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IS SUBORDINATION WITHIN THE TRINITY REALLY HERESY? A STUDY OF JOHN 5:18 IN CONTEXT

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In recent years some evangelicals on different sides of the gender roles controversy have questioned the Christological orthodoxy of their opponents, charging them with "tampering with the Trinity" or even with "heresy." While I have great respect for some of these figures on both sides of the controversy who are issuing such charges, "tampering with the Trinity" and "heresy" is strong language, stronger, I think, than the evidence warrants.¹

Nor, in fact, do Christological views coincide as closely with views on gender roles as some of the advocates of either position claim. Thus, for example, I frequently talk with Christians who espouse a complementarian view of gender roles while expressing surprise that anyone would deny the full equality in all respects of the Father and the Son. By contrast, I and some other scholars I know who support a very broad range of women's ministry affirm the Son's subordination to the Father. To be sure, that subordination may be voluntary, and we do not draw from it the same conclusions many of our complementarian colleagues do; but the fact remains that one's view on gender roles does not enable one to predict one's view of relations within the Trinity, or vice-versa. I do see evidence for the Son's subordination to the Father in rank; I also believe that evangelicals who differ on the matter should do so charitably.²

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¹Those who would call any claims of submission within the Trinity heretical (as even some of my complementarian friends have) would need to consider a large number of historically orthodox theologians "heretical"; see, e.g., the summary in Stephen D. Kovach, "Egalitarians Revamp Doctrine of the Trinity," *CBMW News* 2 (1996) 3 n. 3.

²Curiously, Kovach claims (without citing any page numbers) that "Craig S. Keener . . . always refers to subordination in terms of oppression" ("Trinity," 3 n. 9, which also curiously lumps me among those who deny the Son's subordination), yet this charge actually contradicts the book to which it is attributed (e.g., *Paul, Women & Wives* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1992] 133-5, 229-30), as a more careful reading might have suggested (cf. e.g., Vaughn Crowe Tipton, "Paul, Women and Wives Surveyed," *Baptists Today* [Sept. 30, 1993] 12, who notes that some who advocate gender equality will struggle with my "idea of Christian 'submission' not being a 'dirty word' [226]"). This might constitute one example of assuming that all proponents of a particular "side" of the debate hold a specific set of views.

In a very meager contribution to this discussion, I submit a brief examination of a passage from John's gospel that I believe is relevant to the debate, followed by some brief comments on 1 Cor 15:28.

I. SUBORDINATION IN JOHN 5:18

John 5:18 reports, "This was why the 'Jews' were seeking even more to kill him, because he was not merely annulling the Sabbath, but was even claiming that God was his own Father, thereby making himself equal with God." From John's standpoint, Jesus is fully deity (1:1, 18; 20:28), but he also submits to the Father, whose rank is greater than his own (10:29; 14:28). In view of his prologue, John undoubtedly would have agreed with the later explicit language of the Father and Son sharing the same "substance," had the question been put to him, but in this context he applies the term "equality" to the matter of rank, not to an ontological question of nature.

When Jehovah's Witnesses begin sharing with me their reasons for distinguishing the Father and the Son, including Jesus' claim that "The Father is greater than I," I have normally politely interrupted, proceeding to explain that they are making an argument against the Sabellian, "Jesus Only" position, not against Trinitarianism. Trinitarians affirm that Jesus is a person distinct from the Father, but also recognize that the NT applies to him texts and titles the OT applied to Yahweh. (Unfortunately, soon after I start into those texts and titles, my new acquaintances usually wish to leave.)

Of various NT writers, John is one of the most explicit in affirming Jesus' deity and eternal preexistence. As Trinitarians have always recognized, however, he also distinguishes the identity of the Father and the Son. John frames his prologue by affirming that Jesus is God (1:1c, 18), a thesis which also frames the main body of his gospel (1:18; 20:28). Yet Jesus is also the Father's "Word," who was "with God" (1:1b), indicating a distinction between the Father and the Son. This distinction need not require differences in rank, but does allow for it.

On various occasions in the gospel, Jesus notes that the Father is "greater" than he (14:28). In such instances he does not mean the Father is greater in being as Jesus is greater in being than Jacob or Abraham (4:12; 8:53); rather, the Father is greater in rank, and the Son submits to his will (5:19-20; 8:29). This suggests that Jesus' intermits in 5:18 (who admittedly would have been offended whether Jesus claimed equality in being or equality in rank) misunderstood his point.

A. Does Jesus Claim "Equality"? (5:18)

Jesus is God the Son, but he is also the agent of God the Father. The image of agency in his culture implied some sort of subordination, even if only for the task at hand. When Jesus claims

the authority to continue the Father's work, probably alluding to the Father completing his creative work on the seventh day (Gen 2:2-3), he plainly enough implies his deity. But affirming his deity is distinct from affirming either his identity of being with the Father (Sabellianism) or identity of rank in the redemptive order. The problem today is that we have sometimes followed the line of thought from Jesus' opponents rather than that from Jesus' following response.

The "Jews," representing in this context especially the Jerusalem authorities, understand Jesus to be annulling the Sabbath, hence claiming rank equal with that of the Father (5:18); yet throughout this gospel, this group called the "Jews" are unreliable characters.³ In this context they also prove wrong in thinking that Jesus claims "equality" of rank with the Father (see Jesus' clarification in 5:19-47).⁴ In fact, Jesus himself shares their view that Scripture cannot be "annulled" (10:35).⁵ Thus it is unlikely that John or Jesus view themselves as "annulling" the Sabbath per se; rather, in John's view Jesus is acting as God's agent to do what no one denied God could do on the Sabbath.

Jesus argues that God regularly supersedes the Sabbath. By implying his minor premise that he is God's agent (he uses "my Father" in a special sense that allowed him to act on the Father's authority), he concludes that he is therefore permitted to do God's work on the Sabbath (5:17). The major premise—that God was active on the Sabbath—was not a matter of dispute.⁶ On the basis of Gen 2:2-3, Jewish pietists had to believe that God rested on the seventh day (also *Jub.* 2:1); in some texts later rabbis declared that God finished his work of creating but continued his work of judging (cf. John 5:22, 24, 27, 30).⁷ Yet such rabbis also recognized that God daily renewed his work of creation and would allow that in miracles God

³Interpretations of the title "Jews" vary considerably, but I argue in my forthcoming John commentary, parts of which I have adapted for this article, that John uses the title ironically rather than ethnically (see for now Craig S. Keener, "The Function of Johannine Pneumatology in the Context of Late First Century Judaism" [Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1991] 330-49).

⁴On this misunderstanding as part of the larger pattern in the gospel, see D. A. Lee, *The Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel: The Interplay of Form and Meaning* (JSNTSup 95; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 12-3, 113.

⁵Despite the term's broad semantic range, the gospel employs it only six times, so the three times it appears in conjunction with the law are most significant. The LXX is not helpful here; "loosed the law" in 1 Esdr 9:46 means "opened the [book of] the law."

⁶Exegetes have long noted this Jewish teaching; see, e.g., J. A. Robinson, *The Historical Character of St John's Gospel* (2d ed.; New York: Longmans, Green & Company, 1929) 38-9.

⁷E.g., *Pes. Rab.* 23:8; 41:3; see further H. Odeberg, *The Fourth Gospel* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksells, 1929) 202. Though ἔργον, "work," is a common term, it is significant here that it can apply to God's act of creation (Gen 2:2-3 LXX; Wis 13:1; *Sib. Or.* 1.22). Less likely is the proposal of F. Manns that Jesus carries out Jewish tradition's "works of mercy" ("Les oeuvres de miséricorde dans le quatrième Évangile," *BibOr* 27 [1985] 215-21).

could continue to create after finishing the creation.⁸ Likewise, he continues to matchmake, thereby sustaining his creation.⁹ may observe the Sabbath in one's own courtyard, God is free to observe it as he wills in his creation.¹⁰ Sources closer in time to John, like Philo, emphasized that though God rested on the seventh day, this means only that his activity requires no labor. He never ceases from his activity, because creation continues to depend on him.¹¹

It is Jesus' implied minor premise, in which he presents himself as God's agent, to which his opponents object (5:18). Rather than understanding him as God's agent, however, they characteristically misunderstand him, assuming that he claims equality with the Father. Such a claim could be either positive (in the sense of godlike) or negative (in the sense of presumptuous) in Greek thought, but to Judean teachers it would definitely appear blasphemous in the broader sense of the term (cf. Gen 3:5; Isa 14:14; Ezek 28:2).¹²

If later rabbinic evidence is at all helpful here, it appears suggestive that "equal to God" resembles a later rabbinic phrase meaning to make oneself independent from God, similar to a phrase applied to a son who casts off the yoke of his parents.¹³ The charge of ditheism became significant in later rabbinic controversy with the *Minim* (sectarians), probably including the large number of Jewish Christians who continued to affirm Jesus' deity.¹⁴ Even 3 Enoch, which calls Metatron "the lesser YHWH" (12:5), condemns as apostasy the view that there are "two powers in heaven" (16:2). Probably the opponents of John's intended audience also charged the Jewish Christians with ditheism.¹⁵ John responds that if one does not have Jesus, one does not have God (1 John 2:22-23). But while Jesus claims deity at various points in this gospel (e.g., 8:58; 20:28-29), he also denies equality of rank with his Father. This is

⁸On the daily renewing, see J. Bonsirven, *Palestinian Judaism in the Time of Jesus Christ* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964) 12 (citing the popular morning Shema's first benediction); on the miracles, see the third-century Palestinian Amora in *Gen. Rab.* 63:5.

⁹*Pes. Rab. Kah.* 2:4; 23:8; *b. Sanh.* 22a; *Gen. Rab.* 68:4; *Num. Rab.* 3:6; *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 2:4; cf. *Lev. Rab.* 8:1.

¹⁰Purportedly late first or early second-century tradition in *Exod. Rab.* 30:9, though it may actually be later.

¹¹Commentators cite Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.5, 18; *Cherubim* 87.

¹²In Greek thought, see P. Borgen, "The Gospel of John and Hellenism: Some Observations," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (ed. R. A. Culpepper and C. C. Black; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 107; for Jewish thought see E. Stauffer, *Jesus and His Story* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960) 206. Blasphemy in the narrowest extant sense of the term required uttering God's name (*m. Sanh.* 7:5), but it is unclear how widespread this view was in the first century, and the Greek term includes "reviling" (Craig S. Keener, *Matthew* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997] 377).

¹³Odeberg, *Gospel*, 203. Cf. the LXX of Deut 13:6 (13:7 LXX), where one must love God more than a friend "equal to oneself" (in typical Greek language of friendship).

¹⁴E.g., *Sifre Deut.* 329.1.1; *b. Sanh.* 38a, *bar.*, reading with the earlier manuscripts; *Pes. Rab.* 21:6.

¹⁵R. Kysar, *John, The Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 46.

particularly clear in his response to those who think he has claimed such equality (5:19-30). Jesus does this by calling attention to his role as Son and agent.

In the following verses, Jesus affirms that far from asserting his independence, the Son merely carries out what the Father teaches him (5:19-20). Ancients understood the principle of deferring honor to those to whom it belonged, and Judaism had proved especially jealous for God's honor.¹⁶ In 5:19-30, Jesus responds to the view that he "makes himself" equal with God, arguing that he is *not* making himself equal with God.¹⁷ Their claim against Jesus is false for two reasons. First, to "make oneself" something was to claim authority or identity one did not have. To make oneself a deity was universally regarded as an act of foolish, arrogant presumption, even among Gentiles.¹⁸ Second, Jesus is not claiming rank equal with the Father, but rather that he acts in obedience and on delegated authority.

B. Jesus as God's Son

Jesus' obedience to the Father would reflect well on him among John's audience and their contemporaries. In an honor and shame culture that highly prized disciplining boys for obedience, the claim that Jesus was "obedient" to his Father was a cause for praise.¹⁹ Having already claimed that God is his Father, Jesus explains his own action by means of the analogy of a son who imitates and obeys his father (5:19-20).²⁰ Because the Father loves Jesus (5:20; cf. 3:35; 10:17; 15:9; 17:23-24), the Father shows him what to do (5:20). Jesus has watched the Father's activity (8:38).

The Son's imitation of the Father's deeds here may suggest the specific analogy of apprenticeship, for Jewish fathers often trained

¹⁶E.g., SB 3924 (where Germanicus deflects others' claims of his divinity); in Judaism, 1 Macc 2:24-27, 50; 2 Macc 4:2; Jos. *Ant.* 12.2; 1QS 9.23; Gal 1:14; Acts 22:3.

¹⁷Also others, e.g., J. C. Fenton, *The Gospel According to John in the Revised Standard Version* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970) 71; R. P. Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) 148-9; cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 257 (equality but not independence).

¹⁸W. A. Meeks, "The Divine Agent and His Counterfeit in Philo and the Fourth Gospel," in *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. E. Schüssler Fiorenza; University of Notre Dame Center for the Study of Judaism and Christianity in Antiquity 2; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976) 43; cf. Philo's complaint about Gaius in Meeks, "Agent," 55.

¹⁹J. J. Pilch, "Beat His Ribs While He is Young' (Sir 30:12): A Window on the Mediterranean World," *BTB* 23 (1993) 101-13; contrast the gluttonous son charge in Matt 11:19/Luke 7:34, based on Deut 21:20-21.

²⁰R. H. Lightfoot, *St. John's Gospel: A Commentary* (ed. C. F. Evans; London: Oxford University Press, 1960) 149; especially C. H. Dodd, *More New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 31. It is, however, doubtful that Jesus intends his sonship here generically (pace Dodd, *More Studies*, 31; J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971] 60).

their sons in their own trade.

to his special agent, who watches him and learns from him, would have made good sense in an early Jewish framework.²

The claim that Jesus acts as God's Son, obedient to the Father, in no way contradicts Jesus' full deity. To the contrary, the image of continuing God's creative work on the Sabbath in this text would strongly imply Jesus' deity. In view of 7:23, where Jesus describes the creative work as making a whole person well on the Sabbath (John 7:23), an allusion to creation probably implies specifically the creation of humanity in Gen 1:26. If so, the background for the Father and Son working together in creation here may well be, "Let *us* make

foreshadow the resurrection (5:24-25), an idea to which the discourse quickly turns.

If such an allusion is in view, the particular wording of Gen 1:26 LXX (εἶπεν ὁ θεός ποιήσωμεν ἄνθρωπον) is significant. (ποιέω) with ἄνθρωπον as the object appears in John only in 5:15 and 7:23, the latter a comment on this passage.²³ The LXX elsewhere declares that God "made humanity," employing this same verb (Gen 1:26, 27; 2:18; 5:1; 6:6, 7; 9:6; Wis 2:23).²⁴ This parallel reinforces the likelihood that Jesus claims deity here.

Nevertheless, this part of the discourse is framed with Jesus' claim not to act "from himself," or on his own initiative or authority (5:19, 30),²⁵ fitting the Jewish conception of the agent who carries out his commission.²⁶ Jesus elsewhere emphasizes that he does nothing "from himself" (5:30; 7:17-18, 28; 8:28, 42; 14:10), as the Spirit does not (16:13), and that the disciples cannot produce anything profitable from themselves (15:5). Acting "from oneself" signifies independence; by contrast, for John its negation can signify divine inspiration (11:51).²⁷ Thus Jewish tradition emphasized that Moses explicitly claimed to speak only on God's authority, not his own.²⁸

²¹Dodd, *More Studies*, 33, 36-8 (also contending that apprenticeship functioned as a sort of adoption). The form of Jesus' claim, a negation followed by an affirmation, appears elsewhere in the Jesus tradition (cf. Dodd, *More Studies*, 39; Luke 6:40; 8:16; 11:21-22; 12:47-48).

²²See Odeberg, *Gospel*, 204-5, though the parallels in the third-century work 3 Enoch (10:4-5; 11:1-3; chap. 16; 48:10, 20 C) are so close that one suspects dependence on Johannine tradition.

²³6:10 does not count because "make" is properly attached to "sit down."

²⁴Elsewhere God "made" the human mouth, a synecdoche for God making people in various physical conditions (Exod 4:11).

²⁵Possibly Ign. *Ep. Magn.* 7.1 alludes to John here (even in the shorter recension).

²⁶Meeks, "Agent," 55.

²⁷E.g., Epict. *Disc.* 1.9.32, ἐξ ἑμαυτοῦ, "from myself" (though John consistently prefers ἀπό in this phrase, ἀπό usually functions as roughly equivalent to ἐκ in this period). In John 10:18 it indicates Jesus' independence from those who want him dead, but explicitly not independence from the Father; cf. 18:34.

²⁸*Sifre Deut.* 5.1.1; 19.1.1; 25.5.1.

C. *Jesus as God's Agent*

Few will deny that Scripture speaks of Christ's subordination or obedience to the Father in some sense; but some will argue that this is really beside the point. They argue that such submission of the Son to the Father is plain enough, but that it is functional and temporary, relating to his incarnation and earthly ministry, rather than eternal.²⁹ This is a logically valid objection, but its accuracy must be tested by exegesis of the various passages in question. To be sure, Jesus shared the Father's glory before the world was (17:5); he has always been fully God. But Jesus' submission to the Father did not begin with his incarnation. Often he speaks of the Father "sending" him into the world (e.g., 3:16-17; 10:36; 1 John 4:9; though one could argue differently based on John 17:18), which suggests that, at the very least, he began submitting a little before the incarnation.

To affirm that Jesus is God is not to deny that he was sent by God. By analogy, although they did not go so far, John's Jewish contemporaries could affirm that God sent divine Wisdom forth from his holy heavens to instruct the wise (Wis 9:10).³⁰ As various scholars have noted, although John's Christology is incarnational, it is also a "sending" Christology.³¹ Jesus and his followers had already portrayed Jesus as the Father's agent long before John wrote his gospel (e.g., Mark 9:37; 12:6; Matt 10:40; 15:24; 21:37; Luke 4:18, 43; 10:16; Acts 3:26; Rom 8:3; Gal 4:4).

Agency represented commission and authorization, the sense of the concept which provides a broad conceptual background for early Christian agency. In many cases, at least in our later sources, the agent's own legal status was comparatively low. Indeed, under rabbinic rulings, even slaves were permitted to fill the position.³² Yet agents bore representative authority, because they acted on the authority of the one who sent them. Thus perhaps the most common rabbinic maxim concerning a person's agent is that "he is equivalent

²⁹See in this connection Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *JETS* 40 (1997) 57-68, especially 59-61, whose points are worthy of note.

³⁰Cf. the late parabolic comparison of Torah and prophets to a king's agent in *Song Rab.* 1:2, §2; cf. also the heavenly agent (in Philo, especially Israel) in P. Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (ed. J. Neusner; Studies in the History of Religions, Supplements to Numen 14; Leiden: Brill, 1968) 144-7; cf. Borgen, "Hellenism," 101-2.

³¹C. Mercer correctly argues that John's sending motif is incarnational, not docetic ("ΑΠΟΣΤΕΛΛΕΙΝ and ΠΕΜΠΕΙΝ in John," *NTS* 36 [1990] 619-24); this Christology reveals the divine love that originates it (M. Waldstein, "Die Sendung Jesu und der Jünger im Johannesevangelium," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift/Communio* 19 [1990] 203-21). Jürgen Becker meanwhile emphasizes the sending Christology ("Ich bin die Auferstehung und das Leben. Eine Skizze der johanneischen Christologie," *TZ* 39 [1983] 138-51).

³²*B. Ket.* 99b-100a; for slaves, *b. Git.* 23a; cf. *p. Git.* 2:6, §1.

to the person himself."³³ In the broader Mediterranean world envoys or messengers were backed by the full authority of those they represented.³⁴

Probably the best OT analogy for the Father's sending of Jesus and Jesus' sending his apostles is that of God sending the prophets, especially the prophet-leaders. Although God "sent" others in the LXX, he particularly sent Moses (Exod 3:10, 13-15; 4:28; 7:16; Deut 34:11; cf. Exod 4:13; 5:22) and the prophets, whether individually (2 Sam 12:1; 2 Chr 25:15; cf. 2 Sam 12:25) or collectively (2 Kgs 17:13; 2 Chr 24:19; Bar 1:21). Especially noteworthy here are 2 Chr 36:15 (God sent word by his ἀγγελοῦς, "messengers"; apparently ἀπόστολος, the noun cognate of ἀποστέλλω, was unavailable), and the language of Jeremiah (Jer 7:25; 24:4; 26:5; 28:9; 35:15; 44:4), where *unsent* prophets are evil (Jer 14:14-15; 23:21, 32; 27:15 [36:15-16 LXX]).

It is thus not at all surprising that some later Jewish teachers viewed as agents Moses, Aaron, the OT prophets or, most generally, anyone who carried out God's will.³⁵ Jewish teachers who saw the prophets as God's commissioned messengers were faithful to the portrait of the prophets in their Scriptures. For Israel's prophetic messenger formulas echo ancient Near Eastern royal messenger formulas such as, "Thus says the great king," often addressing Israel's vassal kings for the suzerain king Yahweh.³⁶ OT perspectives on prophets inform the early Christian view of apostleship, although they do not exhaust its meaning.³⁷ Early Christians maintained the prophetic office, while seeming to apply to apostles the special sort of position accorded only certain prophets in the OT (such as prophet-judges like Deborah and Samuel, and other leaders of prophetic schools like Elijah and Elisha).

³³Tos. *Taan.* 3:2 (tr. Neusner 2:274); also *m. Ber.* 5:5; *b. Naz.* 12b; cf. *p. Git.* 1:1. §1. For the sender's responsibility, see *m. Meilah* 6:1; but reportedly pre-Christian tradition in *b. Kid.* 43a holds the agent liable even if the sender is liable also.

³⁴E.g., Dion. Hal. 6.88.2; Diod. Sic. 40.1.1; *Jos. Life* 65, 72-3, 196-8; 2 Macc. 1:20. Cf. Zeno's dispatch of two fellow scholars in his place in Diog. Laert. 7.1.9.

³⁵Moses (*Sifra Behuq.* p. 13.277.1.13-14; ARN 1 A, most MSS; *Ex. Rab.* 6:3; *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 14:5; cf. *Jos. Ant.* 4.329; in Samaritan literature, John Bowman, *Samaritan Documents Relating to Their History, Religion & Life* [POTTS 2: Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1977] 241, 243; Wayne A. Meeks, *The Prophet-King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* [NovTSup 14; Leiden: Brill, 1967] 226-7); Aaron (*Sifra Sav Mekhilta DeMiluim* 98.9.6); the prophets (*Mek. Pisha* 1.87, Lauterbach 1:8; ARN 37, §95 B); others who execute God's will (*Sifra Sav Mekhilta DeMiluim* 98.9.5).

³⁶John S. Holladay, "Assyrian Statecraft and the Prophets of Israel," *HTR* 63 (1970) 29-51, specifically 31-4; cf. *Jdt* 2:5; Virgil W. Rabe, "Origins of Prophecy," *BASOR* 221 (1976) 125-8, specifically 127.

³⁷For OT perspectives on prophets, see W. A. Grudem, *The Gift of Prophecy in 1 Corinthians* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982) 43-54. David Hill observes that Grudem may go too far toward identifying the two, although Grudem does distinguish them (*New Testament Prophecy* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1979] 116-7). Cf. also Otto Betz who thinks that apostleship is modeled "above all on the Old Testament prophet" (*What Do We Know About Jesus?* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968] 105).

Another important element in the significance of the sending motif is that messengers even in the OT were often servants.³⁸ The servant of a king held a high position relative to those the servant addressed (albeit a sometimes uncomfortable one when the people were in rebellion [see, e.g., 2 Kgs 12:18]) but was always subordinate to the king. Although commissioned agents in the first century were not always of lower social status (especially in betrothal arrangements), they relinquished their own status for the commission given them, in which they were authorized by the status of their senders. Even when one sent one's son (Mark 12:6), the messenger position was necessarily one of subordination to the sender. Although the concept of agency implies subordination, it also stresses Jesus' functional equality with the Father in terms of humanity's required response: he must be honored and believed in the same way as must be the Father whose representative he is (e.g., John 5:23; 6:29).

Still, one could argue that Jesus' subordination to the Father in John is a temporary measure designed for the period of his earthly ministry of redemption. It might logically precede his incarnation, but need not represent an eternal state. Indeed, other passages in the NT recognize that Jesus submitted in a special way at his incarnation (Phil 2:5-8). To be sure, various NT images for Jesus (John 1:1-18; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:3) employ the language of divine wisdom to communicate Jesus' exalted status, which language, if pressed, could imply his subordination to the Father. But because it was the best language available among their contemporaries for biblical writers to communicate a high Christology does not mean that we should press the language in all its details. After all, the NT affirms Jesus' *eternal* preexistence (John 1:2; Rev 1:17 with 1:8; Isa 41:4; 44:6; 48:12), which contrasts starkly with traditions about divine wisdom's temporal (not eternal) preexistence.

Most will agree that the Son submits to the Father at some point in time for particular reasons. But for those inclined to doubt our position we have not established beyond dispute the more controversial matter of his eternal submission. Thus it is most helpful to turn to Paul, who seems to affirm the Son's continuing submission in the future. Although this argument, too, falls short of absolute evidence (especially given the unresolved interpretive issues in the context), I believe it will lend support to the case that Jesus' special submission to the Father is eternal in some sense (though not necessarily in the sense experienced during his earthly ministry).

II. TEMPORARY SUBORDINATION IN 1 COR 15:28?

1 Cor 15:28 reads, "And when all things have been brought under his authority, then the Son himself will also be brought under

³⁸For an example of subordinate status, cf. *P. RyI.* 233.14, 16 (second century AD), where an agent addresses his master as κύριε.

the authority of the one who had brought all things under his authority, so that God may be all in all."

The transition from the reign of Jesus to that of the Father, which Paul presumably deduces from the "until" (ἕως) of Ps 110:1 (109:1 LXX, implicitly cited in 1 Cor 15:25), would probably surprise Paul's contemporaries less than it surprises us today. Most Jewish people recognized that God had appointed various rulers over history; in many traditions these human kingdoms would climax with an intermediate era of messianic rule.³⁹ In some sense the messianic king and Son of man must reign forever (Isa 9:7; Dan 7:14; Luke 1:32-33), but Jewish people also usually affirmed that God himself would reign more directly in the final time (Exod 15:18; Ps 146:10; Mic 4:7).⁴⁰ So Paul's first hearers probably would not have found his point difficult to grasp.

Depending on how much weight one hangs on the grammatical details here, scholars debate the extent to which Paul shares with some of his contemporaries the view of an intermediate messianic kingdom. Some believe Christ's reign refers to his present reign concluded by death being placed under his feet at the believers' resurrection (1 Cor 15:25-26), others to a later period based on the succession of "thens" suggested in 15:23-24. In either case, in the end Christ himself will be plainly subordinated to the Father (15:28) in a more complete way than he is before that day (15:27), though he sits already at the Father's right hand (cf. Acts 2:34-35).

At that point, God will be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). This refers to his unchallenged authority over all else, in this context presumably including the Son. Although some appeal to various later Gnostic sources for Paul's "all in all" language,⁴¹ such an appeal is both unnecessary and improbable. Without reference to Gnosticism some of Paul's Greek contemporaries may have misunderstood him pantheistically, because some used "the all" as a term for "the universe."⁴² More to the point, however, Jewish people could speak of God as "all" without a hint of pantheism (4Q266; Sir 43:27).⁴³ Instead, even more hellenized Jews recognized God as the author and source of "all things."⁴⁴ Probably Paul means that God will count as everything among all peoples or in all creation.

Despite some thorny questions about the meaning of some of Paul's language here, which we have not endeavored to resolve, this

³⁹E.g., *Sib. Or.* 3.741-59, 767-95; 4 Ezra 7:28-29; 2 *Apoc Bar* 40:3; *Sifre Deut.* 34 4.3; 310.5.1; *b. Sanh.* 97ab; *Pes. Rab. Kah.* 3:16.

⁴⁰See further e.g., James D. Moffatt, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (MNTC; London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938) 250.

⁴¹Cf. the Mandaean use of the phrase in Richard Pritzenstein, *Hellenistic Mystery-Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance* (PTMS 15; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1978) 52.

⁴²Diog. Laert. 9.6.30-31; Plotinus *Ennead* 2.3.13.

⁴³M. Kister, "On a New Fragment of the Damascus Covenant," *JQR* 84 (1993-1994) 249-51. Cf. also Philo *Allegorical Interpretation* 1.44.

⁴⁴E.g., Philo *On the Virtues* 77, 218; *On the Contemplative Life* 90. Cf. Sir 43:27 in context.

passage appears to affirm the Son's willing and loving subordination to the Father in the future era. For Paul, then, Jesus' deity (e.g., 1 Cor 8:6) is presumably not incompatible with his recognition of the Father's higher rank, even in the eternal future. Paul's wording does not indicate the sense in which the Son submits to the Father—it surely differs from the sense in which the rest of creation submits to both of them (Rev 22:3). But it does suggest that the Father and Son embrace roles that remain distinct in some respects even in eternity.

Implications for the Current Gender Roles Debate?

Although some of my complementarian friends may wish to hail this article as a "concession" by a scholar who does not share all their views on gender, and will undoubtedly argue that I balk at the "logical" conclusion, I think that the complementarian conclusion—or for that matter, the egalitarian one—does not truly necessarily follow from the foregoing evidence. To be sure, a conclusion does follow that is not incompatible with the modern complementarian position: equality in being is compatible with distinctions in rank. (I distinguish this modern complementarian position from the usual traditional position, held through most of church history, in which women's rank is inferior because women are ontologically inferior, a view which some interpreters on both sides of the current debate would regard as more logically consistent.⁴⁵)

Since few evangelicals, to my knowledge, argue today for an eternal subordination of any redeemed person to other redeemed persons, even the temporary subordination of the Son in the plan of redemption would be sufficient to make the case that equality of being is compatible with temporal distinctions in authority. But the value of such a claim for the current debate seems as minimal as the claim is uncontroversial: to my knowledge no evangelical, egalitarian or complementarian, denies that functional human rank (e.g., employers, leaders, professors who must assign grades) exists and should be respected where possible in this age.

What does not necessarily follow from the potential compatibility of temporal rank and equality of nature is that rank must necessarily be determined by gender.⁴⁶ An association of rank with gender does not follow any more than its association with race or other factors held at some times in history to be divinely

⁴⁵For discussion of the history, see most fully Daniel Doriani, "A History of the Interpretation of 1 Timothy 2," in *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15* (ed. A. J. Köstenberger, T. R. Schreiner, and H. S. Baldwin; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 213-67.

⁴⁶See the carefully reasoned case of Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997) 55-60; also Stanley J. Grenz and Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995) 152-3, though both ultimately argue against eternal subordination within the Trinity.

inseparable from rank.⁴⁷ Even if one were inclined to seek such a parallel, all of us recognize that there is some sense in which relations within the Trinity differ from relations among human beings; most human analogies of rank we could offer in society or the church are determined by society, circumstances, calling, or other factors that do not simply subordinate a whole group of people to another whole group of people.⁴⁸

Naturally complementarians may regard the view of trinitarian relations articulated here as compatible with their understanding of gender; but the connection between the premise and the conclusion is not in itself a necessary one, and those who begin with a different premise will see the relationship differently. Like views of gender roles, views of the Trinity may be better determined first by the exegesis of the relevant texts than by theological systems, since the latter, once constructed, are more apt to adapt new data constructively into the system than to undergo revision on the basis of the data.

In other words, I do not believe that the relation of the Son to the Father is directly relevant to the current gender role debate at all—except as a model to all Christians in our loving submission to God and to one another. Yet one wonders if loving submission to one another might not also have some implications for how we treat brothers and sisters on the other side of the debate.

This conclusion brings me back to the question with which this essay began. Granted that there are differences on understanding roles within the Trinity among evangelicals today, do these differences constitute heresy or “tampering with the Trinity”? The precise articulation of roles within the Trinity was important for John’s first, probably Jewish-Christian audience; most likely Jewish people who rejected Jesus’ deity (perhaps from the local synagogues) were challenging their Christology, a challenge that warranted a detailed response.

While John’s inspired articulation of such roles remains vital, the church’s current situation is different enough that we can usually defend the central message of the gospel without unanimity on the details of this matter. Summaries of views through church history may suggest that Christians have not always been clear on the issue of the Son’s subordination and that God did not withhold or bestow his blessing based on this particular doctrine. Certainly most evangelicals in the pews today have not thought through the issue,

⁴⁷See some historic proslavery arguments cited, e.g., in Glenn J. Usry and Craig S. Keener, *Black Man’s Religion* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 102-3.

⁴⁸One could argue specifically for gender subordination based on an internal model of the Trinity seen in 1 Cor 11:3, but only if the exegesis of that passage supports it. Exegesis of that passage is not the focus of this article; but those who, like myself, are not persuaded by the complementarian exegesis of that passage (which I have treated elsewhere; *Paul, Women & Wives*, 19-69; among others, see e.g., Bilezikian, “Bungee-Jumping,” 61) will not find it specifically pertinent to this debate.

yet most of us would balk at questioning the validity of their conversion on this basis.

Most importantly, the specific relation between the Father and the Son was not integral to the apostolic preaching of the gospel necessary for conversion in the NT, provided that people embraced Jesus as Lord (which implies his deity). (Some other points disputed in some evangelical circles today, such as the necessity of personal faith in Jesus for being reconciled to God, do touch the heart of the gospel, and I dare not raise objections if some wish to apply strong terms like "heresy" in those cases.) We may dispute how central this question is, but salvation does not rise or fall on it, and therefore we are not free to treat those who differ on the matter as if they are not our brothers or sisters in Christ.

III. CONCLUSION

Regardless of one's view of gender roles, one can make a case for the Son's subordination to the Father, probably even in some sense for his eternal subordination. Nevertheless, labels like "heresy" and "tampering with the Trinity" are inappropriate for either side of this debate, and are best reserved for sects that genuinely subvert biblical Christology such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons. If the Son's subordination to the Father teaches us nothing else, may we learn from it to value the Father's honor and submit to his will. And if the Son's unity with the Father teaches us nothing else, may we learn from it how our unity with one another is essential to honoring him (John 17:21-23).