10). Here we need to remember, that evangelical theological exegesis can never allow an interpretation of one difficult-to-understand text that would suggest a contradiction within scripture. The rule is that difficult-to-understand texts must always be interpreted so that they harmonize with what is plain and primary in scripture. What is central to the New Testament is Christ’s unqualified lordship. It is in this light that that 1 Cor.11:3 must be understood.

Counter evidence to the unqualified lordship of the Son is also found in the biblical language of sending (cf. Jn 8:42; 17:3, 23) and in the titles “Father” and “Son.” Contemporary evangelicals who advocate the eternal subordination of the Son in authority argue that because Jesus is sent by the Father he must have to do as he is commanded: therefore he is

are born of women, not husbands of wives; (4) there were unmarried women in the church at Corinth (cf. 1Cor.7:8, 25), and we know from Acts that some women prophets were unmarried (Ac 21:9). Knight, *New Testament Teaching*, 35, note 13 gives seven reasons why the Greek nouns *andros* and *gune* that can mean either man and woman or wife and husband must mean in this passage man and woman in general.

³⁸ Michael Harper, *Equal and Different: Male and Female in the Church and Family* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994) 121.

³⁹ Tom Smail, *Like Father, Like Son* (Milton Keynes, Bucks.: 2005), 260. Paul Barnett, *1 Corinthians* (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 2000) 200.

subordinated.⁴⁰ The fourth century Arians first made this argument. It is always tempting to interpret the Scriptures on the basis of human experience, but good exegesis should begin by seeking to discover what the biblical authors had in mind when they wrote. There has been much debate in recent years on the force and ideas behind this “sending” language. It is generally conceded that behind this terminology lies the idea of “agency.” The Son represents the Father. I personally am persuaded that the most plausible interpretation of this sending language is in terms of the Jewish *Shaliach* concept.⁴¹ In Rabbinical writings the one sent (the *Shaliach*) has the same authority as the one who sends him: he is as the sender himself. This principle is stated many times: “The one who is sent is like the one who sent him.”⁴² In this case, the one sent is none other than the Father’s only Son. Thus Jesus says, “Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father *who sent him*” (Jn 5:23, italics added). This means that the sending terminology is best understood as underscoring the unity between the Father and the Son in their work (Jn 5:17–18; 10:29–30), and as explaining how the words of the Son are the words of the Father (Jn 3:34; 12:50; 14:10–11). To disobey Jesus is exactly the same as disobeying God. Nevertheless it is to be recognized that the human language of sending distinguishes the persons—the Father is the one who sends, the Son the one who is sent—but the emphasis falls on the authority of the Son as expressing the authority of the Father.

Hierarchical-complementarians also consistently argued that the title “Son” indicates that Jesus eternally stands under his Father’s authority because he is eternally “the Son.” Cowan typically says, “the Father-Son language in John seems to imply a hierarchical relationship.”⁴³ The evidence in support of this opinion is drawn mainly from human experience. Fallen human relationships are used to explain divine relationships. Following unwittingly exactly the argument of Arius once again, we are told that all human fathers have authority over their sons and this fact explains the divine Father-Son relationship. The titles themselves “Father” and “Son” indicate that the Father commands and the Son obeys. In

⁴⁰ This argument is developed in stark form by Cowan “The Father and the Son”, 49/1, 2006, *JETS*, 117-122. One of his many less convincing arguments is that “the subordination” of the Son is indicated by the fact that Jesus says, “messengers are not greater than the one who sent them” (Jn13:6). He seems to forget there are three possibilities: greater, equal, lesser/subordinate.

⁴¹ See C. G. Kruse, “Apostle,” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, eds. J. B. Green and I. H. Marshall (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity, 1992), 30.

⁴² m.Ber.5:5, b. B Mes. 96a, b Hag 10b, b Men. 93b, b Naz 12b, etc.

⁴³ *JETS*, 49/1, 134.

reply to this argument I have already noted that in the New Testament the title “Son” speaks of Jesus’ royal prerogatives. He is the King’s anointed Son who rules in all majesty and authority. John Frame says that in the New Testament, “there is considerable overlapping between the concepts Lord and Son ... both indicate Jesus' power and prerogatives as God.” “Lordship presupposes sonship, sonship implies lordship.”⁴⁴

In this appeal to the ordinary, everyday meaning of the words “send”, “son” and “father” to prove that Jesus as the eternal Son of God is permanently subordinated to the Father, language used of God is understood literally, or to use the technical term, univocally. This is exactly how the fourth century Arians understood language about the Father and the Son. In reply to them Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers and Augustine argued this practice leads lead to idolatry – the depicting of God as a human being. On this basis theologians have generally agreed that all human language used of God should be understood analogically. Human words can convey trustworthy truth about God, but the content of the human words used of God is found not by appeal to human relationships and life but in revelation. It is from the Bible we learn what the titles “Son,” “Father,” and the word “sent” mean when used of the divine persons. To endorse that language used of God should be taken literally would demand that “Open Theism” be accepted, something my debating opponents do not want to do.⁴⁵ Biblical comments on God “repenting” would need to be understood in human terms. Consistency is demanded on the issue of language used of God. We must agree on whether or not it is literal or analogical.

The historical debate.

Arius was quite convinced that the Son is eternally set under the Father’s authority. The Son must do as the Father commands. For Arius and all who in the fourth century were called Arians, God the Father was an unoriginated Monad, and for this reason the Son and the Spirit were radically different and unlike him. They could be spoken of as “God” but not in the same sense as the Father. On this basis the Arians taught that the Father and the Son (in the early stage of the debate it was these two divine persons who were always in focus) were of different being *and authority*. That Arius ontologically subordinated the Son to the Father is well known. What is less well known and adequately recognized is that he and all the Arians

⁴⁴ *The Doctrine of God*, 661.

⁴⁵ On this topic see John Piper, Justin Taylor, Paul Helseth, eds., *Beyond the Bounds: Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity* (Wheaton, Ill., Crossway, 2003).

also subordinated the Son in authority. Richard Hanson in his monumental study of Arianism says the Arians consistently taught that the Son “does the Father’s will and exhibits *obedience and subordination* to the Father, and adores and praises the Father, *not only in his earthly ministry but in Heaven.*”⁴⁶ In their innovative study *Early Arianism*, Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh also point out that the eternal obedience of the Son was a primary element in Arian theology.⁴⁷ “At the center of Arian theology was a redeemer *obedient* to his Father’s will, whose life of virtue modeled perfect creaturehood and hence a path of salvation for all Christians.”⁴⁸ And for “Arius and his fellow thinkers ... the Father and the Son relationship [was] a relationship in which the former was prior, superior, and dominant.... Conceived relationally rather than ontologically [it] was marked by dependence rather than co-equality.”⁴⁹ What authority the Son had was of a “derivative character.”⁵⁰ The supreme Father gave it to him: “The derivative character of the power and authority manifest in Jesus’ ministry was traced by Arian exegetes from a series of biblical texts which spoke of the things bestowed on him by the Father.”⁵¹ Thus, “the savior who the early Arians discovered in Scripture and promulgated in their writings was never far from an obedient servant who followed God’s commands.”⁵²

What completely surprised me in reading this book was that the way Gregg and Groh described the essence of Arianism is almost identical to how contemporary evangelicals depict the divine Father-Son relationship. The Father is prior and supreme. He rules over the Son. Any authority the Son has is derived from the Father.

⁴⁶ R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2005) 103. Italics added.

⁴⁷ Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981). What is distinctive to his book is the thesis that the early Arians (principally Arius, Asterius the Sophist, and Eusebius of Nicomedia) were more concerned about how salvation was achieved by Christ than with the being of Christ the Son of God.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* x, italics added.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 91.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 91. For this Arian argument and Athanasius’ reply, see Athanasius, “Discourses,” in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (henceforth *NPNF*), eds. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971) 4:3.36 (p. 413).

⁵² *Ibid.* 24.

Athanasius

In answer to “the early Arians’ Athanasius would not allow any disjunction or separation between the Father and the Son in being, work, or divine attributes, especially in *authority*. The God of the Bible, he held, is not a monad who has a subordinate Son. He is for all eternity a triad of inseparable and equal divine persons. Athanasius writes, “The faith of Christians acknowledges the blessed Triad as unalterable and perfect and ever what it was.”⁵³ Because the Son and Father are inseparably one God, Athanasius asked the Arians, “Must not he who is perfect be equal to God?”⁵⁴ He of course believed only an affirmative answer was possible. Athanasius’ tenacious belief that the Father and the Son cannot be divided or separated in any way leads him to repeatedly lay down, what I call the Athanasian “rule”: “The same things are said of the Son which are said of the Father, except for calling him Father.”⁵⁵

From this it follows that Athanasius cannot allow that the Son is eternally set under the Father in being or authority. Whatever his personal failings may have been as a man, as a theologian the logic and consistency of his reasoning is without fault. At no point at any time does he waver from his belief that the Father and the Son are inseparably one in being, work/function, and *authority*.

Athanasius is particularly emphatic that the Father and the Son share the divine attributes equally. Thus they are not separated or divided in being *or authority*. He says,

“The Father is eternal, immortal, powerful, light, king, sovereign, God, Lord, creator, and maker. These attributes must be in the image ... the Son.... If the Son be not all this ... he is not a true image of the Father.”⁵⁶

“He [the Son] is himself the Father’s power and wisdom.”⁵⁷

“The attributes of the Father [are] spoken of the Son.”⁵⁸

⁵³ Ibid. 4:1.18 (p. 317).

⁵⁴ Ibid. 1.10 (p. 327).

⁵⁵ Ibid. 4:3.4 (p. 395), 3.5 (p. 395), 3.6 (p. 396), “The Councils,” *NPNF* 4:3.49 twice (p. 476).

⁵⁶ Ibid. 1.21 (p. 318).

⁵⁷ Ibid. 3.1 (p. 394).

⁵⁸ Ibid. 3.5 (p. 395).

Athanasius specifically affirms that the Father and the Son are equally omnipotent. Speaking of the Son he says,

“[He] is seated upon the same throne as the Father.”⁵⁹

“He is Lord and King everlasting.”⁶⁰

“For he ever was and is Lord and sovereign of all, being like in all things to the Father.”⁶¹

“He is Lord of all because he is one with the Father’s Lordship.”⁶²

The Cappadocians

Arguments against the idea that the Son is set under *the authority* of the Father fill the voluminous writings of the Cappadocians. It is clear why this is so. Eunomius, the Cappadocians’ arch neo-Arian opponent, subordinated the Son in being, origination, *and authority* to the Father. In his *Confession of Faith* that he sent to the emperor Theodosius in 383, Eunomius professes,

“We believe in the one and only true God . . . , he has no sharer of his Godhead nor participator of his glory *nor joint possessor of his authority* nor consort of the throne of his kingdom, for he is one and sole God almighty. . . .

And we believe in the Son of God . . . He is *obedient* in creating and giving being to things that exist, *obedient* in all his administration, not having received his being Son or God because of his *obedience*, but from his being Son and being generated as only-begotten God, being *obedient* in words, *obedient* in acts . . .”⁶³

In their reply to Eunomius’ teaching, the Cappadocians, like Athanasius, first of all make a clear distinction between the Son of God as God and the Son of God in the incarnation. They argue that the limitations the Son embraced in becoming incarnate in no way impinge on his divine status as equal with God the Father. Gregory of Nyssa writes, “We recognize two things in Christ, one divine, the other human (the divine by nature, but the human in the

⁵⁹ Ibid. 4:1.61 (p. 341).

⁶⁰ Ibid. 2.13 (p. 355).

⁶¹ Ibid. 2.18 (p. 357).

⁶² Ibid. 3.64 (p. 429).

⁶³ The reconstituted text in full is given in Hanson, *The Search*, 619–21. I have simply quoted the relevant sections from the text he gives. Italics added.

incarnation. We accordingly claim for the Godhead that which is eternal and that which is created we ascribe to his human nature).”⁶⁴

The Cappadocians take the specific comments on the incarnate Son’s *obedience* to refer solely to his work as the second Adam, the representative human being.⁶⁵ Gregory of Nyssa addressing Eunomius writes “the mighty Paul” says “he became obedient (Php 2:8) ... to accomplish the mystery of redemption by the cross, who had emptied himself by assuming the likeness and fashion of a man ... healing the disobedience of men by his own obedience.”⁶⁶ Similarly Gregory Nazianzus says the Son, “became obedient ... by becoming for our sakes flesh, a servant and a curse, and sin.” He did so according to “his free will.” Noting that Christ goes voluntarily and freely to the cross (Jn 10:18) he adds, “Even in the time of his passion he is not separated from his authority; where can heresy possibly discern the subordination to authority of the King of Glory?”⁶⁷ Then later he says, “In his character as the Word he is neither obedient nor disobedient. For such expressions belong to servants, and inferiors.... In character of the form of a servant, he condescends to his fellow servants.”⁶⁸

For the Cappadocians the divine Father-Son can only have one will because they are one in being. To teach that the Son must submit his will to the will of the Father and the Spirit submit his will to the will of the Father and the Son, as Eunomius and the other Arians did, they recognized introduced tritheism. For them what the Father wills and what the Son wills are always one. In reply to the Arians who make much of the Son going, speaking, and doing as the Father wills, Basil argues that the Son’s “will is connected in indissoluble union with the Father. Do not let us then understand by what is called a ‘commandment’ a peremptory mandate delivered by organs of speech, and giving orders to the Son, as to a subordinate, concerning what he ought to do. Let us rather in a sense befitting the Godhead, perceive the transmission of will, like the reflection of an object in a mirror, passing without note of time from Father to Son.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Faith: To Simplicius,” *NPNF* 5 (p. 337).

⁶⁵ As Gregory of Nazianzus says explicitly. See “Theological Orations,” *NPNF* 7:4.5 (p. 311).

⁶⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, “Against Eunomius,” *NPNF* , 5:2.11 (p. 121). See also Basil, “Letters,” *NPNF* 8:261.2 (p. 300).

⁶⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Theological Orations,” *NPNF* , 4:6 (p. 311).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Basil, “On the Spirit,” *NPNF* 8:8.20 (p. 14).

Eunomius' attempt to explain God in human categories by likening the Son to a servant who only has delegated authority particularly angered Gregory of Nyssa. Eunomius first pointed out that, "In a wealthy establishment one may see the more active and devoted servant set over his fellow servants by the command of his master, and so invested with superiority over others in the same rank and station."⁷⁰ Then he said, "Transfer this notion to the doctrines concerning the Godhead, so that the Only-begotten God, though subject to the sovereignty of his superior, is in no way hindered by the authority of his sovereign in the direction of those inferior to him."⁷¹

Eunomius' reasoning, Gregory holds, leads to "heresy." The triune Godhead is "simple, uncompounded and indivisible." If the Father is "Lord," so too is the Son. It is not possible for them to have "contrary attributes." Setting the Son under the Father's authority in this way, Gregory says, leads to idolatry: "He who affirms the Only-begotten to be a slave, makes him out by so saying to be a fellow servant with himself: and hence will of necessity ... worship himself instead of God. For if he sees in himself slavery, and the object of his worship also in slavery, he of course looks at himself, seeing the whole of himself in that which he worships."⁷²

Because the Cappadocians cannot allow human language used of God to be taken literally, they never suggest that the name *Father* implies authority over the Son. Their constant teaching, as we have seen, is that the Father and the Son have the same divine attributes, most importantly omnipotence. Gregory of Nazianzus puts their position succinctly. "To us there is one God, for the Godhead is one ... though we believe in three persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is one before or after another; nor are they divided in will *or parted in power*."⁷³ Michel Barnes says that all the pro-Nicene theologians of the second half of the fourth century held that "the Father and the Son have the one power [because] they have one and the same nature."⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid. (p. 226).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid. (p. 227).

⁷³ Gregory of Nazianzus, "On the Holy Spirit," *NPNF* 7:14 (p. 322). Italics added.

⁷⁴ Michel Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001) 13. In this detailed and careful study Barnes notes that Athanasius frequently identifies Jesus, the Son of God, or Logos, as "the power of God," citing 1Cor. 1:24. In the Cappadocians, particularly Gregory

Augustine

Augustine likewise gives no support whatsoever to the idea that Christ is eternally set under the Father's authority. He cannot because he insists on the "inseparable equality" of the divine three. He is implacably against subordinating the Son to the Father in any way.

The late Arians Augustine is arguing against made much of the biblical language of sending, arguing that if Christ was sent by the Father he must be set under the Father's authority. Augustine does not concede to this argument. In reply he argues that sending does not necessarily entail subservience, only that the one sent comes "from" the sender. He thus concludes that just as the terms "unbegotten" and "begotten" differentiate the Father and the Son, while not suggesting any eternal subordination, so too do the terms "sending" and "being sent".⁷⁵ What Augustine has seen clearly is that human terms such as "begetting" and "sending" when used of divine persons do not necessarily have the same content as they do in everyday speech – they are thus not to be taken literally. Building on this reasoning Augustine formulates one of his several rules of interpretation. Texts that speak of the Son's sending by the Father do not teach that "the Son is less than the Father, but that he is from the Father. This does not imply any dearth of equality, but only his birth in eternity."⁷⁶ Earlier he says such texts "mark him neither as less nor equal, but only intimate that he is from the Father."⁷⁷

In Augustine's "model" of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit can never be set in opposition or divided in being, work, or *attributes*. Given the premise that the divine three are "equal and indivisible" in substance and divinity, it follows that they must be "equal and indivisible" in activity and attributes, especially power and authority. He reasons this way because in the Bible what God does indicates who God is. Quite explicitly he speaks of the unity of work and will of the divine three. "The Trinity works inseparably in everything that God works,"⁷⁸ and "The Father and the Son have but one will and are indivisible in their

of Nyssa, he sees development. Unity of being and operations implies unity in power. The triune God can even be defined as "the one power."

⁷⁵ Edmund Hill (translator), *The Trinity* (Brooklyn, New York: New City Press, 1991) 4.29 (p. 174). All references to *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*) are from this translation.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 2.3 (p. 99).

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* (p. 98).

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 1.8 (p. 70); cf. 2.3 (p. 99).

workings.”⁷⁹ From this it follows that the divine three are one in their attributes. He writes, “The Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty; yet there are not three almighties but one almighty ... so whatever God is called with reference to self both is said three times over about each of the persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and at the same time is said in the singular and not the plural about the Trinity. As it is not one thing for God to be and another for him to be great, but being is for him the same thing as being great.”⁸⁰ What Augustine is arguing is that the divine three can never be differentiated or divided on the basis of differing attributes, no matter what the divine attribute. God is one in substance and attributes and the eternally differentiated divine three are one in substance and attributes. To argue that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are divided and separated by differing authority or any other attribute, Augustine would rule, is to breach divine unity. It implies both tritheism and subordinationism.

In his definitive study of the fourth century Arian debates Lewis Ayres says, “Fundamental to all pro-Nicene theologies” is the belief “that God is one power, glory, majesty and rule.... the assertion that God is a unity in these respects is universal.”⁸¹

The Athanasian Creed

In the so-called Athanasian Creed composed in about AD 500, what is basically Augustine’s teaching on the Trinity is identified as “the catholic faith.” In this creed the unity of the divine Trinity is to the fore, and any suggestion that the Son or Spirit is subordinated in being or authority is unambiguously excluded. Three clauses specifically deny that the Son is less than the Father in authority. “So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet there are not three almighties but one almighty.” “So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord and the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet not three Lords but one Lord.” “In this Trinity none afore or after another: none is greater or less than another ... all are co-equal.” The only difference allowed between the members of the Trinity is that of differing origination, and this does not in any way imply subordination in being, work, or authority. Nothing could be plainer. The Athanasian Creed is emphatic. The Father, Son, and

⁷⁹ Ibid. 2.9 (p. 103).

⁸⁰ Ibid. 5.9 (p. 195). In 3.12 (p. 197) he gives two lists of attributes shared by the divine three.

⁸¹ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 279.

Spirit are “co-eternal” and “co-equal” God, and therefore indivisible in power and authority. Thus it is asserted “Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.”

Calvin.

In arguing for the full divinity of Christ Calvin says Christ “functions” as God. His divinity “is demonstrated by his works,”⁸² and his works depict him as omnipotent God. Christ governs “the universe with providence and power” (Heb 1:13), he regulates “all things by the command of his own power,” and his deeds are “the *function* of the Creator alone.”⁸³ Calvin holds that in forgiving sins, Christ “possesses not the administration merely but the actual power of the remission of sins.”⁸⁴ Likewise, in healing the sick and raising the dead “he [Christ] showed forth his *own power*.” He was “the real author of the miracles.”⁸⁵ In appealing to the Old Testament Calvin writes, “Christ is brought forward by Isaiah both as God and as adorned with the highest power, which is the characteristic mark of the one true God.”⁸⁶ He is to be identified with “true Jehovah.”⁸⁷ Later in specifically combating derivative subordinationism he says, “Whatever is of God is attributed to Christ.” He rules “in majesty as King and Judge.”⁸⁸ The Father, Son, and Spirit created in “common” and “common also [is] the authority to command.”⁸⁹ It is beyond dispute. For Calvin, the Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparable in work or function and one in their attributes. They are indivisible in authority, power and majesty.

Thomas Torrance says that for Calvin there is “oneness in agency and power” between the divine three and “an inseparable relation between what he [the Son] does and what God [the Father] does.”⁹⁰ In summing up Calvin’s contribution to trinitarian theology, he adds that as far as Calvin was concerned, “There is no difference between them [the divine three] in respect to Being, power, or majesty, for each considered in himself is the one God who has

⁸² *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. Neil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM, 1960) 2.13.12 (p. 135).

⁸³ *Ibid.* 1.13.12 (p. 136). Italics added.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Italics added.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 1.13.9 (p. 131).

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 1.13.9 (p. 132).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 1.13.24 (p. 152).

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* (p. 153).

⁹⁰ T. F. Torrance, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Trinitarian Perspectives* (Edinburgh: T.& T. Clark, 1994) 52.

his being from himself alone. They are fully equal ...” “He leaves no room for any element of subordinationism in his doctrine of the Trinity.”⁹¹

The Confessions

The Reformation and post confessions could not more emphatically affirm *oneness in divinity and power* among the three divine persons.

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 states, “There are three persons in this one divine essence, [are] equal in power and alike eternal.”

The Belgic Confession of 1561, article 8, says, “All three [are] co-eternal and co-essential. There is neither first nor last: for they are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.” The Son is neither “subordinate” nor “subservient.”

The Thirty Nine articles of the Church of England of 1563, article one, state that “in the unity of this Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity.”

The Westminster confession of 1646, article 2, similarly says, “in the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity.”

The 1689 London Baptist confession, chapter 2 paragraph 3 speaks of “three subsistences” who are “one substance, power, and eternity.”

The Methodist Articles of religion 1784 say much the same. “In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity.”

Conclusion.

Nothing in this paper should be read to question eternal divine differentiation, threeness in the one God. I write seeking to reinstate historic orthodoxy among evangelicals. Orthodoxy makes oneness and threeness in God absolutes. I endorse this premise without any reservations. Modalism is the heresy that denies that the Father, Son and Spirit are eternally distinct “persons” yet one God. I do not do this. What this paper opposes is differing the divine persons on the basis of differing attributes, specifically the attribute of authority. Historic orthodoxy rejects differing the divine persons on this basis because it leads inevitably to the heresies of tritheism and subordinationism.

To teach that the Son must obey the Father, and the Spirit must obey the Father and the Son, implies each has their own will. For all eternity the Son must submit his will to the Father’s

⁹¹ Ibid.72.

will, and the Spirit his will to the Father and the Son. Three separated “persons”, each with their own will is the error of tritheism: the breaching of divine unity.

If the Father is above the Son in authority and the Father and the Son above the Spirit in authority then we have hierarchical ordering in the Trinity. The three divine persons are not fully “coequal”. A descending order of authority in the Trinity implies necessarily a descending order in divine being. The Father is omnipotent God, God in the fullness of divine being, the Son a bit less omnipotent God and thus a bit less in divine being, and the Spirit a bit less again. This is the error of Subordinationism.

Recognizing the dangers of differentiating the divine persons on the basis of differing attributes historic orthodoxy unambiguously affirms that the Father, Son and Spirit are one in essence/being *and* power/authority. For this reason the Evangelical Theological Society in its doctrinal statement rightly excludes those who cannot give full and unambiguous assent to the belief that the three divine persons are “one in essence, equal in power and glory.” To deny this or the inerrancy of the Scriptures the ETS doctrinal statement rules is to deny what is foundational to the evangelical faith.