

# Tampering With the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

To someone not conversant with contemporary theological writings, it may come as something of a surprise to learn that the historic doctrine of the Trinity is undergoing considerable scrutiny, reassessment, reformulation, and/or defense.<sup>2</sup> To many, this doctrine, perhaps as much or more than any other, seems so abstract and unrelated to life that they might wonder just why the interest. What is *here* that would warrant and elicit such concentrated attention? What is at stake in *this doctrine* that would provoke such interest and concern?

To many, what is at stake is simply this: the integrity and reality of the Christian faith itself. Donald Bloesch surprised many in the theological world with the publication in 1985 of his book entitled, *The Battle for the Trinity*.<sup>3</sup> He charged the feminist rejection of the Bible's own and traditional theology's predominantly masculine language for God as a rejection of the Trinity itself and, as such, the imposition of a different faith (i.e., not the *Christian* faith) onto those quarters of the church inclined to accept the feminist critique. And, such charges and concerns have continued unabated. Consider, for example, the sobering words of Duke University Professor of Systematic Theology, Geoffrey Wainwright:

The signs of our times are that, as in the fourth century, the doctrine of the Trinity occupies a pivotal position. While usually still considering themselves within the church, and in any case wanting to be loyal to their perception of truth, various thinkers and activists are seeking such

revisions of the inherited doctrine of the Trinity that their success might in fact mean its abandonment, or at least such an alteration of its content, status, and function that the whole face of Christianity would be drastically changed. Once more the understanding, and perhaps the attainment, of salvation is at stake, or certainly the message of the church and the church's visible composition.<sup>4</sup>

What are some of these contemporary proposed revisions of the doctrine of the Trinity that would provoke such strong reaction? This article proposes to focus on two dimensions of trinitarian reconstruction, both of which are the result of feminist revisionism. First, the mainline church rejection of masculine trinitarian language (or any masculine God-language, more generally) has been occurring for nearly three decades. Whether emasculating God's name leaves us with the God named in the Bible will be explored here, with argumentation offered to support traditional and biblical masculine language for the triune God. Second, many contemporary evangelical egalitarians are urging the church to retain masculine language for God while denying that this masculine language indicates any kind of inner-trinitarian distinction of authority. These arguments will be weighed and support will be offered for the church's long-standing commitment to the trinitarian persons' full equality of essence and differentiation of persons, the latter of which includes and entails the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to both Father and Son.

## Mainline Feminist Rejection of Masculine Language for the Triune God

### Central Feminist Arguments for Rejecting Masculine Trinitarian Language

Admittedly a radical representative of the feminist movement, Mary Daly has, nonetheless, captured the heart of the feminist criticism of the church's biblical and historic adherence to masculine God-language in her claim, "If God is male, the male is god."<sup>5</sup> While *no* respected theologian of the church has claimed that God *is male*, the force of Daly's objection is simply that to refer to God with masculine language gives the impression that masculinity is more god-like. By this impression, then, women are held in subservient positions and granted less than their rightful dignity, so it is asserted. The only corrective can be to remove the predominance of masculine God-language from our Scripture, liturgy, and preaching. While some (like Daly herself) have moved to an exclusive use of feminine, earthly, even neo-pagan language for deity, most in the mainline churches who share this fundamental concern call for a balance of masculine and feminine references (e.g., God as Father and Mother) or for a fully gender-neutral language altogether in reference to God (e.g., Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer to replace Father, Son, Holy Spirit).<sup>6</sup>

Only brief attention can be given here to the several lines of argument put forth for inclusive God-language,<sup>7</sup> and our focus will be particularly on the concern over the traditional masculine trinitarian formulation. First, appeal is made to the metaphorical nature of the Bible's own masculine language for God. All agree that when Scripture calls God 'Father' or 'King', we are not to understand by these that God is literally male. They function metaphorically to speak of fatherly and kingly functions such as provision, protection, and rulership. So, while God literally is provider, protector and ruler, he is metaphorically father and king. This being so, feminists argue that we ought, then, to describe God with feminine metaphors that express some other functions of God more characteristically feminine, such as God as comforter, healer, and sympathizer. So while God is (literally) neither father or mother, the metaphors 'father' and 'mother' are equally appropriate in describing of God qualities and functions literally true of him. We ought, then, to balance feminine names of God with traditional masculine names to give a more complete view of God, or else we ought to avoid such gender-specific terms altogether if the risk is just too great that people might take these to think God is a sexual being. As applied to language for the Trinity, feminist advocates have suggested revised language in both directions. Either we should speak of the first person of the Trinity as Father/Mother and the second, the Child of God,<sup>8</sup> or we should move to a strictly gender-neutral trinitarian language, such as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Both approaches are advocated within mainline feminism and what both have in common is the avoidance of

the dominant masculine language for the triune God due to its being both false and misleading.

Second, when one inquires why both biblical and traditional ecclesial language for God has been predominantly masculine, one immediately realizes the intrinsically culturally-conditioned nature of the Bible's and the church's God-talk. Patriarchal culture in biblical days and throughout the history of the church has given rise to this predominantly masculine language for God. For feminism, upon realizing this reality, it seems both obvious and necessary that we work to re-vamp our God-talk. We can maintain this predominantly masculine language for God only at the expense of perpetuating the illicit patriarchy that gave rise to it. While most mainline feminists would not agree wholly with Mary Daly, they would adjust her claim to say that if God is seen and spoken of as masculine, what is masculine will be viewed, naturally and unavoidably, as of higher value and authority. Again, then, one of two lines of response is needed: either we must balance traditional masculine usage with appropriate and meaningful feminine language of God, or we should leave behind all gender specific God referencing altogether.

Third, following from the above two items, feminist political and ideological advancement requires that we reject the biblical and traditional dominance of the masculine in regard to God. The true liberation of women, generally, and the cause of women's rights to serve in all levels of church and denominational leadership, in particular, can never happen when God, our highest authority and only rightful object of worship, is spoken of in masculine terms. Perpetuating the masculinity of God perpetuates the servile nature of the feminine. Since God is above gender, and since he created both genders in his image, then we dare not continue to focus our discussion of God on one gender thus subordinating the other as inferior and subservient.

### Responding to the Feminist Case against Masculine Trinitarian Language

Interestingly, many from within mainline churches as well as the majority of evangelical feminists (i.e., egalitarians) from within and without mainline denominations are opposed to this revisionist feminist agenda. For most in this group, while claiming fully to identify with the values and aspirations of Christian feminism, these opponents claim boldly that to change the language of the Bible and church tradition in which God is revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to jeopardize the integrity of Christianity itself and to promote what is truly, in fact, another deity and another faith.<sup>9</sup> Their argumentation is complex and involved, but we will sketch some of their main concerns.

First, while it is true that the Bible uses masculine metaphorical language for naming God (though God is never

literally male), it is also true that the Bible never employs feminine metaphorical language *to name* God. True, God is sometimes said to be or act in ways *like* a mother (or some other feminine image),<sup>10</sup> but never is God called ‘Mother’ as he is often called ‘Father.’ Respect for God’s self-portrayal in Scripture requires that we respect this distinction. While we have every right (and responsibility) to employ feminine images of God, as is done often in Scripture itself, we are not permitted, by biblical precedence, to go further and to name God in ways he has not named himself. He has named himself ‘Father’ but not ‘Mother.’ This stubborn fact of scriptural revelation must itself restrain our talk of God.

Second, one might be tempted to dismiss the above “factual” point by appeal to the inherently patriarchal culture in which our biblical language of God was framed. But appeal to culture shows just how odd and even unique it is that Israel chose to use only masculine (and *not* feminine) language when naming God. The fact is that the most natural route Israel might have taken is to follow the lead of the nations surrounding her which spoke with regularity and frequency of their deities as feminine.<sup>11</sup> That Israel chose not to do this shows her resistance to follow natural and strong cultural pressures, and it indicates that she conceived of the true God, the God of Israel, as distinct from these false deities.

In defending her assertion that “the Bible’s language for God is masculine, a unique revelation of God in the world,” Elizabeth Achtemeier continues:

The basic reason for that designation of God is that the God of the Bible will not let himself be identified with his creation, and therefore human beings are to worship not the creation but the Creator. . . . It is precisely the introduction of female language for God that opens the door to such identification of God with the world, however.<sup>12</sup>

Whether one follows Achtemeier here fully or not,<sup>13</sup> what is clear is that Scripture never names God as ‘Mother’ or with any other feminine ascription, and this stands clearly against the prevailing practice of the cultures surrounding Israel and the early church.

Third, while Scripture surely does reflect the various cultural and historical settings in which it was written, the God of the Bible is presented, ultimately, by self-revelation or self-disclosure. The Bible’s language of God, then, must be received with respect and gratitude as the divinely ordained conveyer of the truth God himself intended his people to know about him. To alter biblical language of God is to deny and reject God’s self-disclosure in the terms which he chose and which he used in making himself known to us. Clearly, at the pinnacle of this self-disclosure of God stands the revelation of Jesus the Christ who became flesh that we might know in

visible, physical form what God is like (John 1:14-18). And here, with shocking regularity, Jesus refers to God in a manner scandalous to his Jewish listeners, as none other than ‘Father.’ That Jesus is the *Son* sent by the *Father* is so deeply and widely reflective of God’s self-revelation in and through the incarnation, that to alter this language is to suggest, even if only implicitly, that one speak instead of a different deity. Divine self-revelation, then, requires the glad retention of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Fourth, one last caution will be mentioned. For revisionist feminism, it may be granted that biblical language speaks of the triune God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But, these revisionists continue, those same scriptures also employ the language of God as creator, redeemer, and sustainer. May we not use in the church this other biblical language of God and by so doing both honor God’s self-revelation and avoid the illicit equation of God with masculinity that the traditional masculine language risks?

While the terms ‘Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer’ are biblical terms for God, they cannot function as substitutes for the persons of the Godhead named with ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’. There are at least three reasons why this substitution is unacceptable. First, one risks a modalistic understanding of God when he is first creator, and then changes to the next historical phase of redeemer, and likewise then to sustainer. The phases and aspects of activity can easily be seen as historical modes of the manifestation of the one God, as has been advocated by Sabellius and other modalists. Second, this substitution implies that the world is eternal, not temporally finite, and that God’s redemptive work is necessary, not free. The church’s affirmation of God as ‘Father, Son, Spirit’ is a claim, not merely of his economic manifestation as the Father of the incarnate Son in the power of the Spirit (though this is true, in part), but also of the immanent trinity who is *eternally* Father, Son, and Spirit. The Father, then, is the *eternal* Father of the Son; the Son is the *eternal* Son of the Father. Now, if we substitute ‘Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer’ as names for these *eternal* realities, it requires that we see God as eternal Creator, implying an eternal creation, and eternal Redeemer, implying necessary redemption. It is clear that while ‘Father, Son, Spirit’ work well as names of the immanent and economic trinitarian Persons, ‘Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer’ are merely economic and functional designations. As such, they simply cannot substitute for the language of Scripture and church tradition of the eternal God who is in Himself (i.e., immanently and eternally) and in relation to creation (i.e., economically) Father, Son, and Spirit. Third, the personal names of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simply do not reduce to the supposed functional substitutes of Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.<sup>14</sup> Is the Father and the Father alone the Creator? Is the Son alone the Redeemer? Is the Spirit alone the Sustainer? Biblical teaching instructs us that each of these activities is accomplished by all three divine persons working together. Yes, the Father creates,

but he does so through the power of his Word (John 1:3) who acts as implementer of his creative design (Col. 1:16). The Spirit, likewise, energizes the formation of the creative work of the Father through the Son (Gen. 1:2). Redemption, likewise, is destroyed altogether if the work of redemption is reduced to that of the second person of the Trinity. Biblically, redemption only occurs as the Father sends the Son into the world to receive the wrath of the Father against him for our sin (2 Cor. 5:21). And, of course, the Son accomplishes this work only by the power of the Spirit who rests on him and empowers him to go to the cross (Heb. 9:14) and raises him from the dead (Rom. 8:11). And likewise with Sustaining and Sanctifying, it is the work of the Father (1 Thess. 5:23-24) and the Son (Eph. 5:25-27) and the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18) to preserve believers and move them toward the holiness of life and character designed for them from all eternity (Eph. 1:4). One realizes that the substitution of ‘Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,’ for ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,’ not only fails as a functional equivalent of the traditional and biblical trinitarian formula, but worse, if followed it would result in such major theological distortions that the faith that would result would bear only a superficial resemblance to the faith of true biblical and Christian religion. In the words of Geoffrey Wainwright, “Consideration of creation, redemption, and sanctification shows that an account of them that is true to the biblical narrative will also imply and depend on the trinitarian communion and cooperation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup>

## Evangelical Feminism’s Rejection of Eternal Functional Subordinationism Within the Triune God

### Evangelical Feminism’s Embrace of Masculine Trinitarian Language and Rejection of Inner Trinitarian Functional Subordination

Evangelical feminists, otherwise known as egalitarians, have generally favored retaining traditional masculine trinitarian language. For reasons given above, particularly because Scripture is for egalitarians God’s inspired word and self-revelation, the vast majority of egalitarians have sought to defend masculine God-language against the criticism of many of their feminist colleagues. In the process, however, they deny that such masculine God-language has any implications either 1) of superiority of what is masculine over feminine, or 2) that the eternal relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicate any kind of eternal functional hierarchy within the Trinity.

Let it be said clearly that non-egalitarian, complementarian<sup>16</sup> evangelicals agree wholly with the first of these denials. Because God created the man and the woman fully as his image (Gen. 1:26-27), it is clear that no use of masculine language for God is meant to signal some supposed greater value, dignity, or worth of men over women.

Furthermore, that women and men alike are redeemed by the Savior, and that the believing husband is to grant his believing wife honor as a “fellow heir of the grace of life” (1 Pet. 3:7) further indicates the full equality of personhood and worth vested in women and men, through both creation and redemption, by our gracious God. Egalitarian and complementarian evangelicals agree, then, that the Bible’s masculine God-language in no way indicates the essential superiority or greater value of male over female. Both men and women are, in creation and redemption, prized, sought, and loved by God equally; women with men stand before God equal in standing, dignity, worth, and human personhood.

Concerning the second denial, however, there is significant reason to challenge the egalitarian position. If, as egalitarians argue, the masculine language of God in Scripture is not a concession to a patriarchal culture but it represents rather God’s own chosen means of self-disclosure, what *is* conveyed by this masculine terminology? Does this masculine language not intentionally link God’s position and authority as *God* with the concept of *masculinity* over femininity? Furthermore, what *does* it mean that the Father is the eternal *Father* of the Son, and that the Son is the eternal *Son* of the Father? Is not the Father-Son relationship within the immanent Trinity indicative of some eternal relationship of authority *within* the Trinity itself?

Egalitarians reject these implications.<sup>17</sup> They see clearly that if an eternal relationship of authority and obedience is grounded in the eternal immanent inner-trinitarian relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then this gives at least *prima facie* justification to the notion of creational human relations in which authority and submission inhere.<sup>18</sup> And yet, both features of the orthodox view mentioned above might be seen to suggest such a correspondence. That is, both the predominant masculine language for God, and the eternal nature of the Father-Son relationship within the Godhead could lead one to think that authority and obedience is rooted in the Trinity, and that authority in some special way corresponds to masculinity.

To counter these lines of thought, egalitarians argue fundamentally along three lines. First, they assert that the predominant masculine references to God in no way convey some corresponding authority attaching to the male. As already seen in the previous section, the appeal to woman and man being created fully in the image of God indicates no such subordination of the female to the male. Equality (only) characterizes their relation as human persons. As Paul Jewett has put it, to affirm the functional subordination of women to men in any respect cannot avoid that charge that women are thereby inferior to men.<sup>19</sup> But the creation of woman and man as image of God renders this impossible. Masculinity is never inherently superior, though it is, admittedly, the gender in which God has chosen to name himself most commonly.



Second, they assert that any suggestion of subordination within the Godhead, even the claim of a functional subordination of the Son to the Father, cannot avoid at least an implicit Arianism.<sup>20</sup> The early church theologians, it is argued, rejected all talk of subordination regarding any member of the Trinity to any other. Full equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit precludes any and all types of subordinationism. Since the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, we are wrong ever to speak of the Son's subordinate status to the Father and by so doing undermine the orthodoxy won by Athanasius at Nicea and affirmed ever since by the church.

Third, all of Scripture's language of the authority of the Father and submission of the Son is only rightly accounted for within the incarnational mission of the Son. Here, as God taken on human flesh, precisely because Christ was the second Adam and fully human, it was necessary for him to subject himself to the will of the Father. Thus, as Gilbert Bilezikian states, "Christ did not take upon himself the task of world redemption because he was number two in the Trinity and his boss told him to do so or because he was demoted to a subordinate rank so that he could accomplish a job that no one else wanted to touch."<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, when the mission of redemption was completed, the Son resumed his former stature and full equality within the Trinity, leaving forever behind the role in which he had to submit himself in obedience to the Father. As Bilezikian again comments, "Because there was no subordination within the Trinity prior to the Second Person's incarnation, there will remain no such thing after its completion. If we must talk of subordination it is only a functional or economic subordination that pertains exclusively to Christ's role in relation to human history."<sup>22</sup> So, while masculine language predominates in the biblical depiction for God, and while the divine Father-Son relationship is eternal, none of this indicates a relationship of authority and obedience in the Godhead or a corresponding relationship of authority and submission in human relationships.

### Response to the Egalitarian Embrace of Masculine Trinitarian Language and Rejection of Inner Trinitarian Functional Subordination

First, it appears that egalitarianism is in a difficult position. It affirms the predominance of masculine biblical references for God and yet it seems incapable, logically, to explain this divinely chosen use of masculine language. Granted, one can argue, as we have seen earlier with Achtemeier, that referring to God in feminine language would result in a confusion between Creator and creation. But, must this be so? Even Achtemeier admits it need not, while she is convinced it likely will. But, if God himself thought and believed as egalitarians do, could he not overcome this supposed faulty Creator-creature confusion that might be drawn if he so chose, deliberately, to employ masculine and feminine metaphors in equal proportion? Certainly he could make clear, as he has, that he is Spirit and so not a sexual or gendered being. Furthermore,

he could make clear that when he refers to himself as Mother he is not by this conveying an ontological connection with the world. So, I find it difficult to accept this as a full or adequate answer to the question of why God chose to name himself in masculine, but never feminine, terms.

Another obvious reason exists, one which egalitarians seem to bump up against regularly without acknowledging it for what it is. For example, in Wainwright's musing over God as 'Father' he notes that "'Father' was the name that the second person in his human existence considered most appropriate as an address to the first person." But why is this? To this question, Wainwright can only say that "*there must be . . . something* about human fatherhood that makes Father a suitable way for Jesus to designate the one who sent him. In trinitarian terms, the crucial point is that Father was the address Jesus characteristically used in this connection."<sup>23</sup> However, just what the "something" is, Wainwright does not tell us. But is it not obvious? Jesus said over and over again throughout his ministry that he came to do the *will* of his *Father*. Clearly, a central part of the notion of 'Father' is that of fatherly authority. Certainly this is not all there is to being a father, but while there is more, there certainly is not less or other. The masculine terminology used of God throughout Scripture conveyed within the patriarchal cultures of Israel and the early church the obvious point that God, portrayed in masculine ways, had authority over his people. Father, King, and Lord conveyed, by their masculine gender referencing, a rightful authority that was to be respected and followed. Malachi 1:6, for example, indicates just this connection between 'father' and authority. Malachi writes, "'A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?'" says the LORD Almighty." God as Father is rightfully deserving of his children's honor, respect and obedience. To fail to see this is to miss one of the primary reasons God chose such masculine terminology to name himself.

Second, while the early church clearly embraced the full essential equality of the three trinitarian persons (because each of the three divine persons possesses fully and simultaneously the identically same infinite divine nature), nonetheless the church has always affirmed likewise the priority of the Father over the Son and Spirit. Since this priority cannot rightly be understood in terms of essence or nature (lest one fall into Arian subordinationism), it must exist in terms of relationship.<sup>24</sup> As Augustine affirmed, the distinction of persons is constituted precisely by the differing relations among them, in part manifest by the inherent authority of the Father and inherent submission of the Son. This is most clearly seen in the eternal Father-Son relationship in which the Father is eternally the Father of the Son, and the Son is eternally the Son of the Father. But, some might wonder, does this convey an eternal authority of the Father and eternal submission of the Son? Hear how Augustine discusses both the essential equality of the Father and Son, and

the mission of the Son who was sent, in eternity past, to obey and carry out the will of the Father:

If however the reason why the Son is said to have been sent by the Father is simply that the one is the Father and the other the Son then there is nothing at all to stop us believing that the *Son is equal to the Father* and consubstantial and co-eternal, and yet that the Son is sent by the Father. Not because one is greater and the other less, but because one is the Father and the other the Son; one is the begetter, the other begotten; the first is the one from whom the sent one is; the other is the one who is from the sender. For the Son is from the Father, not the Father from the Son. In the light of this we can now perceive that *the Son is not just said to have been sent because the Word became flesh, but that he was sent in order for the Word to become flesh*, and by his bodily presence to do all that was written. That is, we should understand that *it was not just the man who the Word became that was sent, but that the Word was sent to become man*. For he was *not sent in virtue of some disparity of power or substance or anything in him that was not equal to the Father*, but in virtue of the Son being from the Father, not the Father being from the Son.<sup>25</sup>

Notice two observations from Augustine's statement. First, Augustine sees no disparity between affirming, on the one hand, the full *equality* of the Son to the Father, and on the other hand, the Son's eternal position as *from* the Father, whose responsibility it is to carry out the will of the Father as the one *sent* from all eternity from the Father. Jewett's claim that functional subordination entails essential inferiority is here denied by Augustine. Second, notice that Augustine denies Bilezikian's claim that all subordination of the Son to the Father rests fully in the Son's incarnate state. To the contrary, Augustine affirms that "the Son is not just said to have been sent because the Word became flesh, but that he was sent in order for the Word to become flesh." In other words, the sending of the Son occurred in eternity past in order that the eternal Word, sent from on high from the Father, might take on human flesh and then continue his role of carrying out the will of his Father.

As P. T. Forsyth writes, the beauty of the Son's simultaneous equality with and obedience to the Father expresses the willing service God intends his people to render. Forsyth asserts that "subordination is *not* inferiority, and it is God-like. The principle is imbedded in the very cohesion of the eternal trinity and it is inseparable from the unity, fraternity and true equality of men. It is not a mark of inferiority to be subordinate, to have an authority, to obey. It is divine."<sup>26</sup> And in another place, Forsyth makes clear that the Son's obedience

to the Father was indeed an eternal obedience, rendered by an eternal equal, constituting an eternal subordination of the Son to do the will of the Father. He writes:

Father and Son co-exist, co-equal in the Spirit of holiness, i.e., of perfection. But Father and Son is a relation inconceivable except the Son be obedient to the Father. The perfection of the Son and the perfecting of his holy work lay, not in his suffering but in his obedience. And, as he was eternal Son, it meant an eternal obedience. . . . But obedience is not conceivable without some form of subordination. Yet in his very obedience the Son was co-equal with the Father; the Son's yielding will was no less divine than the Father's exigent will. Therefore, in the very nature of God, subordination implies no inferiority.<sup>27</sup>

Third, the egalitarian denial of any eternal submission of the Son to the Father makes it impossible to answer the question why it was the "Son" and not the "Father" or "Spirit" who was sent to become incarnate. And even more basic is the question why the eternal names for "Father" and "Son" would be exactly *these* names. John Thompson has indicated a trend in much modern trinitarian discussion to separate Christology from trinitarian formulations. He writes that "Christology and the Trinity were virtually divorced. It was both stated and assumed that any one of the three persons could become incarnate. . . . There was thus only an accidental relation between the economy of revelation and redemption and the eternal triune being of God."<sup>28</sup> It appears that contemporary egalitarianism is vulnerable also to this criticism. Since nothing *in God* grounds the Son being the Son of the Father, and since every aspect of the Son's earthly submission to the Father is divorced altogether from any *eternal relation* that exists between the Father and Son, there simply is no reason why the *Father* should send the *Son*. In Thompson's words, it appears that the egalitarian view would permit "any one of the three persons" to become incarnate. And yet we have scriptural revelation that clearly says that Son came down out of heaven to do the will of his Father. This sending is not *ad hoc*. In eternity, the Father commissioned the Son who then willingly laid aside the glory he had with the Father to come and purchase our pardon and renewal. Such glory is diminished if there is no eternal Father-Son relation on the basis of which the Father sends, the Son willingly comes, and the Spirit willingly empowers.

And finally, what biblical evidence exists for the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father? A running theme in the history of this doctrine (as seen above in Augustine and Forsyth) is that the Son was commissioned by the Father in *eternity past* to come as the incarnate Son. As Jesus declares in well over thirty occasions in John's gospel, he was *sent to the earth* by the Father to do the Father's will. Could this be reduced merely to the sending of the *incarnate*

Son to fulfill the Father's mission for him now that he has already come into the world? Or should we think of this sending, this commissioning, as having taken place in *eternity past*, a commissioning which then is fulfilled in time? Scripture, it seems clear, demands the latter view.

Consider, for example, Peter's statement in his Pentecost sermon recorded in Acts 2. Concerning Christ, he says, "This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross" (Acts 2:23). The crucifixion of Christ fulfilled God's "set purpose" which he established far in advance of the actual incarnation. Though this verse alone does not tell us exactly how far back God's plan was set, we know from numerous biblical prophecies (e.g., Psalm 22; Isa. 9:6-7; Isa.53; Micah 5:2, to name a select few of the most notable) that God had planned and predicted, long before the incarnation, precisely the birth, life, death, and ultimate triumph of the Son. If Christ's coming fulfilled God's "set purpose," and this purpose was established long in advance of the incarnation, then it is clear that the commissioning of the Son occurred in Christ's relation with the Father in the immanent trinity and not after he had come as the incarnate Son. Consider another of Peter's claims. In regard to Christ's redemptive work, Peter writes "He [Christ] was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake" (1 Peter 1:20). If we wonder how far back this commissioning of the Son took place, this verse settles the question. Before the world was made, the Father chose (literally, "foreknew") the Son to come as the redeemer. The Son's coming in time to shed his blood reflects not an *ad hoc* decision, or a toss of the trinitarian coin, but the eternal purpose of the *Father* to send and offer his *Son*.

Ephesians 1:3-5 and Revelation 13:8 confirm this understanding. In Ephesians, Paul gives praise to God the *Father* for choosing his own *in Christ* before the foundation of the world, and for predestining them to adoption as sons *through Jesus Christ* to himself. Since Paul specifically 1) gives praise to the *Father* for this election and predestination, 2) designates *Christ* as the one toward whom our election and predestination is directed, and 3) states that the Father's elective purpose and plan occurred before the creation of the world, it follows that the Father's commissioning of the Son is based in eternity past, and that the Son's submission to the Father is rooted in their eternal relationship within the Godhead. Revelation 13:8 likewise indicates that the book of life in which believers' names have been recorded is 1) from the *foundation of the world*, and 2) is of the *Lamb who was slain*. Again, then, we see clear evidence that the Father's purpose from eternity past was to send his Son, the Lamb of God, by which his own would be saved. The authority-obedience relation of Father and Son in the immanent trinity is mandatory if we are to account for God the Father's eternal purpose to elect and save his people through his beloved Son.

But will Christ one day, as Bilezikian argues, be elevated to the same status or equality of role as that of the Father? Consider Paul's discussion of the consummation of Christ's reconciling work in a day yet future. He writes, "For he [the Father] 'has put everything under his [Christ's] feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:27-28). Because Christ was commissioned in eternity past to come, in time and in history, to carry out the will of his Father, when this work is completed, Christ will place himself in the very position he had with the Father previously. While possessing again the full glory of the Father (John 17:5), he will put himself in subjection to the Father (1 Cor. 15:28). The relation of the Father and Son in eternity past, in Christ's historic and incarnate life, and in eternity future, then, is the same. Christ is fully equal in essence with the Father yet subordinate in role. Scripture clearly upholds these truths, and we in the church should likewise do the same.

## Conclusion

We have examined two areas where significant and wide-spread revisionism is currently taking place in the doctrine of the Trinity: mainline feminism's rejection of Scripture's predominantly masculine trinitarian language, and evangelical feminism's rejection of the eternal inner trinitarian relations of authority and obedience. Each of these areas calls for great care by thoughtful and prayerful Christian people. Because we have God's inspired word, and because God has, in this word, made his own triune life known, we must with renewed commitment seek to study, believe and embrace the truth of God as made known here. Where we have been misled by the history of this doctrine, may Scripture lead to correction. But where contemporary revision departs from Scripture's clear teaching, may we have courage to stand with the truth and for the truth. For the sake of the glory of the only true and living God, who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, may we pledge to him alone our fidelity, obedience, and love.

## Addendum: Points of Practical Application

1. *Embrace Rightful Authority Structures.* Because the structure of authority and obedience is not only established by God, but it is, even more, possessed in God's own inner trinitarian life, as the Father establishes his will and the Son joyfully obeys, therefore we should not despise, but should embrace proper lines of authority and obedience. In the home,

believing community, and society, rightful lines of authority are good, wise, and beautiful reflections of the reality that is God himself. This applies to those in positions of God-ordained submission and obedience who need, then, to accept joyfully these proper roles of submission. It applies equally to those in God-ordained positions of authority who need to embrace the proper roles of their responsible authority and exercise it as unto the Lord.

2. *View Both Authority and Submission as God-like.* With P. T. Forsyth, we need to see not only authority but also submission as God-like. We more readily associate God with authority, but since the Son is the *eternal Son* of the Father, and since the Son is *eternally God*, then it follows that the inner trinitarian nature of God honors both authority and submission. Just as it is God-like to lead responsibly and well, so it is God-like to submit in human relationships where this is required. It is God-like for wives to submit to their husbands; it is God-like for children to obey their parents; it is God-like for church members to follow the directives of their godly male eldership. Consider Phil. 2:5-11 and see the pattern of God-like submission manifest. We honor God as we model both sides of the authority-submission relationship that characterizes the trinitarian persons themselves.

3. *Revive the Wholesome and Biblical Concept of God as Father.* As Jesus instructed us in his model prayer (i.e., the Lord's prayer), we are to pray to "our Father who art in heaven." The concept and reality of God as Father is so very glorious, and we dare not lose this article of the church's faith and practice because of abusive fatherhood or cultural confusion over what fatherhood is. 'God as Father' invokes two counterbalancing and complementary ideas: *reverence* (e.g., hallowed be thy name), and *reliance* (e.g., give us this day our daily bread). God as Father deserves our highest and unqualified respect and devotion, and he deserves our absolute trust and dependence. Devotion to and dependence on God as Father captures, at heart, the whole of what our life before him is to be.

4. *Our Common Adoption into God's Family is as Sons.* All of us, as children of God, need to embrace God's rightful authority over our lives. We are all sons of God (兒 子 稱 神) through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 3:26), and as sons we must see our role, as with the role of the eternal Son, always and only to submit to the will of our Father. Paradoxically, when we obey fully, we enter fully into life as God created it to be. As Jesus said, "If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I

have spoken to you so that My joy might be in you and your joy might be made full" (John 15:9-10). We are to obey, without reservation, fully, and with great anticipation of blessing, for as we obey, we enter into full and lasting joy.

5. *Our Worship is of the Triune God, Equal in Essence yet Distinct in Role.* The beauty and harmony of God's created design of diversity in unity (as seen, e.g., in marriage and in the body of Christ) is rooted eternally and immutably in God himself. We only worship God when we uphold him *as he is*. If we despise unity and "celebrate diversity" that is fragmented and disjointed, or despise diversity by insisting on a uniformity that denies created and God-ordained differences, we will not value God for *who* he is, and so we will not honor him *as he is*. In God, diversity of persons serves the unity of purpose, method and goal. The will of the Father is gladly carried out by the Son. When the Spirit comes, it is his joy to do the will of the Son. In purpose they are united, in roles they are distinct, and in *both* (purpose and role) there is glad acceptance. Together the three persons model what our 'diversity in unity' of relationship should look like and how our lives together are to be lived. ■

<sup>1</sup> This article was first delivered as a paper at the "Building Strong Families" conference, Dallas, Texas, March 20-22, co-sponsored by FamilyLife and The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. An expanded and edited version of this article will appear as part of a forthcoming chapter, "The Doctrine of the Trinity," in *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*, edited by Douglas S. Huffman and Eric L. Johnson (Zondervan).

<sup>2</sup> Consider a sampling of recently published works, and notice the variety of theological perspectives and interests represented among their authors: Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991; 2nd ed., 1997); Ted Peters, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993); Thomas F. Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives: Toward Doctrinal Agreement* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994); Duncan Reid, *Energies of the Spirit: Trinitarian Models in Eastern Orthodox and Western Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997); Kevin Vanhoozer, ed., *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> Donald Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God Language* (Ann Arbor: Servant, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, "The Doctrine of the Trinity: Where the Church Stands or Falls," *Interpretation* 45 (1991) 117.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1973) 19.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979); Virginia Mollenkott, *The Divine Feminine: The Biblical Imagery of God as Female* (New York: Crossroad,



1983); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983); Ruth Duck, *Gender and the Name of God: The Trinitarian Baptismal Formula* (New York: Pilgrim, 1991); Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Gail Ramshaw, *God Beyond Gender: Feminist Christian God-Language* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Aída Besançon Spencer, et. al., *The Goddess Revival* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>7</sup>For very careful and thorough study and critique of this argumentation, see Alvin F. Kimel, Jr., ed., *Speaking the Christian God: The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); and John W. Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998).

<sup>8</sup>Note that the early creeds speak of the second person as “begotten” not made, which, as such, contains no gender connotation. So, it is argued, to speak of the Child begotten of the Father/Mother is consistent with the language of the early church and preserves continuity while making a needed correction.

<sup>9</sup>Note the telling title of an article opposed to feminist God-language revisionism, viz., Elizabeth Achtemeier, “Exchanging God for ‘No Gods’: A Discussion of Female Language for God,” in Kimel, ed., *Speaking the Christian God*, 1-16.

<sup>10</sup>For an exhaustive discussion of biblical references to God employing feminine imagery, see Cooper, *Our Father in Heaven*, chapter 3, “The Bible’s Feminine and Maternal References to God,” 65-90.

<sup>11</sup>Elaine Pagels, “What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity,” in Christ and Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising*, 107 comments that “the absence of feminine symbolism of God marks Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in striking contrast to the world’s other religious traditions, whether in Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome, or Africa, Polynesia, India, and North America.”

<sup>12</sup>Achtemeier, “Exchanging God for ‘No Gods,’” 8-9.

<sup>13</sup>See, *ibid.*, 12, where Achtemeier acknowledges that many feminists deny that naming God as feminine links God with creation, but she asserts and then supports with numerous citations her claim, “But feminist writings themselves demonstrate that it does.”

<sup>14</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969), I. 2., 878-879, writes: “the content of the doctrine of the Trinity . . . is not that God in His relation to man is Creator, Mediator and Redeemer, but that God in Himself is eternally God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . . [God] cannot be dissolved into His work and activity.”

<sup>15</sup>Wainwright, “Doctrine of the Trinity,” 123.

<sup>16</sup>The term “complementarian” is the self-designation of the evangelicalism constituency that would see God’s created design for men and women as comprising male headship in the created order, reflecting itself in the requirement of a qualified male eldership in the church and the husband’s overarching responsibility in the leadership of the home. The single best volume describing and defending a complementarian vision is John Piper and Wayne Grudem, eds., *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991).

<sup>17</sup>See, e.g., Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *Journal of the Evangelical*

*Theological Society*, 40/1 (March 1997) 57-68; and Stanley J. Grenz, “Theological Foundations for Male-Female Relationships,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41/4 (December 1998) 615-630; Royce G. Gruenler, *The Trinity in the Gospel of John: A Thematic Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986); and Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

<sup>18</sup>Some egalitarians acknowledge the eternal inner-trinitarian Father-Son relation yet do not understand this as implying or entailing relations of authority and submission in the created order. See Craig Keener, “Is Subordination Within the Trinity Really Heresy? A Study of John 5:18 in Context,” *Trinity Journal* 20 NS (1999) 39-51.

<sup>19</sup>See, e.g., Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female: A Study of Relationships from a Theological Point of View* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), where he asks, “how can one defend a sexual hierarchy whereby men are over women . . . without supposing that the half of the human race which exercises authority is superior in some way to the half which submits?” (p. 71). He continues by asking further whether anyone can “establish the mooted point—woman’s *subordination* to the man—by underscoring the obvious point—woman’s *difference from* the man—without the help of the traditional point—woman’s *inferiority to* the man? The answer, it appears to us, is no” (p. 84).

<sup>20</sup>Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping,” 67 says, e.g., that any talk about subordination “smacks of the Arian heresy.”

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>23</sup>Wainwright, “Doctrine of the Trinity,” 120 (italics added).

<sup>24</sup>For a discussion of evidence that early church theology upheld the simultaneous eternal equality of essence yet functional relationship of authority and obedience among the persons of the triune Godhead, see also, Robert Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990) 65-78; and Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42/3 (September 1999) 461-476. In limited space, Kovach and Schemm cite examples from Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, and Augustine, with supporting commentary from John Calvin, Philip Schaff, Jaroslav Pelikan, J. N. D. Kelly, Charles Hodge, W. G. T. Shedd, and they cite (p. 471) the conclusion of Paul Rainbow, “Orthodox Trinitarianism and Evangelical Feminism,” 4 (unpublished paper, based on his dissertation, “Monotheism and Christology in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6,” [D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1987]), in which Rainbow concludes, “From the earliest form of the creed we can see that the Father and the Son are united in being, but ranked in function.”

<sup>25</sup>St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. 5 of *The Works of St. Augustine* (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991) IV. 27 (italics added).

<sup>26</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *God the Holy Father* (1897; reprint, London: Independent Press, 1957) 42.

<sup>27</sup>P. T. Forsyth, *Marriage, Its Ethic and Religion* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912) 70-71.

<sup>28</sup>Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, 22.