Intra-trinitarian Subordination:
Reflections on the Ontological Relationship
of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

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INTRODUCTION

Immeasurable complexity characterizes trinitarian research. Preeminently profound among the doctrines of the church, it is the “majestic mystery” beyond full comprehension. Yet, the Bible does disclose knowledge about the triune God, and believers “ought to take pains to ensure” that they benefit from it.

Scripture describes how the divine persons interact outwardly to accomplish humanity’s salvation. Whether this outworking of the Trinity demonstrates trinitarian communion prior to Christ’s incarnation is the question motivating this paper. Perhaps there are relational nuances in the economic Trinity not found in that of the ontological or immanent Trinity. While the former portrays the divine relationships demonstrated in the economy of salvation, the latter peers into the “life of God in himself.”

Herman Bavinck believed that all doctrinal error results from, or is attributable to, a deviation from the orthodox teaching of the Trinity. With this in mind, this study must establish the essential elements of trinitarian doctrine before it dares to proceed further.

ESSENTIALS

God is one. Anchoring one’s understanding in this initial fact coincides with the biblical emphasis. Establishing the divine oneness is paramount in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:4; 2.

Isaiah 43:11). Furthermore, God’s unity of being is self-evident when considering the whole biblical structure—perhaps especially in the Apostle Paul’s writings. Christians worship precisely one God, and “besides him there is no other” (Deuteronomy 4:35). This one God “is Spirit” (John 4:24). In other words, “his essential nature is spirit.” Trinitarian dialogues need to begin here—with the eternal, inseparable, single “Being of God”—or they will fail. Yet, even here theological restraint is in order.

Logical priority in a trinitarian discussion does not imply an ontological priority. Christians should always bear in mind that God’s oneness and his threeness are equally important. Neither article holds more importance than the other. Continuing with the Old Testament foundation, the New Testament unfolds the divine threeness in Matthew 3:16-17; 28:18-19; John 10:30, 12:45, 14:10-11, 17:21-23; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Hebrews 9:14, and elsewhere. From this, it is plain that Christianity is both monotheistic and trinitarian. No other religion has this baseline of essential doctrine.

Theologians in both the East and West have long been in agreement on the reality of God’s one essence and his three persons. He is eternally and concurrently one God in three coequal persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Orthodoxy does not assert that there are “three

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9 Maintaining the simplicity of Christ’s statement has challenged the Church. Augustine wrote of God’s “nature, or substance, or essence, or whatever else you may call that which God is.” Terms used by others include *essence, being, ousia,* and *substance.* Augustine, *Trinity (Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century),* translated by Edmund Hill. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2011), p. 126.
Gods and exactly one God.”

It teaches that within the Godhead there are three divine persons who:

- are ontologically united. The existence of any of these persons is logically sufficient for the existence of all three. Put another way, the unity of the Trinity is grounded in necessary relations between the three persons. This means that it is simply not possible for one of the three to exist independently from the other two.

Spirit is indivisible. Thus God, while triune, is simple. He has no parts. Jesus is not one third of God. He is all of God. So too, the Father and the Holy Spirit are all of God. The entirety of the divine essence—with nothing left out—is in the Father, and in the Son, and in the Spirit. Since God’s being cannot be divided between each of the three divine persons, “each person is the whole of God.”

Because of its simplicity, the synopsis offered by Fred Sanders on this topic is helpful: “God’s way of being God is to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit simultaneously from all eternity, perfectly complete in a triune fellowship of love.” God is eternally and inseparably three divine persons within the one divine essence. If God were lacking this “eternal threeness” in the ceaseless unity of his one divine essence, he “would not be the God that he is.” Having established this minimum baseline of trinitarian doctrine, the inquiry now becomes one of relationships within the Trinity.

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15 Ibid., locations 3398-3400.
16 Letham, p. 176.
18 George Hunsinger, p. 300.
ETERNAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON AND SPIRIT

Claims that the Son is ontologically subordinate to the Father plagued the early church. Arianism was a “virulent form of [this] Subordinationism.”19 Arians rejected the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit by positing exclusive transcendence and eternality to the Father. In their model, Jesus was a created intermediary.20

Responding to these claims, the church rejected “any form of ontological hierarchy, order or ranking among them that would pertain to their eternal state” by affirming “the consubstantiality . . . coeternity and the essential oneness of the persons of the Trinity.”21 Accordingly, Christ’s subordination is due only to the incarnation and nothing inherent within the Trinity.22 Stated differently, this system embraces absolute, eternal equality of authority within the Godhead.

Opponents of this viewpoint argue that subordination exists eternally within the Trinity. Firmly believing that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are subordinate to the Father in terms of intra-trinitarian authority, they assert that this authority structure is ontological. While having no bearing on the equality of divinity of each person, the Father has “greater authority” than the Son and Spirit. They have an eternal position in “submission to [the Father’s] authority.”23

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22Millard Erickson, Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate, Kindle. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2009), locations 101-104.
This student has found no theologian who denies that the Son, because of his incarnation, functioned in a role of submission to the Father while on earth. The rub is whether the submission demonstrated within the economic Trinity is eternal.

J. Scott Horrell defends eternal subordination of function within the Godhead. Attempting to reduce resistance to this theory, he offers sensitive, inoffensive phrases to describe it. He writes of the “generous preeminence of the Father, the joyous collaboration of the Son, and the ever-serving activity of the Spirit.” Good motivation does not always prevent one from missing the point.

Exclusive application of these terms to just one person in the Trinity—as if they define sole and specific roles within the ontological Trinity—simply does not work. Designations of preeminence apply to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus has the preeminence in Colossians 1:18. Mark 3:29 places the Holy Spirit in a preeminent position related to blasphemy. Matthew 20:28 states that Jesus came to serve. Besides these facts, the Apostle John highlights the joyous collaboration of the Father, Son, and Spirit (John 14:10, 25; 15:26; 16:12-15; 17:20-23).

Many see difficult implications in eternal submission within the Trinity. Nonetheless, Horrell’s effort to dampen the impact of alleged intra-trinitarian subordination falls flat. Determining whether the belief finds true support in the Bible is the solution. Toward that goal, narrowing attention to God the Son is beneficial.

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25 Ibid.
ONLY BEGOTTEN

During the battle against Arianism, Christian scholars taught that Christ is the “Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages.” Rendering monogenēς as “only begotten” in John 3:16 and other passages drove these conclusions. Since the twentieth century, however, theologians and linguists have challenged that translation. It is now well known that gennaō is not the root words for monogenēς. The root is genōς, “which means ‘class’ or ‘kind.’”27 Equipped with this new insight, the church can now address the subject with added clarity.

Craig S. Keener informs his readers that references to the begetting of the Son “may say more about second-century Christology than about semantic presuppositions shared between John and his original audience.”28 Completely ignoring the concept of begetting in his treatment of John 3:16, D. A. Carson favors the translation “the One and Only.”29 In fact, the term begotten occurs only twice in his 715-page tome, The Gospel According to John.

The Greek construction behind so loved that he gave his one and only Son . . . emphasizes the intensity of the love, and insists that the envisaged consequence really did ensue; the words “his one and only Son” . . . stress the greatness of the gift. The Father gave his best, his unique and beloved Son (cf. Rom. 8: 32).30

Theologians work with the information and translations accessible to them. One could understand insistence upon the Son’s begetting based on the mistranslation only begotten—when that was all that was available. Scholars now have better information. It seems puzzling that seasoned theologians base appeals in favor of eternal subordination of the Son on outdated and

30Ibid., p. 204.
incorrect data. Nonetheless, many trinitarian theologians are rallying in support of the doctrine. Summarizing the fray on the side of eternal subordination, Sanders could not be clearer. He speaks of the “irreversible taxis”

to which the obedience of the incarnate Christ corresponds in human form. It’s an eternal procession that reaches its strangely logical final conclusion in the sending of the Son. As for his submission to the Father, I don’t know what they call it in the happy land of the Trinity, but when it lives among us it is rightly named obedience.  

In a book published in 2015, Robert Letham repeatedly cites the historical belief that Jesus Christ is the only begotten. Curiously, he does not address the linguistic work done in the twentieth century. His chapter merely recaps what earlier theologians had concluded—based on an error in translation. During a debate in 2005, Bruce Ware did the same thing.

**RELATIONSHIPS EXPRESSED BY THE TERMS FATHER AND SON**

Ware has also appealed to the relationships implicit in the words Father and Son. Rather than designating an “ad hoc arrangement for the incarnation,” he claims that the church has always accepted these terms as indicative of their “eternal personhood and relationship.” While this seems obvious enough, Ware does not stop there. He also insists that this relationship entails

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Earthly parent-child relationships entail authority, especially in patristic culture. Hence, he surmises:

The Father is the grand architect, the wise designer of all that has occurred in the created order, and he, not the Son . . . is specifically said to have supreme authority over all. In his position and authority, the Father is supreme among the Persons of the Godhead as he is supreme over the whole created order.\textsuperscript{36}

Grudem appeals to Ephesians 1:3-5, which assigns ultimate authority to choose the elect to the Father. Further contending that Scripture is devoid of a single allusion to any type of filial authority over the Father, he claims that the “entire history of salvation belongs to the Father.”\textsuperscript{37} Bold and sweeping in its depth, this assertion appears to project human societal needs upon the Trinity.

Terms describing God must not be “understood univocally, but rather analogically. . . . never by reference to human life on earth.”\textsuperscript{38} Torrance concurs. Scholars cannot truly know what the designation of Father and Son means within the ontological Trinity. Grasping the full meaning of “divine Fatherhood and Sonship . . . in terms of what human Fatherhood [and] Sonship” look like is problematic.\textsuperscript{39} “There comes a point when [analogies] cannot be pressed further.”\textsuperscript{40}

Believers can understand some things about the divine persons, but should resist \textit{strict} correspondence between the divine and earthly familial relationships. How people understanding parental roles must not be the determining factor. Human relationships are temporal and tainted by sin. What is inescapable in human relationships is not even possible in divine communion.

\textsuperscript{35}Ibid., p. 16.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., p. 17.
\textsuperscript{37}Wayne Grudem et al., “Do Relations of Authority and Submission Exist Eternally Among the Persons of the Godhead?”
\textsuperscript{38}Kevin Giles, \textit{The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology}, Kindle. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), locations 2750-2751.
\textsuperscript{39}Torrance, p. 192.
J. Oliver Buswell argues that the terms *Father* and *Son* express “personal relationships in the eternal Trinity, without in any sense involving the thought of generation . . . or essential subordination.” As with begetting, no sound exegetical reason remains to assume eternal subordination of the Son. To reach the conclusion that authority is required in the Godhead based on the terms *Father* and *Son* seems to be arbitrary. Carson’s point seems applicable here. John 3:16 underscores the “intensity” of the Father’s love for his Son. Love looks like the most defensible correlation between divine and human relationships based on the expressions *Father* and *Son*. A lack of conflict with any of the divine attributes makes this theory even more appealing.

DIVINE ATTRIBUTES AND SUBMISSION WITHIN THE GODHEAD

God the Son submitted to his Father in and during the incarnation. From this undisputed fact coupled with the eternality of the divine relations, Ware concludes that the Son is eternally in submission to his Father. He tempers his declaration with a warning that this should not be understood as a reluctant submission. This does not soften the claim. Works on the attributes of God provide insight at this point.

Because “every defining attribute of God includes all the others,” the Church affirms that God’s omniscience is eternal. If it were not, then his knowledge would not encompass

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42Carson, p. 204.
everything. God’s wisdom is his omniscience “as manifested in the adaptation of means to ends.”\textsuperscript{46} Just as God’s omniscience is eternal, so is this divine wisdom.

God’s knowledge, “unlike ours, is not successive and gradually acquired.”\textsuperscript{47} God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit know all things simultaneously, equally, and eternally in divine wisdom. As a consequent, when Acts 2:23 speaks of the “determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God,” it cannot mean there was a debate among the three persons as to the best course of action to take. God the Father did not have to formulate a plan by choosing among the best options available to him. Nor did he have to propose his idea to the Son and Spirit. They did not have to offer their unique insights and perspectives, which they had pondered beforehand. Neither a coming to terms with the superiority of the Father’s plan, nor the Son’s choice to submit his will, are consistent with the attributes of God. The individual strengths of each member of a human team contribute to the strength of the team as a whole. Such a concept is foreign to the triune God.

God’s perfect, eternal unity is above human comprehension. While people think in terms of submitting one will to another, this cannot be so within the Godhead. Because of the divine perfections, the blessed Trinity has unity of being and mind. Bringing history toward one goal is simultaneously and cohesively the one work of the one God who has one will.

To be sovereign is to be the “ruler of all things.”\textsuperscript{48} Affirming eternal submission within the immanent Trinity ascribes final sovereignty to the Father. He alone of the three divine persons is the ultimate source of all divine decisions and acts—with the Son and Spirit

submitting to his will and obeying his commands. Such a stance diminishes the sovereignty of
the Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Scripture speaks of God having hands and eyes. Anthropomorphisms like these help
explain something about God through analogy. Anthropopraxism is a type of anthropomorphism,
and is a rhetorical device that depicts “deity with the activities of humanity.”49 The “determinate
counsel” of Acts 2:23 appears to be a good candidate for designation as anthropopraxic.

McCall insists that “there are no good reasons” to accept Ware and Grudem’s theory on
submission within the ontological Trinity and “very good reasons” to reject it. Marshaling scores
of biblical texts does not settle the debate; both sides can do that. Theological interpretation is
the heart of the matter. McCall counsels his listeners to decide if the passages in question “really
support the full theological conclusion” that Ware and Grudem insist upon.50

Arguing from the doctrine of divine simplicity, Dennis A. Jowers affirms eternal equality
of authority among the persons of the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one will.
Because there is only one divine will, it follows that the Son has no need whatsoever to submit
his will to the Father’s. “If the Father and Son possess only one will, the same will, then the
Father cannot issue commands to the Son qua divine, and the Son qua divine cannot submit to
them.”51

50 Wayne Grudem et al., “Do Relations of Authority and Submission Exist Eternally Among the Persons of the
Godhead?”
51 Dennis W. Jowers, “The Inconceivability of Subordination within a Simple God” in Dennis W. Jowers and H.
Wayne House, eds., The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives On the Equality of God the Father and
CONCLUSION

Problems lie in projecting a necessary subordination of roles in human society upon the Trinity. Humans need authority structures in society due to their temporal limitations, differences in knowledge and wisdom, and conflicting self-interests. No such conditions exist within the Godhead. Considering intra-trinitarian relationship requires a separation from “all that belongs to human conditions and imperfections.”

Based on these considerations and having already established the essential elements of trinitarian doctrine in the introduction, it seems plain that each divine Person is eternally aware—without deliberation, debate, or consideration—of the best way to assure that his good plan is brought about. After all, God “cannot be ignorant of anything; his knowledge can neither be increased nor diminished.” The Father has had no more perfect wisdom and knowledge than the Son or the Spirit. The mind of God is the mind of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No divine Person needs to submit to another. Insisting that the Son and Spirit submitted to the Father in eternity implies that they had a different rationale for a particular issue, which required them to submit. God’s attributes preclude such a need for submission of will to the Father. Careful consideration of the evidence supports the view that the sole living God who created and rules over all and who is described in the Bible is one Triune God in three co-eternal, co-equal Persons, each Person being presented as distinct yet equal, not as three separate gods, but one Godhead, sharing equally in honor, glory, worship, power, authority, rule and rank, such that no Person has eternal primacy over the others.

54This assertion does not pertain to the time of Christ’s conception to his death. Jesus’ admitted his limited knowledge (Matthew 24:36).
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