

NEO-SUBORDINATIONISM: THE ALIEN ARGUMENTATION IN THE GENDER DEBATE

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Abstract

Over the last forty years, the debate over gender roles in the home, church, and society has escalated in an unprecedented way among evangelical Christians due to the introduction of an alien argumentation that grounds the permanent, functional subordination of women to men in the being of God. This argumentation—which is termed “neo-subordinationism” in this article—states that there is a prescriptive hierarchical ordering of the immanent Trinity that is recognizable through the economic Trinity. In this Trinitarian hierarchy, the Son and the Holy Spirit are said to be ontologically equal but eternally subordinated in role and authority to the Father, with the Holy Spirit also functionally subordinated to the Son (for those who accept the *filioque*). Likewise, women are ontologically equal but permanently subordinated to men in role and authority. As such, they cannot serve in certain leadership capacities in the home, church, or society. This novel argument has shifted the gender debate from discussing anthropology and ecclesiology to theology proper, a shift that has been called the “turn to the Trinity.”

This article argues that, while theology proper should inform all other areas of theological studies, reading perceived differences of gender roles into the immanent Trinity has serious systematic consequences. Thus, the equality of the Trinity should be preserved by excluding neo-subordinationism from the debate on gender roles. This is accomplished, first, by briefly reviewing the history of the gender debate with a particular focus on the emergence of modern complementarian and egalitarian perspectives and the entrance of neo-subordinationism into complementarian argumentation among evangelicals generally and Seventh-day Adventists specifically. Second, four significant problems of neo-subordinationism for Christian theology are discussed: (1) its failure to adequately account for all the canonical data, (2) its inherent logical inconsistencies, (3) its inaccurate reporting of church history, and (4) its ramifications for soteriology and the character of God. Finally, the article concludes with some recommendations for how to proceed in the gender debate without injuring intra-Trinitarian ontology.

Keywords: Trinity, Christology, Pneumatology, eternal functional subordination, neo-subordinationism, gender, complementarianism, egalitarianism

Introduction

The role of women in the home, church, and society has been an intensely debated issue within Christianity at large for centuries. Over the last forty years, however, the gender debate has escalated in an unprecedented way among evangelical Christians due to the introduction of a new argumentation by some complementarian theologians that grounds the permanent, functional subordination of women to men in the nature of the triune God. This present-day nuance of an ancient heresy, which will be termed “neo-subordinationism” hereafter,¹ states that there is a prescriptive hierarchical ordering of the immanent Trinity (*ad intra*) that is recognizable through the economic Trinity (*ad extra*). In this Trinitarian hierarchy, the Son and the Holy Spirit are said to be *ontologically*² equal, but *functionally*³ subordinated

¹Subordinationism was a heresy of the third and fourth centuries taught by Origen of Alexandria (c. 185–c. 254 CE) and, in its most extreme form, by Arius (c. 256–336 CE). Both taught that the Son is eternally and ontologically subordinate and inferior to the Father, but Arianism took this subordination further by asserting that the Son had a beginning in eternity past. See the discussion in Norman R. Gulley, *God as Trinity*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology*, 4 vols. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 84–87, 94–96; Fernando L. Canale, “Doctrine of God,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen, Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary Reference Series 12 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2001), 142–143; Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 243–245; Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology: In One Volume* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2011), 552–553. The new subordinationist conception of the Trinity discussed in this article holds some similarities and differences to this ancient heresy. As such, this article will refer to this new conception of the Trinity—frequently called eternal functional subordinationism (EFS)—as “neo-subordinationism.” This term indicates similarities to ancient subordinationism, as the two conceptions of the Trinity are alike and arguably equivalent (see the section on logical inconsistencies below). However, a distinguishing technical term is used in greater fairness to the proponents of contemporary subordinationism, or EFS, many of whom claim to reject the ancient heresy. In this light, the term also acknowledges the differing nuance that the Son is ontologically equal but eternally subordinate in role/function/authority to the Father.

²Ontology refers to the metaphysical study of the nature of being. Discussions concerning divine ontology in this article refer to the very substance/essence/nature or being of God and the relationship of his three persons, or who God is in and of himself (i.e., the immanent Trinity [the Trinity *ad intra*]). See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 302; Kwabena Donkor, *God in 3 Persons—In Theology*, Biblical Research Institute Release 9 [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015], 17n49. Human ontology refers to the substance/essence/nature or being of humans.

³Functionality refers to how a person or thing operates or takes action. Thus, when divine functionality is discussed in this article, it refers to how God through his three persons acts in the world with respect to creation, redemption, and consummation (i.e., the economic Trinity [the Trinity *ad extra*]), which comes from the Greek word, οἰκονομικός [*oikonomikos*], referring to the arrangement of activities in a household [the English word, “economics” comes from this word]; for examples

throughout *eternity* in role and authority to the Father, with the Holy Spirit also *functionally* subordinated to the Son (for those who accept the *filioque*).⁴ Likewise, women are *ontologically* equal but *functionally* subordinated to men *permanently*. As such, they cannot serve in certain leadership capacities in the home, church, or society. This novel argumentation has shifted the gender debate from a discussion on anthropology and ecclesiology to one on theology proper, a shift that has been called the “turn to the Trinity.”⁵

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that, while it is true that theology proper should inform all areas of systematics (since it is the foundation upon which the edifice of systematic theology is built), reading perceived differences of gender roles into the immanent Trinity is theologically dangerous and has serious consequences for Christianity. Thus, the equality of the Trinity should be preserved by excluding neo-subordinationism from the contemporary discussion on gender roles because of its systematic destructive impact on orthodox Christian theology. This is accomplished, first, by briefly reviewing the history of the gender debate with a particular focus on the emergence of the two primary perspectives in the post-Reformation period—complementarianism and egalitarianism. Then, the entrance of neo-subordinationism into complementarian argumentation is traced among evangelicals generally and Seventh-day Adventists specifically. Next, four significant problems of neo-subordinationism for Christian theology are highlighted in some detail: (1) its failure to adequately account for all of the canonical data in Scripture, (2) its inherent logical inconsistencies, (3) its inaccurate reporting of the history of Christian thought, and (4) its ramifications for the essential Christian doctrines of salvation and the character of God. Finally, the article concludes with some recommendations for how to proceed in the gender debate without injuring intra-Trinitarian ontology.

of the use of οἰκονομικός, see Aristotle, [*Oce.*]; Xenophon, *Oec.*). See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 302; Donkor, *God in 3 Persons*, 17n49. Human functionality refers to how human persons act.

⁴The *filioque* debate (a Latin term, meaning “and from the Son”), in brief, was an argument between the Western and Eastern churches over whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from only the Father (Eastern position) or from both the Father and the Son (Western position). The *filioque* addition to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 CE) by the Western church was a major theological reason for the Great Schism that took place between Eastern and Western Christianity in 1054. For more information, see Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 135–138; Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Holy Spirit: A Guide to Christian Theology, Basic Guides to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 30; Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 521.

⁵Alan G. Padgett, “The Bible and Gender Troubles: American Evangelicals Debate Scripture and Submission,” *Di* 47.1 (2008): 24.

Historical Context of Neo-subordinationism in the Gender Debate

As this discussion is entered, it is important for the reader to realize that the present-day gender debate did not suddenly emerge in a vacuum; rather, a long historical progression of events and societal changes led up to these current discussions. While slight variations of views regarding gender roles existed among pre-Reformation Christians, a significant consensus thrived during this period of Christianity. The traditional theological view espoused at that time was “simply that women should not take up leadership roles in the church or society because they are defective in some ways by their very nature.”⁶ Though different in the details, primarily an *ontological* reason was set forth for why men were permitted to lead and women were prohibited from leading in the home, church, and society. Thus, a qualitative *ontological* difference between men and women was believed to exist, which resulted in the *functional* subordination of women to men. Yet a new understanding on gender roles began to surface during and progress after the Protestant Reformation (though the traditional view was difficult to relinquish entirely for the magisterial Protestant reformers and their followers).

The Reformation’s new understanding of the priesthood of all believers and other key theological differences between Protestant and Roman Catholic thinkers stimulated a discussion that led some to revise the previous traditional stance of an ontological difference between men and women. New argumentation was advanced by some “on the grounds of Scripture and right reason that women are called to ministry and gifted by the Spirit just as men are.”⁷ “Although women became more involved in ministry following the Reformation, they still experienced limitations.”⁸ Nevertheless, views regarding gender roles continued to evolve, gaining further ground for gender equality.

The Emergence of Two Differing Perspectives

After World War II, the rise of the women’s rights movement and secular feminism in the 1960s ignited greater fervor in the debate, especially in the United States of America. “[S]ome American Evangelical scholars began to argue on a number of fronts—including biblical interpretation—for the full equality of women in the church, home, and society” both *ontologically* and *functionally*.⁹ In the 1970s, they formed the Evangelical Women’s Caucus to further this cause. These evangelicals were referred to as “Christian feminists” or “egalitarians,” their preferred self-designation.¹⁰ In 1988, egalitarians

⁶Ibid., 22.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Nancy Hedberg, *Women, Men, and the Trinity: What Does It Mean to Be Equal?* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 63.

⁹Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 23.

¹⁰Richard M. Davidson, “Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture,” in *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister

formed a nonprofit organization named Christians for Biblical Equality (CBE), and produced their position document, “Statement on Men, Women and Biblical Equality,” in 1989, as a response to their opposition.¹¹

Not long after the rise of the egalitarian view of gender roles, “fundamentalists and conservative Evangelicals responded to this challenge with their own arguments and publications.”¹² However, the pre-Reformation traditional view for which they advocated was revised due to the changing cultural views of women’s ontological equality with men. Their nuanced argument asserted that “men and women are equal in *essence*, but that in *function* women are subordinate[d]” permanently.¹³ Thus, they revised the traditional *ontological* reason for the subordination of women by upholding the biblical, ontological equality that was argued by their counterparts, yet they continued to maintain the *permanent, functional* subordination of women to men. Since the 1970s, this group of evangelicals has been referred to as “patriarchalists,” “hierarchalists,” “traditionalists,” and, their preferred self-designation, “complementarians.”¹⁴ Triggering their opposition to form the CBE (as was discussed above), complementarians organized the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW) in 1987 in Danvers, Massachusetts, and published their manifesto on gender roles in 1988, which was called the “Danvers Statement.”¹⁵ Out of this historical context arose the modern, ongoing gender debate between these two main groups of evangelicals.¹⁶

The Entrance of an Alien Argumentation

Most of the gender debate between egalitarians and complementarians prior to and during the early 1970s had focused on identifying proper hermeneutical principles that should be utilized in biblical interpretation, evaluating the roles and authority of important female biblical characters (e.g., Deborah, the five daughters of Zelophehad, Philip’s five daughters, Pheobe, Junia, etc.), and doing exegesis on key scriptural passages that seemed

(Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 259. See also Christians for Biblical Equality, “History of CBE,” <http://www.cbeinternational.org/content/cbe-history>; idem, *Biblical Gender Equality: A Summary* (Minneapolis: Christians for Biblical Equality, 2015), 3–5.

¹¹Davidson, “Headship, Submission, and Equality,” 284. See also Christians for Biblical Equality, “Men, Women and Biblical Equality,” 1989, https://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/english_3.pdf.

¹²Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 23.

¹³Hedberg, *Women, Men, and the Trinity*, 2; Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 23–24; emphasis original.

¹⁴Davidson, “Headship, Submission, and Equality,” 259.

¹⁵Ibid., 284. See also Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “Our History,” <http://cbmw.org/history>. The “Danvers Statement” can be found at idem, “The Danvers Statement,” <http://cbmw.org/uncategorized/the-danvers-statement>.

¹⁶Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 22.

to address the dynamics of male-female relations (e.g., Gen 1–3, Luke 8:1–4; 1 Cor 11:2–16, 14:34–36; Gal 3:28; Eph 5:18–33; 1 Tim 2:8–15). However, an alien argumentation was introduced into the debate in the 1970s by some complementarian theologians, causing the discussion to take a surprising turn. Alan G. Padgett refers to this novel argumentation as the “turn to the Trinity.”¹⁷

George W. Knight III initiated this turn when in 1977 he published *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women*, which espoused the complementarian perspective on gender roles.¹⁸ What was novel and noteworthy about Knight’s argumentation was his usage of the economic and immanent Trinity, particularly the relationship between the Father and the Son, as an analogy for male-female relations.¹⁹ Even more significant was its new understanding that the Son—though fully God *ontologically*—is *functionally* subordinate in *eternity* to the Father. Knight wrote:

The apostle Paul in his appeal to the relation of God the Father to God the Son does not regard Christ’s Sonship and resultant incarnation as implying His inferiority to the Father. Although Christ the Son’s submission is expressed in the areas of action and of incarnation (the areas of service and of the accomplishment of salvation; cf. also I Cor. 15:24–28), it is also an expression of the ontological relationship of preincarnate, submissive Sonship (cf., e.g., John 5:18–23, 30).

The ontological relationship analogous to that between man and woman, writes Paul, is that between Father and Son (I Cor. 11:3). That Christ submits as Son and as incarnate, i.e., because of certain ontological aspects, does not mean therefore that He is inferior to the Father, nor does it cast into doubt His deity. Likewise, that the woman submits as woman does not mean therefore that she is inferior or that her humanity as an image-bearer is threatened. In both cases, it is equals in relationship to one another. In both cases, one, because of His or her ‘ontological’ and ordained role in relation to the other, acknowledges headship and submits. Just as no inferiority may be asserted or assumed for Christ in His submission, so also no inferiority may be asserted or assumed for woman, and no objection may be justly made because her submission rests on her cocreated identity as woman in relation to man.²⁰

Based on his research, Kevin Giles believes that Knight’s claim is the “first formulated . . . argument” to utilize neo-subordinationism, arguing

¹⁷Ibid., 24.

¹⁸George W. Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1977). This book built on his research in an earlier published article. See idem, “The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Male and Female with Special Reference to the Teaching/Ruling Functions in the Church,” *JETS* 18.2 (1975): 81–91.

¹⁹Ibid., 56. Knight wrote, “For the basis of man’s headship over woman and woman’s submission to man, the apostle Paul appeals to the analogy of God the Father’s headship over Jesus Christ, His incarnate Son (I Cor. 11:3). . . . With full authority and with *absolute* and *permanent* reasons, Paul argues for the form of this relationship between man and women” (ibid., 26; emphasis added).

²⁰Ibid., 55–56; see also 32–33.

that “just as women are permanently subordinated in authority to their husbands in the home and to male leaders in the church, so the Son of God is eternally subordinated in authority to the Father.”²¹ To arrive at this conclusion, Knight employed 1 Cor 11:3 as the foundation for his one-to-one linkage of male-female relations to the relationship between the Father and the Son respectively.²² 1 Corinthians 11:3 became the keynote passage that some complementarian writers later utilized to argue that the permanent, functional subordination of women to men is analogously connected to the eternal, functional subordination of the Son to the Father.

The publication of Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* in 1994 further developed and popularized Knight’s neo-subordinationism by stating, “[W]hile the persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes, they nonetheless differ in their relationships to the creation. The Son and the Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles. Moreover, these differences in role are not temporary but will last forever”²³ Grudem applied this Trinitarian relationship to male-female relations when he wrote, “[J]ust as the Father has authority over the Son in the Trinity, so the husband has authority over the wife in marriage.”²⁴ Since this publication, other systematic theologies written by conservative evangelicals have followed suit, such as Norman Geisler’s *Systematic Theology*, in which he stated, “All the members of the Trinity are equal in *essence*, but they do not have the same *roles*. . . . [I]t is clear that there is a *functional subordination*; that is, not only does each member have a different function or role, but some functions are also subordinated to others.”²⁵ For Geisler, like Grudem,²⁶ this functional subordination “is not just *temporal* and *economical*; it is *essential* and *eternal*.”²⁷ Thus, he also grounded the permanent,

²¹Kevin Giles, “The Evangelical Theological Society and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *EvQ* 80.4 (2008): 324, 323.

²²Knight, *The New Testament Teaching*, 26.

²³Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249. Giles believes that it “was the first evangelical systematic theology to enunciate the doctrine of the *eternal subordination of the Son in function/role and authority*” (“The Evangelical Theological Society,” 325; emphasis original). However, Millard J. Erickson mentions a few other systematic theologians before Grudem—such as Charles Hodge, Augustus Strong, and Louis Berkhof—who also taught some form of neo-subordinationism (See *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009], 27–33). Nevertheless, Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* was probably the first evangelical systematic theology to make an analogy of authority and subordination between the Father-Son relationship and male-female relations and most certainly popularized it.

²⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 257. For more detail on the analogy he makes between the Trinity and male-female relations, see *ibid.*, 454–471.

²⁵Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 548; emphasis original.

²⁶See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249–250.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 549; emphasis added.

functional subordination of women to men in the home, church, and society by appealing to “the nature of the Godhead.”²⁸

This neo-subordinationist conception of the immanent Trinity has even penetrated the thinking of some scholars of biblical theology. A notable example is Bruce K. Waltke’s *An Old Testament Theology*, in which he asserted that hierarchy “exists eternally in the Godhead itself, wherein the Son is always voluntarily subservient to the Father’s will and the Spirit to both. In the mystery of the Godhead, in which the three persons are one and equal, the Son obeys the Father, and the Spirit obeys both.”²⁹ This argument is utilized by Waltke to demonstrate that “[h]ierarchy in government is not the result of the Fall.” He stressed this pre-fall hierarchy in male-female relations in order to establish it as the divine prescriptive norm since the beginning of human history.³⁰

Reformed theologians, as well as Southern Baptist scholars and seminaries, have been the primary advocates of utilizing neo-subordinationism in their complementarian argumentation.³¹ In fact, the Southern Baptist Convention took a definitive stand in favor of the complementarian perspective on gender roles in its 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.³² Even so, the neo-subordinationist argument has not exclusively remained in Southern Baptist or other Calvinist circles. Scholars of other faith traditions have adopted it

²⁸Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 1134–1135. More recently, this neo-subordinationist conception of the Trinity has appeared in Michael F. Bird’s systematic theology, where he states, “I think that functional subordination with ontological equality is indeed consistent with historic orthodoxy” (*Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013], 120). Fortunately, he argues that the Trinity should not “be used to establish the proper relations between men and women, simply for the fact that the Trinity is unique and does not translate well as a model for relations between two persons of separate genders” (*ibid.*).

²⁹Bruce K. Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 243; emphasis added. Differing from Grudem and Geisler, Waltke adds the important qualifier “voluntarily” to “subservient,” which arguably softens his position (*ibid.*). Nevertheless, this subservience is “eternally in the Godhead itself”—his being—and in “the mystery of the Godhead” (*ibid.*).

³⁰*Ibid.* See also 239–247.

³¹The reason for this strong representation of neo-subordinationism among Reformed denominations would be an interesting topic for another article. Perhaps this phenomenon is related systematically in some way to a theology of determinism regarding the eternal decrees of God that some Calvinists maintain. This investigation is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to realize that not all determinists subscribe to neo-subordinationism.

³²See Article XVIII on “The Family” and the provided commentary on it in Southern Baptist Convention, “The Baptist Faith and Message,” 2000, <http://www.sbc.net/bfm2000/bfm2000.asp>. Article VI on “The Church” states, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” (*ibid.*). Cf. Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity?*, 51; Padgett, “Bible and Gender Troubles,” 25.

despite the fact that it is out of harmony with the representative teachings of their denominations. Giles points out that “[i]n America, Australia, and to a lesser extent in England, this teaching has swamped the evangelical world. It seems to be what most Evangelicals now believe.”³³

Neo-Subordinationism in Seventh-day Adventism

An interesting example of this rise of neo-subordinationism is that which has taken place among a few Seventh-day Adventist scholars, pastors, and evangelists.³⁴ Since the late 1800s and early 1900s, Seventh-day Adventists have affirmed the equality of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.³⁵ However,

³³Giles, “The Evangelical Theological Society,” 326. A book edited by Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House provided a venue for the debate over the Trinity between complementarians and egalitarians (see *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012]).

³⁴It should be pointed out that the majority of Seventh-day Adventist scholars still reject neo-subordinationism. Iriann Marie Hausted identifies several of these scholars and their various works on the issue, such as Woodrow W. Whidden II, Jerry Moon, John W. Reeve, Norman R. Gulley, Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, and Jo Ann Davidson (“Eternal Functional Subordination in the Work of Wayne Grudem and its Relationship to Contemporary Adventism” [paper presented at the 68th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society and the 2016 Autumn Symposium of the Adventist Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, 16 November 2016], 18–23, <http://www.atsjats.org/site/1/docs/2016/papers-triune-god/Hausted%20-%20Wayne%20Grudem%E2%80%99s%20Trinitarian%20Subordinationism%20-%20ATS%202016.pdf>).

³⁵See the discussions in Merlin D. Burt, “History of Seventh-day Adventist Views on the Trinity,” *JATS* 17.1 (2006): 125–139; Canale, “Doctrine of God,” 148–151; Denis Fortin, “God, the Trinity, and Adventism: An Introduction to the Issues,” *JATS* 17.1 (2006): 4–10; Jerry Moon, “The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 1: Historical Overview,” *AUSS* 41.1 (2003): 113–129; idem, “The Adventist Trinity Debate, Part 2: The Role of Ellen G. White,” *AUSS* 41.2 (2003): 275–292; Gerhard Pfandl, “The Doctrine of the Trinity among Seventh-day Adventists,” *JATS* 17.1 (2006): 160–179; Woodrow W. Whidden II, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity: Understanding God’s Love, His Plan of Salvation, and Christian Relationships* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002); Trinity Congress, South Pacific Division, “Consensus Statement,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, ed. Paul B. Petersen and Robert K. McIver (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2014), 219–220. See also the older Seventh-day Adventist theology textbook for colleges prepared by the Department of Education of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which says, “Often in theological writings, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are referred to as the First, Second, and Third Persons of the Godhead. This designation has nothing to do with position, honor, power, or authority, but is simply a variant means of identification. It has nothing to do with relationships within the Godhead or with our attitude or relation to its members” (T. H. Jemison, *Christian Beliefs: Fundamental Biblical Teachings for Seventh-day Adventist College Classes* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1959], 84n1). When commenting on Jesus’s subordination to the Father, the textbook points out that this submission was voluntary and limited to

some Seventh-day Adventist writers began to use neo-subordinationist argumentation borrowed from Grudem in the 1970s and 1980s to support a complementarian perspective. Others have used the Trinity to support competing models for male-female relations.

“the period of His earthy ministry,” during which he “had taken ‘the form of a servant’ (Philippians 2:7)” (ibid., 88). Thus, Christ’s submission to the Father is said to be temporary and function, not eternal.

Additionally, see the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, in which Canale writes, “The biblical idea of the subordination of God the Son to God the Father belongs, not to the inner structure of divine reality, but rather to the sphere of the accomplishment of the plan of salvation. . . . Thus, statements that imply the subordination of God the Son to God the Father are to be understood as a result of His incarnation, the expression of His obedience to the Father. Without this subordination the Incarnation itself would not have reached its salvific purpose. . . . The functional subordination of the Son does not entail, however, an ontological dependence or inferiority of the Son. In a broad sense, the subordination of the Son to the Father can be seen as expressing the unity of the inner trinitarian life as the Godhead works out salvation in and throughout the history of the great controversy. In the Bible, therefore, no ground is found for the idea that there is an ontological subordination of the Son to the Father or that the divine reality of the Father has in any way a primacy of origin over the divine reality of the Son” (“Doctrine of God,” 126). Canale’s discussion on the “delegation of the Father to the Son” as the “counterpart” to “the subordination of the Son to the Father” within the plan of redemption is also helpful in clarifying the Seventh-day Adventist understanding of intra-Trinitarian relations ontologically and economically. See ibid., 127–128.

Additionally, note that the official twenty-eight fundamental beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church nowhere indicate any kind of hierarchy and subordination in the Trinity (see statements 2–5 in Seventh-day Adventist Church, “28 Fundamental Beliefs,” 2015, <https://www.adventist.org/fileadmin/adventist.org/files/articles/official-statements/28Beliefs-Web.pdf>). Kwabena Donkor, assistant director of the Biblical Research Institute (BRI) of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, understands fundamental beliefs two through five “to remove any hint of subordination” (*God in 3 Persons*, 19). Also the book produced by the Ministerial Association of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, which explains the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs, nowhere speaks of a hierarchical ordering of the Trinitarian persons. Rather, it describes the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity “as coeternal, coexistent in utter self-giving and love for one another” (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* [Silver Spring, MD: Ministerial Association, 2005], 30). Furthermore, when commenting on the “economy of function” of the Godhead, it does speak of “orderliness” and “union” and states that “different members of the Godhead perform distinct tasks in saving man” (ibid., 30–31). However, it nowhere speaks of hierarchy and subordination, but rather mutuality. As an example, it discusses the mutual participation of all three persons in the giving of the Son: “The incarnation beautifully demonstrated the working relationship of the three persons of the Godhead. The Father gave His Son, Christ gave Himself, and the Spirit gave Jesus birth (John 3:16; Matt 1:18, 20)” (ibid., 30). This same description of intra-Trinitarian relations is found in the earlier edition of the book that was published in 1988 (idem, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*

Role of Women in the Church Study Committee (1973)

On 19 July 1973, “the General Conference Committee voted to establish an *ad hoc* committee on the role of women in the church,” which met at Camp Mohaven in Danville, Ohio, during 16–20 September 1973.³⁶ An argument in two of the papers shared there might have been the first in which neo-subordinationist argumentation was used in print (or at least the first to make an analogy between the Father-Son relation and male-female relations) in the modern gender debate among Seventh-day Adventists. The paper titled “The Relationship of Man and Women in the Beginning and at the End” by Gerhard F. Hasel, professor of Old Testament and biblical theology and former dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, connected the relationship of the Father as head over the Son to the husband’s relationship as head over his wife in the marriage context via 1 Cor 11:3.³⁷ While Hasel preserved the Father and Son’s ontological equality, he readily pointed out the Son’s submission to the Father. However, the exact nature of this subordination cannot be determined conclusively, because the paper lacks further clarification. Since Hasel was more egalitarian and favorable of women

[Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1988], 23–24). Thus, it seems that the denomination rejects any notion of hierarchy and subordination in the Trinity.

A more recent confirmation that Seventh-day Adventists, as a denomination, reject notions of subordination in the Trinity was that which happened during the discussion to make changes to the twenty-eight fundamental beliefs at the 2015 General Conference session in San Antonio, Texas. During that discussion, a question was raised about the addition of Ps 101:1 to the reference list following the third fundamental belief about God the Father, as well as a minor change to the final sentence of that statement. The question inquired about the idea that Jesus is “eternally subordinate to the Father” (General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (San Antonio, TX), Transcripts of the Meetings of the Sixtieth General Conference Session, 2–10 July 2015, eighth business meeting of 6 July 2015, 20, <http://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/GCSM/2015/GCST20150706PM.pdf>). Ángel Manuel Rodríguez, former director of the BRI, responded to the question, saying, “As far as I can tell, such a teaching hasn’t been part of the Adventist body of beliefs, and this passage [Ps 101:1] denies the subordination” (ibid.). To view the fundamental belief changes that were proposed during this discussion, see Andrew McChesney, “28 Fundamental Beliefs Get an Update,” *Adventist News*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/28-fundamental-beliefs-get-an-update>. Lynda du Preez brought this occurrence to my attention.

³⁶Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (ASTR), “1973 Role of Women in the Church Committee: Mohaven Documents,” <https://www.adventistarchives.org/1973-5-mohaven#.U0OAMcdO0lo>.

³⁷Gerhard Hasel, “The Relationship of Man and Woman in the Beginning and at the End” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Role of Women in the Church Study Committee, Danville, OH, 16–20 September 1973), 18, 23, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/the-relationship-of-man-and-woman-in-the-beginning-and-at-the-end.pdf>.

in ministry throughout the paper³⁸—as was the committee to which he presented—the subordination he had in mind was likely only functional and temporary and, thus, it may not be fully neo-subordinationist.

In this same study committee, Raoul Dederen, professor of systematic and historical theology and former dean of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, shared the paper “The Role of Woman Today: A Theology of Relationship—Man to Woman,” in which he similarly connected the Father-Son relation to male-female relations by way of what he called the “kephale-structure” in 1 Cor 11:3. He wrote,

This kephale-structure of the relationship between man and woman stands within a larger chain, or if you like it better the structure goes far beyond the relationship between man and woman. Even the relationship of Christ to God, the relationship of the church to Christ are determined by this fundamental principle of being set within and subject to an order that was instituted by God from the beginning. . . . This basic structure is the kephale-structure: the man is the head of the woman, Christ is the head of the man, God is the head of Christ. The ‘head’ is that which determines, that which leads.³⁹

³⁸See *ibid.*, 22–24. Hasel wrote, “In addition to the important observation that the rulership of man over woman is valid only in the sphere of marriage, it has been observed, if our careful investigation has not misled us, that the husband’s ruling function is not a part of God’s perfect creation but a result of sin. The implications of these observations are of immense significance for the task of the proclamation of the gospel of God’s remnant church. If the plan of salvation and the message of the gospel are concerned with the reproduction of the image of God in men under the guidance of the Spirit of Truth and on the basis that Christ in His life and death has achieved even more than recovery from the ruin wrought through sin, is it then not the responsibility of the church as God’s instrument to bring about the reproduction of the image of God in man, to restore harmony between God and man, to establish equality and unity where there is now inequality and disunity? Would this not involve among many things a restoring of and establishing of equality between men and women in such spheres of life and activity where the divine declaration of man’s rulership over his wife and the wife’s submission to her husband (Gen 3:16; Eph 5:22ff; 1 Pet 3:1ff. [*sic*]) does not apply? Furthermore, does the urgency of the task and the shortness of time not require the full utilization of all of our manpower and womanpower resources, which includes the full participation of women, also in the lines of ministerial activity? If ‘in Christ’ or in the church there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free man, neither male or female (Gal 3:28), does this oneness and equality not call for a united effort to finish the task where all, both ‘male and female’ (3:28) participate in full equality of responsibilities and privileges in all lines of work in order to hasten the coming of our beloved Lord and Savior Jesus Christ?” (*ibid.*, 24). The same thinking is expressed in his later paper, which was presented before the BRI in 1975 (*idem*, “Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3” [paper presented at the Meeting of the Biblical Research Institute Committee, Washington, DC, 29–30 December 1975], 13–14). See also *idem*, “Equality from the Start: Woman in the Creation Story,” *Spectrum* 7.2 (1975): 21–28.

³⁹Raoul Dederen, “The Role of Woman Today: A Theology of Relationship—Man to Woman” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Role of Women in the Church Study Committee, Danville, OH, 16–20 September 1973), 10.

However, like Hasel, Dederen carefully noted that the submission of woman to man is “*limited* to the case of married women in relation to their own husbands. The issue is therefore the family order, and not an order applying to the status of the sexes or to social situations in general,”⁴⁰ including the context of the church, “which is a body of which Christ is *sole* head.”⁴¹ As for the submission of the Son to the Father, he did not say whether it was limited to a certain context (i.e., the incarnation) and, thus, only temporary and functional, or unqualified and, thus, eternal and ontological. Thus, like in Hasel’s paper, the exact nature of the Trinitarian subordination discussed in Dederen’s paper cannot be settled definitively merely by what is written therein.⁴² The jury is still out on whether or not the two papers make a fully

⁴⁰Ibid., 11; emphasis added.

⁴¹Ibid., 12; emphasis added. He also stated in the conclusion that the reasons for the apostolic church’s hesitancy toward “the regular participation of women in the ministry” “were not based . . . on the nature (male or female) of the three persons of the Godhead, nor on the nature of the order of creation-fall, nor on the essence of the ministry instituted by Christ” (ibid., 14).

⁴²In an article from 1970, Dederen affirmed the ontological equality of the persons of the Trinity, when he wrote that “we must confess that the Trinity is one indivisible God and that the distinctions of the persons do not destroy the divine unity. This unity of God is expressed by saying that he is one substance. Nevertheless, in the divine unity there are three co-eternal and co-equal persons, who, though distinct, are the One undivided and adorable God. This is the doctrine of Scripture” (“Reflections on the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *AUSS* 8.1 [1970]: 16). Later he described their relationship as one “not of separation but of interdependence” (ibid.). However, when he explained the details of the relationship between the Father and the Son, he did so in terms of priority of the former and subordination of the latter: “When the apostles discuss [the Son’s] relationship with the Father they speak as if he were in some sense less than the Father, even after his resurrection. In acknowledging the priority and primacy of the Father, however, they did not deny the Son’s divinity” (ibid., 17). Whether this subordination is strictly functional and temporal or essential and eternal is not clear here either, for he explained it in seemingly contradictory ways. Note the following: “[The view of the apostles] . . . was not subordinationism, nor does it imply any inferiority of the Son compared with the Father. Christ, here, is set in the order of Deity. The willing subordination of the Son to the Father—and of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son—relates not to their essential life with the Trinity. Nor is it in any way inconsistent with true equality. It is a demonstration of the unity of purpose existing among the members of the Deity. Here the activities of one are seen to be but the carrying out of the united will. We may conclude with some that the Father has metaphysical priority, or with others that he has a primacy of order. One thing nevertheless remains certain: the NT writers have not worked out the problem with subtle refinement, but they all agree that the Father has priority and that both Father and Son are God. And they consider such a statement consistent” (ibid., 18–19). Also see his summary that “Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinguished only by their mutual relations as revealing the Deity to us. God the Father stresses the infinity, eternity and power of the Deity, the primacy and finality of God. Jesus Christ affirms the character of the divine Nature. In him we discern the nature of the divine purpose and the manner of God’s working for its realization. The Holy Spirit testifies of the intimacy of omnipotent Power, the never-failing availability of God, how close he is to

neo-subordinationist argument. Nevertheless, it is significant that both Hasel and Dederen interpreted 1 Cor 11:3 as dealing with authority and hierarchy, even though they seemed to understand these as confined to a particular time and context—the time after the fall of humanity and prior to the eschaton and only in the context marriage.⁴³

*The Commission on the Role of Women I (1988)
and Samuele Bacchiocchi*

Due to the aforementioned committee's favorable recommendation to incorporate more women into ministry, one Seventh-day Adventist theologian, Samuele Bacchiocchi, became very concerned with what he considered to be a "new" direction.⁴⁴ In 1987, he drafted a fifty-six-page paper for the 1988 Commission on the Role of Women I;⁴⁵ the paper opposed women in pastoral ministry and asserted Grudem's headship theology and

each one of us at every moment. Each of them, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, enlarges our understanding of God as revealed in the Scriptures. This is why the Trinity is a relation, not a separation" (ibid., 20). It seems that he intended to confine the Father's priority and the Son's subordination to the plan of redemption and, thus, they were viewed as functional and temporal, not essential and eternal. However, one could argue that he made a more unqualified argument because of such statements as "the Father has metaphysical priority" (ibid., 18) and "Christ . . . is set in the order of Deity" (ibid.).

⁴³In preparation for the 1985 Spring Meeting of the General Conference Executive Committee, the 1985 Role of Women in the Church Committee was established to "discuss the role of women in the church, and in particular the issue of women's ordination" in order to prepare a report for that meeting, "with an eye to presenting a further report" to the 1985 General Conference Session (ASTR, "1985 Role of Women in the Church Committee," <https://www.adventistarchives.org/1985-study-committee>). One of the four "commissioned and pre-circulated" research papers was written by Willmore D. Eva, who, while supportive of women in ministry, understood Paul in 1 Cor 11:2–16 as "advocating a conservative stand on the issue of women's role in the church" and calling upon "the hierarchical order of God to Christ to man to woman, to affirm it" ("A Biblical Position Paper: The Role and Standing of Women in the Ministry of the Church" [unpublished paper, January 1985], 37, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/a-biblical-position-paper-the-role-and-standing-of-women-in-the-ministry-of-the-church.pdf>). Nothing can be deduced regarding the nature of this hierarchy, as this is the only mention of a Father-Son and male-female connection in the paper; no explanation is given by the author.

⁴⁴Gerry Chudleigh, "A Short History of the Headship Doctrine in the Seventh-day Adventist Church," *Spectrum* 42.2 (2014): 87.

⁴⁵This commission was established by the 1987 Annual Council of the General Conference for continued study on the role of women in the church after the 1985 General Conference Session decision in New Orleans, Louisiana, "To take no definitive action at this time regarding ordination of women to the gospel ministry" (ASTR, "1988 Commission on the Role of Women I," <https://www.adventistarchives.org/1988-commission>; "Fifteenth Business Meeting, Fifty-fourth General Conference Session," *Adventist Review* 162.34 [11 July 1985]: 20).

neo-subordinationism.⁴⁶ It was crafted to reflect the content found in his 1987 self-published book *Women in the Church*, which, together with his paper, introduced Grudem's headship theology and neo-subordinationism into Seventh-day Adventism for the first time.⁴⁷ Bacchiocchi's book was indeed the turning point for some in Seventh-day Adventist thinking regarding neo-subordinationism in the Trinity and headship in male-female relations. Gerry Chudleigh perceptively observes,

The extensive bibliography in Bacchiocchi's anti-women's-ordination book, *Women in the Church*, lists no supporting Adventist references, and later books condemning women's ordination list none before Bacchiocchi's book. Current anti-women's ordination websites that offer publications for further study offer nothing written by Adventists before Bacchiocchi's 1987 book.⁴⁸

⁴⁶The relevant sections of the paper read, "The Trinity provides a perfect model of how equality in worth can coexist with subordination in functions. God the Father is the Head in the Trinity (1 Cor 11:3), but His headship does not lessen the value of the Son, because both are equally God. Some argue that the Son's functional subordination to the Father was temporary, limited only to the time of His incarnation and/or of the completion of His redemptive mission. This argument is untrue, because 1 Corinthians 15:28 clearly tells us that at the consummation of His redemptive mission, Christ who has been reigning until He subjects all things under His Father's feet, will Himself be subject to God: 'When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone' (1 Cor 15:28). The Son is not of less value because of His functional subordination to the headship of the Father, since both fully share the divine nature. Similarly, a woman is of no less value because of her functional subordination to the headship of a man in the home or in the church, since both men and women are equally created and restored in the image of God (Gen 1:27; Gal 3:23). . . . The headship between man and woman is correlated by Paul in 1 Corinthians 11 to the headship between God and Christ: 'The head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband, and the head of Christ is God' (1 Cor 11:3). The latter refutes the charge that submission means inferiority because in the Trinity there is a headship among equals. Christ's submission to the authority and headship of His Father did not stifle His personality, but was the secret of His wisdom, power, and success. Similarly, a woman who accepts the leadership of a mature and caring man in the family or in the church will not feel unfulfilled, but rather will find the needed protection and support to exercise her God-given ministries" ("Divine Order of Headship and Church Order: A Study of the Implications of the Principle of Male Headship for the Ordination of Women as Elders and/or Pastors" [paper presented at the Meeting of the Commission on the Role of Women, Washington, DC, 24–27 March 1988], 14, 48, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/divine-order-of-headship-and-church-order.pdf>). Bacchiocchi quoted or referred to Grudem's writings multiple times throughout this paper.

⁴⁷Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Study of the Role of Women in the Church* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1987), 76, 126–128." In the preface of the book, Bacchiocchi directly attributed his understanding to Grudem by stating, "Among the hundreds of authors I have read in the preparation of this book, two stand out as the ones who have made the greatest contribution to the development of my thoughts, namely, Prof. Wayne Grudem of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Prof. James B. Hurley of Reformed Theological Seminary" (*ibid.*, 16–17).

⁴⁸Chudleigh, *A Short History*, 84.

Bacchiocchi's influential position as professor of theology and church history in the religion department at Andrews University (the flagship educational institution of the Seventh-day Adventist Church) from 1974 to 2000, led some Seventh-day Adventist scholars, administrators, pastors, and members to embrace neo-subordinationism.⁴⁹

The Commission on the Role of Women II (1989)

The 1988 Commission on the Role of Women I deemed that further study on the role women in the ministry of the church was needed. Thus, "General Conference leadership appointed" a second Commission on the Role of Women to meet in Crandall, Georgia, at the Cohutta Springs Conference Center on 12–18 July 1989, to accomplish this task.⁵⁰ Several documents were written by theologians, administrators, and pastors for circulation among members of the commission with the purpose of creating more discussion and reflection on this hotly debated issue in the church.⁵¹

V. Nørskov Olsen, scholar, professor, and former president of both Newbold College in England and Loma Linda University in Loma Linda, California, drafted over three hundred pages worth of documents for the commission to review.⁵² In these documents, he extensively connected male-female relations to the Trinity via the *imago Dei* (image of God), but in a way

⁴⁹For example, Samuel Koranteng-Pipim wrote *Searching the Scriptures* in 1995, which employed the same neo-subordinationist argumentation of Bacchiocchi to prevent women from serving as pastors in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (*Searching the Scriptures: Women's Ordination and the Call to Biblical Fidelity* [Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 1995], 52). It is intriguing that Koranteng-Pipim recommends Grudem's writings to those who are interested in learning more about headship theology and states that they have enriched the writing of his book (*ibid.*, 53n1).

⁵⁰ASTR, "1989 Commission on the Role of Women II: Cohutta Springs Documents," <https://www.adventistarchives.org/1989-cohutta-springs>.

⁵¹"The Commission's conclusions "were presented to the 1990 General Conference Session in Indianapolis, Indiana" (*ibid.*). To view the commission's report and the ensuing vote of the 1990 General Conference Session, see "1990 General Conference Session Action," *Adventist Review* 189.28 (11 October 2012): 19.

⁵²It should be noted that at the top of each of these documents, Olsen pointed out that these were "working" papers or first drafts. For an example, see the top of the first document (V. Nørskov Olsen, "The Church in the Old Testament" [paper presented at the Meeting of the Commission on the Role of Women II, Crandall, GA, 12–18 July 1989], 1, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/documents-for-role-of-women-commission.pdf>). He desired that they not be "duplicated" in their "present form" and that comments on them be restricted to discussions of the commission (*ibid.*). Eventually, he developed these documents into three different publications. See *idem*, *Man, the Image of God: The Divine Design—The Human Distortion* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1988); *idem*, *Myth and Truth about Church, Priesthood and Ordination* (Riverside, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1990); *idem*, *The New Relatedness for Man and Woman in Christ: A Mirror of the Divine* (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda University Press, 1993).

that argues against neo-subordinationism. Commenting on Gen 1:26–27, he wrote, “There is in the order of creation an analogy between the I-Thou relationship of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit; and the I-Thou relationship between man-male and man-female.”⁵³ This primarily means that as “the unity of the Godhead exists in oneness of substance, nature, will, operation, majesty, etc.—implying absolute equality”⁵⁴—so too, “[b]eing an image of the divine the human relatedness” of male and female “was destined to be one of [absolute] unity and equality.”⁵⁵ This absolute unity and equality does not equal “sameness.” Rather, it entails “complimentary or functional differences in . . . mutual fellowship.”⁵⁶

To define these “functional differences” further, Olsen began with the Trinity. He noted that Scripture speaks of “functional differences” that “are exercised in complete harmony or unison, as noticed in the covenant of redemption and clearly spelled out in the biblical description of the functions of the three Persons both in the work of Creation and redemption.”⁵⁷ In these “various spheres of functional relationship within the Trinity a certain headship is exercised by God the Father; ‘God is the head of Christ’ (1 Cor. 11:3).”⁵⁸ He defined this headship in a very specific and unique way so as to avoid the idea of subordination:

Humanly speaking, even within the Trinity, headship resembles the role of a chairman, the first among equals, who are in complete accord; any directive given is rooted in a “delegated” or “representative” authority (the words “representative responsibility” are more correct than “authority”) reflecting order, oneness, and harmony (John 14–17).⁵⁹

To further qualify this headship of the Father among the three persons of the Trinity, he was careful to explain that “[o]n account of the very nature of oneness and equality, the divine headship is *not authoritative*, but represents a responsibility created by love (agape) and manifested in giving and serving,

⁵³Idem, “The Divine Oneness, Equality, and Relatedness in Functional Differences” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Commission on the Role of Women II, Crandall, GA, 12–18 July 1989), 10, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/documents-for-role-of-women-commission.pdf>.

⁵⁴Ibid., 4.

⁵⁵Idem, “Man and Woman as Relational Beings,” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Commission on the Role of Women II, Crandall, GA, 12–18 July 1989), 3, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/documents-for-role-of-women-commission.pdf>.

⁵⁶Ibid., 4.

⁵⁷Idem, “The Divine Oneness,” 4.

⁵⁸Ibid., 7. However, commenting on 1 Cor 11:3, he wrote, “1 Cor. 11:3 does not express a chain of command, for then it would have begun with God to Christ, Christ to man, and man to woman; instead the three categories end with God and Christ” (idem, “The Pauline Male-Female Relatedness” (paper presented at the Meeting of the Commission on the Role of Women II, Crandall, GA, 12–18 July 1989), 40, <https://www.adventistarchives.org/documents-for-role-of-women-commission.pdf>).

⁵⁹Idem, “The Divine Oneness,” 9.

[*sic*] (diakonia).⁶⁰ “Accordingly, subordination is not the right word to express Christ’s relationship with the Father.”⁶¹

Olsen went on to assert that this Trinitarian “relatedness” “is a prescriptive model for the human situation and a part of the *imago Dei*.”⁶² As in the Trinity, there is a “functional complementarity”⁶³ between male and female, though it seems that he restricted the “functional differences” to the context of the family and did not extend them beyond to other spheres, such as the church and society.⁶⁴ This male-female “functional complementarity,” according to him, entails a “headship” of the male over the female, “a super- and sub-ordination” that “is a purely functional difference, not a difference in value.”⁶⁵ Furthermore, it should be remembered that Olsen’s description of this headship is not “domination” or “authoritative,” but “representative responsibility” in the context of love and service, as it is in the Trinity.⁶⁶ In fact, he stated that the “misconceived ideas of headship, subordination, power, and authority” make up “the distorted concept of relatedness” that is the result of the fall.⁶⁷ Being in “unity with Christ (the Son of man, the new and perfect Adam)” renews the “inner and outward life . . . into the image of God, which embraces an imitation of the Trinitarian relatedness and the order of creation.”⁶⁸

A close reading of Olsen’s analogy between the Trinity and male-female relations reveals that he applied it in two specific ways beyond the more general ways noted above. First, he connected the Father to the man and the Son to the woman via 1 Cor 11:3.⁶⁹ Second, he described an analogy between the “Christ-Spirit” relationship and male-female relations.⁷⁰ For him, this can be seen by observing the Holy Spirit’s more feminine characteristics

⁶⁰Ibid., 8; emphasis added. “On account of the very nature of the divine oneness and equality, identified in all aspects of existence within the Trinity (none of them would think and act differently from one another), there can never be domination in the functional activities, different as they are of necessity even within the divine realm. There is no need for authority in order to ‘enforce’ conformity or unity” (ibid.).

⁶¹Ibid., 9.

⁶²Idem, “Man and Woman,” 7.

⁶³Idem, “The Pauline Male-Female Relatedness,” 17.

⁶⁴“Being created man-male and man-female means that in the oneness and equality of personhood there are inherent functional differences between being husband and wife, father and mother” (idem, “Man and Woman,” 4).

⁶⁵Ibid., 7–8, citing Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 358.

⁶⁶See Olsen, “The Divine Oneness,” 8–9. See also idem, “The Pauline Male-Female Relatedness,” 17, 39–40.

⁶⁷Idem, “Man and Woman,” 9.

⁶⁸Idem, “The Pauline Male-Female Relatedness,” 7.

⁶⁹Ibid., 38–40.

⁷⁰Idem, “The Divine Oneness,” 7.

and functions.⁷¹ These feminine qualities of the Holy Spirit indicate that “[t]here is an analogy between the Holy Spirit and . . . women in their common nurturing role and the unique way in which they are the bearers and sustainers of creative powers.”⁷² This is as far as he went in detailing this second analogy.

The significance of Olsen’s analogy cannot be commented on in detail here, for this would require an entire article of its own (or more). However, what is most important to note, for the purpose of this article, is that he, more extensively than any other Seventh-day Adventist author, employed the Trinity as a model for male-female relations. This was not to assert neo-subordinationism, but to confront notions of authority and subordination. He upheld equality with difference in the Trinity and in male-female relations.

Women in Ministry and Prove All Things in the Late 1990s

In 1998, an *ad hoc* committee at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary published the book *Women in Ministry*, which was egalitarian in nature and favorable toward women’s ordination.⁷³ Interestingly, the book contains one chapter by W. Larry Richards, who interpreted 1 Cor 11:3 as a prescriptive hierarchy and, thus, came quite close to advocating neo-subordinationism. In that chapter, Richards connected the Father-Son relationship to male-female relations in the following way: “Christ is under God’s authority, so the woman is under her husband’s authority.”⁷⁴ However, like Hasel and Dederen, he went no further to define the exact nature of the subordination of the Son to the Father, but he did note that the subordination of women to men in 1 Cor 11:2–16 is limited to the issue of authority (not ontology) and restricted to the context of marriage.⁷⁵ These limitations in male-female relations may suggest possible limitations in the Father-Son relationship.

Two years later, a group of complementarian Seventh-day Adventists, some of whom were scholars and pastors, prepared a book titled *Prove All Things* to counteract the influence of *Women in Ministry*.⁷⁶ *Prove All Things* contained two articles by Bacchiocchi and C. Raymond Holmes that utilized neo-subordinationism in the Trinity to argue for male headship and against women’s ordination.⁷⁷ The content of these articles is very similar to that found in Bacchiocchi’s *Women in the Church*.

⁷¹See idem, “The Divine Oneness,” 5–7.

⁷²Ibid., 6.

⁷³Nancy Vyhmeister, ed., *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998)

⁷⁴W. Larry Richards, “How Does a Woman Prophecy and Keep Silence at the Same Time?,” in *Women in Ministry: Biblical & Historical Perspectives*, ed. Nancy Vyhmeister (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1998), 319.

⁷⁵Ibid., 319, 322.

⁷⁶Mercedes H. Dyer, ed., *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry* (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000).

⁷⁷See Samuele Bacchiocchi, “Headship, Submission, and Equality in Scripture,” in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien

The Theology of Ordination Study Committee (2012–2015)

More recently, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists established a committee in 2012 called the Theology of Ordination Study Committee (TOSC) to conduct an official denominational study of ordination and its implications for women, the findings of which would be reported at the 2015 General Conference Session in San Antonio, Texas.⁷⁸ Both egalitarian and complementarian Seventh-day Adventist scholars, administrators, pastors, and members from various disciplines and diverse cultural backgrounds presented papers arguing for their theological positions in the gender debate. Some of the complementarians introduced similar arguments of neo-subordinationism that Bacchiocchi used into these discussions.⁷⁹ A clear example is Edwin Reynolds's claim that "[t]here is no essential conflict between ontological equality and submission, for God and Christ are ontologically equal, yet Christ submits to His Father. The submission is functional, providing for

Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 81; C. Raymond Holmes, "Does Paul Really Prohibit Women from Speaking in Church?," in *Prove All Things: A Response to Women in Ministry*, ed. Mercedes H. Dyer (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2000), 172. See also Holmes's earlier work, *The Tip of an Iceberg: Biblical Authority, Biblical Interpretation, and the Ordination of Women in Ministry* (Wakefield, MI: POINTER, 1994), 137.

⁷⁸ASTR, "Theology of Ordination," <https://www.adventistarchives.org/ordination>.

⁷⁹See Stephen P. Bohr, "Issues Relating to the Ordination of Women with Special Emphasis on 1 Peter 2:9, 10 and Galatians 3:28" (paper presented at the July 2013 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 34–35; P. Gerard Damsteegt, "Headship, Gender, and Ordination in the Writings of Ellen G. White" (paper presented at the July 2013 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 12–15; idem et al., "Interpreting Scripture on the Ordination of Women" (paper presented at the January 2014 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 21–25 January 2014), 12, 16; John W. Peters, "Restoration of the Image of God: Headship and Submission" (paper presented at the January 2014 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 21–25 January 2014), 50–60; Paul S. Ratsara and Daniel K. Bediako, "Man and Woman in Genesis 1–3: Ontological Equality and Role Differentiation" (paper presented at the July 2013 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 1–65; Edwin Reynolds, "Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship in First Corinthians" (paper presented at the July 2013 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 22–23; Ingo Sorke, "Adam, Where Are You? On Gender Relations" (paper presented at the July 2013 Meeting of the Theology of Ordination Study Committee, Silver Spring, MD, 22–24 July 2013), 24. See also Bohr, "Reflections on Women's Ordination," *Secrets Unsealed Ministry Update* 2 (2012): 19; idem, "Reflections on Hermeneutics of Women's Ordination," *Secrets Unsealed Ministry Update* 3 (2014): 6–19 (he cites Grudem frequently here); Doug Batchelor, *The Trinity: Is it Biblical?* (Roseville, CA: Amazing Facts, 2003), 23–24; idem and Dwight Hall, *Strange Fire: Understanding the Hot Topic of Women's Ordination* (Coldwater, MI: Remnant, 2014), 41, 52–57 (they also cite Grudem frequently).

different role relationships; it does not express any ontological inequality.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, he stated that “the role relationships between Christ and His Father [are] extended from eternity past to eternity future.”⁸¹ Thus, Reynolds’s view of the eternal, functional subordination of the Son to the Father was similar to those of both Bacchiocchi and Grudem.

The Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary’s Statement and the “Open Appeal”

A final recent example of Seventh-day Adventists utilizing neo-subordinationist argumentation in the gender debate is found in the exchange that took place between two important documents that were published online less than a year before the commencement of the 2015 General Conference Session. The first was the statement, “On the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church,” produced by the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary,⁸² in which male headship in the church was denounced⁸³ and neo-subordinationism in the Trinity was rejected.

Scripture affirms that the Son is eternally equal with the Father and the Spirit . . . Scripture also affirms the temporary voluntary functional subordination of Christ the Son in order to accomplish the salvation of humanity . . . The interpersonal relationships within the Trinity provide the ultimate model of

⁸⁰Reynolds, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship,” 22. See also idem and Clinton Wahlen, “Women in Scripture and Headship,” *Spectrum* 41.4 (2013): 47–57.

⁸¹Reynolds, “Biblical Hermeneutics and Headship,” 23. See also Council of Adventist Pastors, which states, “Jesus’ submission to the Father extends into eternity, even after the sin problem has been resolved. . . . Not only does the Son’s submission to the Father extend into the future, it has always existed. . . . The principles revealed by the incarnation and death of God the Son—including the submission of the Son to the Father, even though both are co-eternal and both are God—have always been ‘the foundation of God’s throne’” (*The Adventist Ordination Crisis: Biblical Authority or Cultural Conformity?* [Spokane, WA: Council of Adventist Pastors, 2015], 53–54; emphasis original).

⁸²See Andrew McChesney, “Andrews Theologians Approve Statement on Headship,” *Adventist News*, 22 August 2014, <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/andrews-theologians-approve-statement-on-church-leadership>.

⁸³“According to Scripture, Christ is the only Head of the Church and the human members of Christ’s Church collectively (male and female) make up the body of Christ Neither Scripture nor the writings of Ellen White apply the language of headship in the Church to anyone other than Christ. Further, neither Scripture nor the writings of Ellen White endorse any transfer of the role of head in the home to roles within the Church body. . . . no other can be head of the Church. That is, headship in the Church is unique to Christ and non-transferable” (Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, “On the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church: A Statement of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary,” 9 September 2014, 4, https://www.andrews.edu/sem/about/statements/9-19-14-updated_web_version-unique_headship_of_christ_final.pdf).

love and self-sacrifice for us. As such, they do not furnish a model for a top-down governmental structure for human leadership within the Church.⁸⁴

A second document, an open response letter published on the *Adventist Review* website, was created by twenty-four persons who were faculty, alumni, students, and friends of the seminary with the purpose of appealing to the seminary to reconsider its statement. The letter utilized neo-subordinationist argumentation that is very similar to that of Knight and Grudem.

[I]n 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul parallels the relationship male believers have to Christ with the relationship that Christ has to the Father, employing the concept of headship within the Godhead and between men and women in the church . . . Here the Bible teaches that headship and submission are principles of heaven belonging to the Godhead, and that on earth human beings have been created to reflect these principles because they bear the image of God. . . . [T]he headship of Christ and that of God the Father form the pattern for the headship of the man-woman relationship in the church.⁸⁵

The neo-subordinationist thinking, as expressed here, is reaching beyond the authors of this open appeal letter and impacting many among the current membership of the denomination. Even so, the seminary responded to the appeal with a reaffirmation of their original statement, rejecting the appeal letter's neo-subordinationism and male headship.⁸⁶

As can be seen by this brief history, Grudem's popularization of Knight's neo-subordinationism has gone a long way in penetrating the theology of many evangelical denominations, such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church by way of the writings of Bacchiocchi. This has led to a significant shift in the focus of the gender debate.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵"An Open Appeal from Faculty, Alumni, Students, and Friends of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary to Faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary Regarding the Recent Statement from the Seminary on the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church," 6 October 2014, 2, http://www.adventistreview.org/assets/public/news/2014-10/242011032-Appeal-to-the-Seminary-Faculty_1_.pdf. See Andrew McChesney, "Appeal Made Over Andrews Statement on Headship," *Adventist News*, 7 October 2014, <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/appeal-made-over-andrews-statement-on-headship>. A thorough comparative discourse analysis of the two documents can be found in Eun-Young Julia Kim, "A Comparative Discourse Analysis of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary's Statement 'On the Unique Headship of Christ in the Church' and the Response Statement, 'An Open Appeal,'" *AUSS* 55.1 (2017): 45–82. These two documents can also be found in print as Appendices B and C at the end of her article.

⁸⁶"We, the faculty of the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, respectfully reaffirm our original statement on the 'Unique Headship of Christ in the Church' which was the result of prayerful and responsible study of Scripture and the Spirit of Prophecy, and was voted by an overwhelming majority of the faculty in a duly called meeting" (*Adventist Review* Staff, "Statement from Andrews Seminary in Response to Headship Appeal," *Adventist News*, 13 October 2014, <http://www.adventistreview.org/church-news/statement-from-andrews-seminary-in-response-to-headship-appeal>).

Shift of the Debate

The rapid spreading of this new neo-subordinationist view of the immanent Trinity, since its introduction into the gender debate by Knight, and its popularization by Grudem, has led many complementarians to use this foreign argumentation to prove the position that Scripture supports the permanent, functional subordination of women. This has shifted the gender debate radically from primarily arguing over gender issues to fierce debating over the nature of intra-Trinitarian relationships. Egalitarians have now found themselves forced to do more than advocate for the equality of women. Now they must also defend the equality of the persons of the Trinity.⁸⁷

The Theological Problems of Neo-Subordinationism

Though neo-subordinationism postures to be a useful argument for the complementarian viewpoint in the gender debate, it carries insurmountable systematic problems for Christian theology. The rest of this article will argue that neo-subordinationism is problematic for Christian theology in four main areas: (1) its failure to adequately account for the whole of the canonical data in Scripture, (2) its inherent logical inconsistencies, (3) its inaccurate reporting of the history of Christian thought, and (4) its ramifications for the essential Christian doctrines of salvation and the character of God.

Inadequate Account of the Canonical Data in Scripture

Neo-subordinationist complementarians utilize and interpret a handful of biblical passages in a certain way to substantiate their supposed, eternal, functional subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both the Father and the Son, and connect this intra-Trinitarian subordination to male-female relations in a one-to-one analogy. However, when one looks more carefully at the biblical texts that they employ, it is clear that questionable hermeneutics are in use. Whereas the most notable examples are addressed below, due to the limited scope of this article, a discussion entertaining every instance in which these complementarians use Scripture to argue for a neo-subordinationist viewpoint cannot be provided.⁸⁸ However, the key passages frequently used in neo-subordinationist

⁸⁷For examples, see Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Equal in Being, Unequal in Role," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 301–333; Kevin Giles, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and Subordinationism," *ERT* 28.3 (2004): 270–284.

⁸⁸Genesis 1:26–28 is of utmost importance in this debate on the Trinity and gender roles, but it will not be addressed here, since proper treatment of the passage would necessitate a more extensive discussion than what can be given here. Thus, this section of the article will focus on the New Testament. Some helpful discussion on this passage and its implications for other passages in the Old and New Testaments can be found in Richard M. Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 15–80, 633–658; Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine*

complementarian literature will be explored to demonstrate some of the hermeneutical problems therein.

Is Neo-subordinationism Taught in 1 Corinthians 11:3?

As mentioned earlier, the keynote passage that many complementarians use to suggest hierarchal order in the Trinity and in male-female relations is 1 Cor 11:3, which says, “But I want you to know that the head of every man/husband [παντὸς ἀνδρὸς] is Christ, [the] head of a woman/wife [γυναικὸς] is the man/husband [ὁ ἀνὴρ], and [the] head of Christ is God.”⁸⁹ There are some problems with the complementarian interpretation of this text. First, this passage does not seem to be ordered in a *hierarchal* manner from highest to lowest levels of perceived authority: God-Christ relationship, Christ-man relationship, and man-woman relationship (see **fig. 1**).⁹⁰

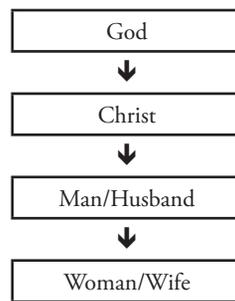


Figure 1. Hierarchical Reading of 1 Corinthians 11:3

of Humanity, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 29–72.

⁸⁹Translation supplied. Depending on their context, ἀνὴρ (*anēr*) can be translated as either “man” or “husband,” and γυνή (*gunē*) can be translated as either “woman” or “wife.”

⁹⁰“[T]he order of the three parts of the headship statement [in 1 Cor 11:3] . . . is not conducive to creating a sense of a chain of command” (Stephen Bauer, “1 Corinthians 11 and Headship,” *Reflections on Scripture*, April 2014, 7, <http://webpages.charter.net/stephenbauer/4-1%20Cor%20and%20Headship.pdf>). It is interesting, however, to note that in order to make a neo-subordinationist argument that women should refrain from ministering in the office of pastor/elder, Gregg R. Allison completely changes the order of the text into his preferred hierarchical order: “The apostle draws an analogy between (1) the subordination of Jesus Christ, the Son, to God the Father, who is his head, or authority; (2) the subordination of every man to Christ, the Lord, who is their head, or authority; and (3) the subordination of a wife to her husband, who is her head, or authority” (*Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 228). This rearrangement, of course, affects the intended meaning as it is given in the text.

Philip B. Payne explains that when “Paul wanted to make a hierarchical series elsewhere, he did so in a logical sequence.”⁹¹ A notable example of this is found one chapter later in 1 Cor 12:28. Here, Paul plainly ranked and ordered the spiritual gifts that God appointed in the church from first to last. No such hierarchical ordering is found in 1 Cor 11:3. Rather, it appears that Paul ordered the relations *chronologically* as represented in **figure 2**: Christ-man relationship (Gen 1:26–27, 2:7), man-woman relationship (Gen 2:21–25), and God-Christ relationship (John 1:1–3, 14).

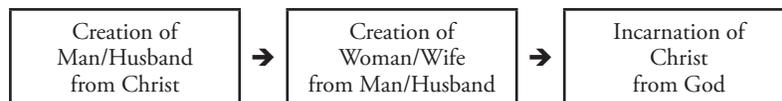


Figure 2. Chronological Reading of 1 Corinthians 11:3

The chronological ordering of this text points toward interpreting κεφαλή (*kephalē*) or “head” as meaning “source” instead of “authority” in the following way: “man came from Christ’s creative work, woman came from ‘the man,’ Christ came from God in the incarnation.”⁹² This is further supported by Paul’s use of ἐκ or “from/out of” in 1 Cor 8:6 and 11:8, 12, where the source of woman being man and the source of man being Christ/God are predicated.⁹³

However, even if Paul intended κεφαλή to mean “authority” rather than “source” (as the discussion of ἐξουσίαν [*exousian*] or “authority” in 1 Cor 11:10 may suggest), one should not interpret 1 Cor 11:3 as a support for neo-subordinationism, because the God-Christ relationship is a reference to Jesus’s life and ministry on earth. Gilbert Bilezikian argues, “[T]he passage nor its context contains any indication that this headship [of God to Christ] describes

⁹¹Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 129. See also Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles: What the Bible Says about a Woman’s Place in Church and Family*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 105–106.

⁹²Payne, *Man and Woman*, 129. See also Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles*, 106.

⁹³New Testament scholar Teresa Reeve points out that κεφαλή has three primary clusters of metaphorical meanings—authority, source, and prominence/representation—and that each of these meanings is employed by Paul in various places throughout his epistles (“First Corinthians 11:2–16 and the Ordination of Women to Pastoral Ministry,” in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, ed. John W. Reeve [Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015], 243–262). She identifies the uses of κεφαλή in Eph 4:15–16 and Col 2:18–19 as having the meaning of “source” (*ibid.*, 248–249). Thus, this metaphorical meaning was not foreign to Paul. Concerning the debated usage of κεφαλή particularly and all word usages generally, Reeve makes this very important exegetical and hermeneutical point that is often violated by those who demand that κεφαλή always—or at least in most cases—means “authority”: “it is essential to allow the context to point to the meaning of words in a specific usage, rather than insisting on interpreting every word in a rigidly unvarying way” (*ibid.*, 250).

an eternal state. In this text, Paul is referring to the relationship that prevails between God and Christ in the context of Christ's ministry to men and women within human history.⁹⁴ Undoubtedly, this passage exclusively addresses the context of the incarnation and cannot be understood in any eternal sense. Furthermore, though Michael F. Bird argues for the subordination of women to men, he observes that 1 Cor 11:3 nowhere grounds this relationship in the Trinity: "1 Cor 11:3 . . . does indicate that men and women should both respect their respective heads, but it does not imply that man is the head of women *because* God is the head of Christ."⁹⁵

Finally, the reader must realize that 1 Cor 11:3 is a very difficult passage to interpret (especially due to the metaphorical use[s] of the controversial word κεφαλή) as evidenced by the diversity of interpretations and applications in scholarship and the lack of unanimity. Consequently, it is not fitting that neo-subordinationist complementarians should make this text the foundation of their major argument. Therefore, the complementarian usage of this text to support neo-subordinationism is unwarranted.⁹⁶

Does Johannine Literature Support Intra-Trinitarian Subordination?

In addition to 1 Cor 11:3, neo-subordinationist complementarians have interpreted Jesus's statements in the Gospel of John, such as John 14:28, ". . . for the Father is greater than I;"⁹⁷ John 5:30, "I can do nothing on my own;" and others (e.g., John 4:34; 6:38; 14:31, etc.), as indicating that Jesus is eternally subordinated to the Father's authority.⁹⁸ The key hermeneutical problem therein is that these complementarians have employed a "proof-texting" methodology that has caused them to overlook the context in which Jesus made these statements—namely, the period of his incarnational ministry. He said these things in his assumed humanity. Hence, it cannot be inferred that these statements have an eternal quality. To suggest otherwise is

⁹⁴Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping: Subordination in the Godhead," *JETS* 40.1 (1997): 61.

⁹⁵Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 120; emphasis original.

⁹⁶For more helpful discussion on this passage, see Bauer, "1 Corinthians 11 and Headship" 1–9; Gordon D. Fee, "Praying and Prophesying in the Assemblies: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Gordon D. Fee (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 142–160; Payne, *Man and Woman*, 113–140; Reeve, "First Corinthians 11:2–16," 243–262. These sources provide useful footnote references to both complementarian and egalitarian literature on this passage.

⁹⁷All English Scripture citations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), unless noted otherwise.

⁹⁸See Wayne A. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004; repr., Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 408. See the discussion in Craig S. Keener, "Is Subordination within the Trinity really Heresy? A Study of John 5:18 in Context," *TJ* 20 (1999): 39–51.

to deny the literary context of these passages.⁹⁹ Without this critical contextual insight, one can easily read these Johannine passages as asserting ontological inequality between the Father and the Son, which, of course, most, if not all, complementarians and egalitarians would be quick to deny. Additional clarity concerning these passages comes to light when they are balanced with other texts (e.g., John 5:18, 8:58, 10:30, 14:9, 17:5, and others), which emphasize Jesus's oneness and equality of divinity and glory with the Father prior to, during, and after the incarnation. Thus, Johannine passages that speak of the Son's subordination to the Father should be read *contextually*, as referring to the Son's unique experience in humanity during the time of his incarnation and should not be read as referring to *eternity*.¹⁰⁰

Is the Incarnation a Model for Intra-Trinitarian Subordination?

Thirdly, neo-subordinationist complementarians claim that incarnation of Christ serves as a biblical example of his functional subordination and obedience to the Father's commands in eternity. Bird writes, "Because the New Testament speaks about Jesus' submission to his Father during the incarnation . . . and even postascension as God's vice-regent . . . , we have to propose that the Son's submission demonstrates something of the eternal relationships within the Godhead."¹⁰¹ This too falls short of the scriptural evidence. The passage of Phil 2:6–11 makes it clear that Jesus was fully equal to God prior to and following the incarnation.¹⁰² Additionally, the New

⁹⁹Contextual analysis of the literary unit under study is a crucial step of the historical-grammatical method in the process of discovering the intended meaning in a text. Leaving out this step, can lead to theologically dangerous interpretations, such as the one being deconstructed in this article.

¹⁰⁰See Augustine, *Trin.* 1.7.14; Jemison, *Christian Beliefs*, 87–88. Canale says, "The biblical idea of the subordination of God the Son to God the Father belongs, not to the inner structure of divine reality, but rather to the sphere of the accomplishment of the plan of salvation. . . . Thus, statements that imply the subordination of God the Son to God the Father are to be understood as a result of His incarnation, the expression of His obedience to the Father" ("Doctrine of God," 126"). For a New Testament perspective, see also Paul B. Petersen's discussions on John 17:3 and 14:28, in which he recognizes that Jesus speaks these words "from the perspective of His humanity" (*God in 3 Persons—In the New Testament*, Biblical Research Institute Release 11 [Silver Spring, MD: Biblical Research Institute, 2015], 7–8, 17). Robert K. McIver also has a helpful article on Christology in the Gospel of John ("Some Aspects of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel Relevant to Contemporary Christological Controversy," in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, ed. Paul B. Petersen and Robert K. McIver [Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2014], 3–27).

¹⁰¹Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 119–120. Why does one "have to propose" this?

¹⁰²In Phil 2:6, the present active participle of ὑπάρχω (*huparchō*; "to exist") is used to indicate that the state in which the Son existed prior to the incarnation was that of being in the form of God. The following clause clarifies precisely that this state is equality with God (τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ [*to eivai isa theō*]) without qualification. Further clarification is given in Phil 2:7, where the present active participle of λαμβάνω (*lambanō*; "to take") is used. There the Son is said to empty himself by *taking* the form

Testament never describes the period of the Son's incarnation in terms of hierarchical subordination, but rather as voluntary, self-inflicted *functional* humiliation. Philippians 2:7–8 declare this explicitly: “. . . but [he] emptied *himself*, by taking the form of a servant, *being born* in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled *himself* by *becoming* obedient to the point of death.”¹⁰³ The reader should notice that the Father did not empty and humble him in this text; rather the Son emptied and humbled *himself*. Moreover, when this passage says that the Son was born in the likeness of humanity and “became” obedient, it implies that he was not in the likeness of humanity before and did not offer obedience prior to his self-humiliation in the incarnation.¹⁰⁴ Hebrews 5:8 suggests this very same idea: “*Although* he was a son, he *learned* obedience through what he suffered.”¹⁰⁵ Bilezikian pinpoints the significance of this text for this discussion:

Three remarks must be made about this text. (1) The fact that he learned obedience “although” he was a Son indicates that the nature of his Sonship excluded the necessity of obedience. He learned obedience despite the fact that he was a Son. (2) The fact that he “learned” obedience indicates that it was something new in his experience as Son. Obedience was not a mark of his eternal relation to the Father. He learned it for the purpose of ministry. (3) The fact that he learned obedience “through” what he suffered indicates that obedience was required in relation to his suffering and that it was not an eternal condition. Christ's experience of obedience was confined to his redemptive ministry as suffering servant.¹⁰⁶

Therefore, Christ's incarnation is not an example of his eternal, functional subordination to the Father or of any sort of eternal intra-Trinitarian hierarchy

of a servant or slave (δούλου [*doulou*]). Clearly, the Son did not function as a servant or slave of the Father prior to the self-emptying and self-humbling of the incarnation. See also John 17:5.

¹⁰³Emphasis added. In Phil 2:7–8, Paul used the active aorist indicative form of both κενόω (*kenōō*; “to empty”) and ταπεινῶ (*tapeinōō*; “to humble”) to indicate that the Son (not the Father)—the nominative masculine singular relative pronoun ὃς (*hos*; “who”) in Phil 2:6, which refers back to Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ or “Christ Jesus” in Phil 2:5, is the obvious subject of those active verbs—was the one performing this action. To emphasize this further, the accusative reflexive pronoun ἑαυτὸν (*heauton*) is employed twice to function as the direct object of both ἐκένωσεν (*ekenōsen*) and ἐταπεινώσεν (*etapeinōsen*). Thus, the passage emphatically points to the Son's volition and action in the incarnation.

¹⁰⁴Paul could have easily used the static verb of being, εἰμί (*eimi*; “to be”), to indicate that the Son's obedience was a state that was true of Christ prior to his incarnational self-emptying and self-humiliation. However, he utilized the dynamic verb of being, γίνομαι (*ginomai*; “to become”), to indicate a change process of the Son's state from not rendering obedience prior to the incarnation to becoming obedient at the time of his incarnational self-emptying and self-humiliation.

¹⁰⁵Emphasis added. The concessive conjunction καίπερ (*kaiper*) or “although” is used to clarify the concessive nature of the participial clause ὄν υἱός (*ōn huios*; “being a son”).

¹⁰⁶Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 65.

that is essential to the Godhead. Rather, the incarnation was a profound *change* in the Son's experience!¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the functional subordination—or humiliation rather—that he experienced during the incarnation was *voluntary* and *contextually limited* to that period of time, not extending to his existence prior to or after it. This indicates that there is no eternal, functional hierarchy between the Father and the Son, and that it is more biblically and theologically accurate to describe Christ's incarnation, not as subordination, but as *temporary, voluntary self-humiliation* that had the purpose of revealing the profound love of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—for the world (John 3:16).¹⁰⁸

Does Scripture Support a Unilateral Intra-Trinitarian Hierarchy?

Finally, neo-subordinationist complementarians argue that an eternal, unilateral hierarchy in which the Son is *exclusively* subordinated to the Father and the Holy Spirit is *exclusively* subordinated to the Father and the Son (for those who accept the *filioque*) is presented in Scripture, as is represented in **figure 3** below.¹⁰⁹ This “one-way” hierarchy of intra-Trinitarian relationships is said to always function in this order in Scripture without exception. The same kind of unilateral, hierarchical relationship is said to be mirrored in relations between males and females. But these assertions crumble when the biblical data is analyzed carefully. This will be demonstrated by briefly evaluating (1) the triadic ordering patterns in the New Testament, (2) the economic activities of the three persons, and (3) the intra-Trinitarian relationships between the Father and the Son and between the Son and the Holy Spirit, as they are portrayed in Scripture.

¹⁰⁷“The incarnation does make a difference. . . . Jesus' human nature counts. The incarnation simply does not mean that the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father is now lived out in human flesh as though the incarnation does not really make any relational difference. . . . In other words there is an asymmetry between the inner workings of the Trinity (*ad intra*) and the external workings (*ad extra*) of the Trinity. The latter cannot simply be appealed to in order to illuminate the former. . . . Rahner's Rule that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity must be applied with care, lest referent and meaning be confused” (Graham A. Cole, *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007], 173).

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰⁹See Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 549; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249–250; idem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 47; Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 21. Some neo-subordinationist complementarians deny any mutual, functional subordination in the economic Trinity. For example, the Council of Adventist Pastors writes, “We do not read anywhere in the inspired writings about mutual submission among members of the Godhead” (*Adventist Ordination Crisis*, 62).

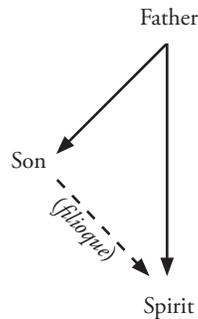


Figure 3. Unilateral Hierarchical Model of the Trinity

No Consistent Trinitarian Ordering

First, there seems to be no consistent unilateral ordering pattern of the three persons of the Trinity in Scripture, such as the traditional ordering that is found in Matt 28:19, as well as in other passages—(1) the Father, (2) the Son, and (3) the Holy Spirit. A representative handful of primary Trinitarian texts in the New Testament is sufficient evidence to demonstrate this phenomenon (see **tab. 1**).¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰In his research on Trinitarian ordering in the New Testament, Rodrick K. Durst identifies “seventy-five triadic order passages” (*Reordering the Trinity: Six Movements of God in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2015], 68). For him, “the quantity of divine triadic instances is so profound and in such a diversity of orders that it constitutes a qualitative *matrix* of Trinitarian consciousness. Trinity is how the New Testament authors inadvertently thought and viewed reality” (ibid., 66; emphasis original). Other lists that illustrate the sheer quantity of Trinitarian passages in the New Testament can be found in Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 839–942; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 63–69; Arthur William Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962), 237–247. To understand this “matrix” of Trinitarian consciousness, Durst classifies each of the “triadic order” passages “according to the order of the persons named in the Trinity” (*Reordering the Trinity*, 68). He found that by “[u]sing this method, the seventy-five triadic instances found can be organized into six categories of orders, with all six used in surprisingly balanced percentages overall” (ibid.). See ibid., 69, for these percentages and 309–318 for a more comprehensive chart that includes all seventy-five Trinitarian passages. Finally, Durst analyzes each of these six patterns and determines contextually that each represents a special economic “movement” of God in the plan of redemption (ibid., 79–81; see chs. 5–10, where he discusses his contextual analysis of each Trinitarian passage in detail [ibid., 157–282]; see also Petersen, *God in 3 Persons*, 22). The key insight of Durst’s research for this present study is that this balanced variety of orderings of Trinitarian persons in the New Testament is evidence for there being no unilateral hierarchy in the immanent or economic Trinity. “There is no ranking of the three who are one God” (ibid.). See also Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 109–110; Jemison, *Christian Beliefs*, 84n1.

Table 1. Ordering of the Trinitarian Persons in Scripture

Passage	Triadic Ordering		
Matt 28:19	τοῦ πατρὸς (Father)	τοῦ υἱοῦ (Son)	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (Spirit)
Acts 2:38–39	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Son)	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (Spirit)	κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν (Father)
Rom 15:30	τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Son)	τοῦ πνεύματος (Spirit)	τὸν θεόν (Father)
1 Cor 12:4–6	τὸ . . . αὐτὸ πνεῦμα (Spirit)	ὁ αὐτὸς κύριος (Son)	ὁ . . . αὐτὸς θεός (Father)
2 Cor 13:14	τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Son)	τοῦ θεοῦ (Father)	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος (Spirit)
Eph 4:4–6	ἐν πνεῦμα (Spirit)	εἷς κύριος (Son)	εἷς θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ (Father)
Heb 2:3–4	τοῦ κυρίου (Son)	τοῦ θεοῦ (Father)	πνεύματος ἁγίου (Spirit)
1 Pet 1:2	θεοῦ πατρός (Father)	ἁγιασμῶ πνεύματος (Spirit)	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Son)
Jude 20–21	πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (Spirit)	θεοῦ (Father)	τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Son)
Rev 1:4–6	ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος (Father)	τῶν ἑπτὰ πνευμάτων (Spirit)	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Son)

In 1 Pet 1:2 and Rev 1:4–6, the Father is listed first, like the traditional ordering, but the Holy Spirit is mentioned before the Son. However, Paul changed up the traditional ordering even more. In the benediction of 2 Cor 13:14, the Son appears first, followed by the Father, and then the Holy Spirit. Hebrews 2:3–4 bears this same ordering. Paul in Rom 15:30 and Luke (with Peter speaking) in Acts 2:38–39 also had the Son ordered first, but the Holy Spirit follows him directly, and the Father is mentioned lastly. In 1 Cor 12:4–6 and Eph 4:4–6, Paul completely reversed the traditional ordering by placing the Holy Spirit first, the Son second, and the Father last. Like the last two passages, Jude 20–21 has the Holy Spirit first, but the Father is listed second and the Son third. Thus, Scripture does not have a

It must be noted, however, as Giles does, that the “exact number of passages in each category can be disputed” (Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006], 109n71). This is because in “several cases members of the Godhead are mentioned more than once in the one context, and so where one begins and ends, the selected passage determines the answer” (ibid.).

unilateral, hierarchical ordering pattern of the Trinitarian persons.¹¹¹ Rather, all six mathematically possible orderings of the three persons of the Trinity are present in the New Testament with relatively balanced occurrences.¹¹²

Shared Economic Activities

Second, when one looks carefully at the economic interactions of the three persons in Scripture, it appears that the textual data significantly “blurs the lines” of the clearly defined, essential Trinitarian hierarchy proposed by neo-subordinationist complementarians. This is well illustrated by Millard J. Erickson, who points out that the Bible has a plethora of texts that speak of two or more of the persons of the Trinity functioning in the same redemptive role or accomplishing the same salvific task. He writes,

It is also interesting to observe that many of the functions of the Father that the [neo-subordinationist complementarians] consider an indication of his superiority are also attributed to the Son and in some cases to the Holy Spirit as well. The Son chooses persons to salvation (John 5:21; Matt. 11:27) as well as service (John 6:70), and the Spirit chooses to whom to give which gifts (1 Cor. 12:11). Both the Father (John 14:16, 26) and the Son (John 15:26; 16:7) send the Holy Spirit. The judgment will take place at the judgment seat of the Son (2 Cor. 5:10) and the Father (Rom. 14:10). The love from which nothing can separate the believer is both that of the Son (Rom. 8:35) and of the Father (v. 39), and no one can pluck the believer out of the hand of Jesus (John 10:28) or the hand of the Father (v. 29). The believer is indwelt by the Spirit (John 14:17), the Son (2 Cor. 13:5), and possibly even the Father (John 14:23; 1 Cor. 3:16). Both the Son and the Father give life (John 5:21), as does the Spirit (John 6:63).¹¹³

There is much more canonical data available than that which is given here by Erickson, which identifies overlapping roles and shared activities of the economic Trinity throughout salvation history. For example, in his book on the Holy Spirit, James M. Hamilton Jr. provides a near comprehensive table, which features many of the actions that are common to two or more of the persons of the Godhead in John’s gospel alone.¹¹⁴ “Thus the position advocated by both Augustine and Calvin seems most helpful: the actions of any one of the persons of the Trinity are actually actions in which all three persons participate.”¹¹⁵

¹¹¹Benjamin B. Warfield asks this important rhetorical question regarding the various Trinitarian ordering patterns: “If in [the Bible writers’] conviction the very essence of the doctrine of the Trinity was embodied in [the traditional] order, should we not anticipate that there should appear in their numerous allusions to the Trinity some suggestion of this conviction?” (*Biblical Foundations* [London: Tyndale, 1958], 108).

¹¹²See n110 in this article.

¹¹³Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 308. For a much fuller discussion, see idem, *Tampering with the Trinity?*, 123–132.

¹¹⁴James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Academic, 2006), 56.

¹¹⁵Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 308. See Augustine, *Trin.* 1.5.8; 1.8.15–9.19;

Intra-Trinitarian Reciprocity and Mutuality

Finally, there are several lines of biblical evidence that support *mutual* subordination among the persons of the Trinity in the plan of redemption, instead of a hierarchical order of authority and subordination.

Father and Son. First, consider the economic relationship of the Father and the Son. While there is, indeed, a temporary, voluntary, and functional humiliation of the Son during the incarnation, in which he offered obedience to the Father's will, there is also an equalizing temporary, functional "subordination" of the Father to the Son that Fernando L. Canale refers to as "delegation."¹¹⁶ Notice the following three texts from the gospel of John: (1) John 3:35 states, "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand;" (2) the first clause of John 13:3 reads, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands;" and (3) the first part of John 16:15 says, "All that the Father has is mine." The Father has surrendered everything pertaining to the plan of redemption to the Son's authority, including the judgment, which determines the salvation of all (John 5:22). Canale points out that "[i]n delegating everything to the Son, the Father is binding Himself to the results of Christ's salvific mission."¹¹⁷ This subordination or "delegation" of the Father is the precise counterpart of the Son's temporary subordination in the economic Trinity.

This mutual, functional subordination of the Father and Son is most apparent in the complex Pauline passage, 1 Cor 15:24–28. While neo-subordinationist complementarians have used this passage extensively to support functional subordination of the Son to the Father into the future of eternity,¹¹⁸ it does not have to be read in a way that asserts such a future intra-Trinitarian reality. Instead, this passage seems to emphasize intra-Trinitarian *mutuality* and *reciprocity*.¹¹⁹

Tract. Ev. Jo. 20.3; John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.12.2. See also Ambrose, *Spir.* 1.3.40. *Opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* ("the works of the Trinity externally are indivisible"). Whereas the Trinitarian oneness that Augustine and Calvin asserted is shared, the metaphysical explanations with which they achieve this oneness seem to cause other theological problems. Additionally, the reality of Trinitarian oneness in action does not deny that Scripture teaches some functional differences among the three persons (e.g., only the Son became incarnated). However, these differences are clearly restricted to the time and operations of creation, redemption, and consummation, and, thus, they do not imply eternal, ontological and/or functional, unilateral subordination. For a helpful explanation of these functional differences, see Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 520–523.

¹¹⁶See Canale, "Doctrine of God," 126.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*, 128.

¹¹⁸For examples, see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249; Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 549–559; Stephen D. Kovach, "Egalitarians Revamp Doctrine of the Trinity," *CBMW News* 2.1 (1996): 4. See also Keener, "Subordination within the Trinity," 47–49.

¹¹⁹Gulley also sees mutual Trinitarian submission present in this passage. He writes, "In love the Father makes all enemies subject to Christ (lifting the crucified Christ which draws all to Christ, and causes them to bow and proclaim His justice).

Martin F. Hanna helpfully maps out the mutual submission that takes place between the Father and the Son in this passage. First, “[t]he Father has put (*hupotasso*, submitted) all things under Christ’s feet (1 Cor 15:27).”¹²⁰ This is the “delegation” of the Father to the Son about which Canale writes.¹²¹ The exception at the end of 1 Cor 15:27, that all except the Father is put under Christ’s feet, should be understood in the context of the passage’s theme: Christ’s victorious death and resurrection has resulted in the defeat of death and the grave for redeemed humanity, which will be realized fully in the eschatological resurrection. Thus, the exception clause of 1 Cor 15:27 communicates that the “submission of the Father [to the Son] is complete, but [that] He is not in submission under the feet of Christ as an enemy.”¹²²

Second, Christ reciprocates and “submits ‘when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father’ (15:24). Therefore, ‘When all things are made subject (*hupotasso*) to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject (*hupotasso*) to Him who put (*hupotasso*) all things under Him, that God may be all in all’ (15:28).”¹²³ Now, what is the nature of this subordination of the Son and his kingdom to the Father at the end of time? This should not be understood as an *ontological* subordination. Rather, in context of the whole chapter, the Son subordinates himself as the second Adam, the representative and mediator of the kingdom of redeemed humanity. At the eschaton, he submits this redemptive *role* with its *functions* to the Father.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, this submission

Thus, in love, the Father makes Christ the head of all things in heaven and on earth which will continue in the age to come (eternity). The other reference [1 Cor 15:28] says that the Son subjects Himself to His Father, whom He loved to glorify when on earth. Here is an insight into the mutual magnification of each other, which is compatible with Trinitarian reciprocal love” (*God as Trinity*, 153). Reeve too sees this mutuality of subordination and suggests that this passage “must be balanced with the recognition that ‘all the fullness dwelt in Christ’ (Col 1:19) and the Father likewise places all things under Christ (Eph 1:22) and places Christ’s name above all names (Phil 2:9–10)” (“First Corinthians 11:2–16,” 250–251).

¹²⁰Martin F. Hanna, “Men and Women in Church Order,” in *Women and Ordination: Biblical and Historical Studies*, ed. John W. Reeve (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2015), 299. See also the more compressed discussion in idem and Cindy Tutsch, eds., *Questions and Answers about Women’s Ordination* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2014), 33–34.

¹²¹Canale, “Doctrine of God,” 126.

¹²²Hanna, “Men and Women,” 306n19.

¹²³Ibid., 299.

¹²⁴John Calvin observed that this passage is “at first view at variance with what we read in various passages of Scripture respecting the eternity of Christ’s kingdom” (John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 2 vols., trans. John Pringle [Edinburgh: T. Constable, 1848], 2:31). He asked, “For how will these things correspond—*Of his kingdom there will be no end*, (Dan 7:14, 27; Luke 1:33; 2 Pet 1:11) and *He himself shall be subjected?*” (ibid., 2:31). He resolved this by stating, “We acknowledge, . . . , God as ruler, but it is in the face of the man Christ. But Christ will then restore the kingdom which he has received, that we may cleave wholly to God. Nor will he in this way resign the kingdom, but will transfer it

does not bring an end to the Son's kingdom, which is eternal (Ps 45:6; Dan 7:14, 27; Luke 1:33; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:11). Rather, at that time, it will be shared in the Godhead forever (cf. Dan 2:44; Rev 1:6; 11:15).

Furthermore, it is helpful to understand this passage theologically in light of the reciprocal love of the Trinity and the mutual subordination and magnification between the Father and the Son that was already discussed. This harmonizes the apparent contradiction between the subjugation of everything under the Son in Eph 1:10, 20–23 so that he may “fill all in all” and the subjugation of everything under the Father in 1 Cor 15:24–28 so that “God may be all in all.” This eschatological act of the Son and the Father completes the plan of redemption and places all under the Godhead so that “the Father, Son, and Spirit as God will be all in all.”¹²⁵

Son and Spirit. Also consider the economic relationship of the Son and the Holy Spirit. As previously noted, neo-subordinationist complementarians claim that the Holy Spirit offers a “one-way” eternal, functional subordination

in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity” (ibid., 2:32). To explain what Calvin meant by this, the editor of the commentary footnoted a comment by John Dick: “The mediatorial kingdom of Christ . . . will end when its design is accomplished; he will cease to exercise an authority which has no longer an object. When all the elect are converted by the truth, and, being collected into one body, are presented to the Father ‘a glorious Church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing;’ . . . nothing will remain to be done by the power with which our Saviour was invested at his ascension; and his work being finished, his commission will expire. . . . [S]o our Redeemer, who now sways the sceptre of the universe, will return his delegated power to him for whom he received it, and a new order of things will commence under which the dependence of men upon the Godhead will be immediate; and Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, one in essence, counsel, and operation, will reign for ever over the inhabitants of heaven” (John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 2 vols. [n.p.: M. W. Dodd, 1850], 2:141). Thus, both Calvin and Dick connected this subordination of the Son to the Father to the consummation of Christ's mediatory ministry for humanity so that human beings can once again commune directly with all the persons of the Trinity. This makes God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—“all in all” (1 Cor 15:28). This particular discovery is dependent upon Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 154. See also Augustine, *Trin.* 1.8.15–10.21. Timothy J. Arena suggests a similar, but nuanced, explanation that focuses on Christ as the second Adam, stating that “the most plausible explanation for the subjection of [the Son in] verse 28 is that Christ is here subjecting Himself as the Representative of humanity, the ideal Man who reversed the curse of the Fall, gave life to the dead, and is restoring all things” (“Eternally Equal: A Historical, Biblical, and Theological Analysis of Intertrinitarian Relationships” [paper presented at the 68th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society and the 2016 Autumn Symposium of the Adventist Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, 16 November 2016], 34, <http://www.atsjats.org/site/1/docs/2016/papers-triune-god/Arena%20-%20Eternally%20Equal%20-%20ATS%202016.pdf>). In this way, the eschatological subordination of Christ can be read as not ontological, but merely functional. Thus, a key point of the passage is “Trinitarian mutuality” (ibid.). See also Petersen, *God in 3 Persons*, 17–18; Roland D. Meyer, “A Study of Paul's Concept of the Saving Act of 1 Corinthians 15:27–28,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, ed. Paul B. Petersen and Robert K. McIver (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2014), 47–63.

¹²⁵Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 154. See also Canale, “Doctrine of God,” 128.

to the Son (*filioque*), as well as to the Father. The New Testament shows that the Holy Spirit does indeed function in a servant role during the post-ascension and pre-*parousia* period. In this period, the Holy Spirit is sent by the Father (John 14:16–18) and by the Son (John 16:7), receives the truth content he is to give to the disciples from both the Son (John 16:13) and the Father (John 16:14–15), and is supposed to testify of and glorify the Son (John 15:26; 16:14). Thus, one could say that the Holy Spirit is functionally and temporarily subordinate to the Father and the Son during this period until his redemptive role is accomplished (though subordination does not need to be read into these passages).¹²⁶

However, there is also much biblical evidence that shows that the Holy Spirit was not subordinated to the Son prior to this period of time, but that the inverse was true. As Graham A. Cole says, “So very often these days the Spirit is subordinated to Jesus in our thinking. But pre-Pentecost the incarnate Son is very much under the empowerment of the Spirit.”¹²⁷ In particular, during the incarnation, the Son is described as living obediently to and dependently upon the Holy Spirit. Norman R. Gulley comments, “As the Son of Man on earth, Christ was subordinate to the Holy Spirit who made His incarnation possible (Matt 1:18–20; Luke 1:35).”¹²⁸ After the Son’s anointing of the Holy Spirit to his earthly ministry at his baptism (Matt 3:16), he was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit, where the devil severely tempted him. In his account, Mark employs the strong term ἐκβάλλω (*ekballō*), meaning “to throw out,” to communicate the idea of the Holy Spirit “driving” or “compelling” the Son to enter into the wilderness (Mark 1:12). Furthermore, the Son’s earthly ministry was a perpetual submission to the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁹ He was “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1), who anointed and sent him to “proclaim the good news to the poor,” “to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19), and to “cast out demons” “by the Spirit of God” (Matt 12:28). Thus, when the Son declared in John 5:30, “I can do nothing on my own,” he was not only voluntarily, temporarily subordinate

¹²⁶See Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 147–148.

¹²⁷Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 150. Abraham Kuyper said, “. . . the Church has never sufficiently confessed the influence of the Holy Spirit exerted on the work of Christ. The general impression is that the work of the Holy Spirit begins when the work of the mediator on earth is finished, as tho [*sic*] until that time the Holy Spirit celebrated His divine day of rest. Yet the Scripture teaches us again and again that Christ performed His mediatorial work *controlled* and *impelled* by the Holy Spirit,” (*The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975], 97, as cited in *ibid.*; emphasis added).

¹²⁸Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 145.

¹²⁹See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Pneumatology: The Holy Spirit in Ecumenical, International, and Contextual Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 29–30, 34; *idem*, *The Holy Spirit: A Guide to Christian Theology, Basic Guides to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 6.

in function to the Father in his incarnated ministry but also implicitly to the Holy Spirit (John 5:19). Therefore, “Jesus lived under the authority of the Spirit. . . . There is a subordination of the Son to the Spirit as the Son carries out his messianic vocation.”¹³⁰ All of this reveals that there is “a story of successive subordinations” in the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit.¹³¹ “In the state of humiliation the Messiah is directed by the Spirit. In the state of glory, the vindicated Messiah directs the Spirit.”¹³²

Furthermore, the Son is dependent on the Holy Spirit to represent him, to testify of and glorify him, and to make his presence available to his disciples during his absence between his ascension and second advent (John 14:16–19; 15:26; 16:5–8, 14). “So the Spirit is dependent upon Christ to be sent, to know what to say, and to bring glory to Christ. But at the same time Christ is dependent upon the Holy Spirit to be made spiritually present on earth while He ministers bodily in heaven’s sanctuary.”¹³³ Therefore, the submission between the Son and the Holy Spirit during the period from the ascension to the *parousia* is not *unilateral*, but *bilateral*, that is, *voluntarily* and *mutually* reciprocated between them.¹³⁴

All of these representative scriptural evidences—and those not discussed due to present limitations—lead one to the conclusion that the functional subordination in the economic Trinity is qualified by being *mutually experienced* among all the persons of the Godhead and *temporally limited* to the time in which the plan of redemption is implemented for the saving of humanity (see **fig. 4**). It does not affect the ontological equality of the immanent Trinity because it is not an inner history of eternity past, nor is it carried into eternity future. Once the plan of redemption is fully consummated, the functional subordination in the economic Trinity is likewise ended (1 Cor 15:24–28).

Therefore, an exclusive, unilateral, eternal, functional subordination model of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son is not reflected in Scripture. Moreover, the Bible nowhere connects this neo-subordinationist model of God to male-female relations. Neo-subordinationist complementarians have employed deficient hermeneutics that have provided an inadequate model for understanding the Trinity from Scripture for the purpose of buttressing their position of subordination of women to men in

¹³⁰Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 171.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 207.

¹³²*Ibid.*

¹³³Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 148.

¹³⁴Aurelius Ambrosius (c. 340–397), or simply Ambrose, pointed out the presence of mutuality in the relationship between the Son and the Holy Spirit when he wrote, “The Spirit was upon Christ; and . . . as He sent the Spirit, so the Spirit sent the Son of God. For the Son of God says: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He hath anointed Me, He hath sent Me to preach the Gospel to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and sight to the blind’” (*Spir.* 3.1.1, as cited in Kärkkäinen, *The Holy Spirit*, 25).

the gender debate.¹³⁵ If they desire to maintain the subordination of women to men in the family, church, and society, they should attempt to do so on other biblical grounds, and not on the doctrine of the Trinity.¹³⁶

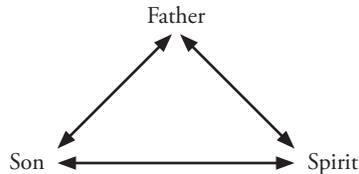


Figure 4. Mutual Covenantal Model of the Trinity

Logical Inconsistencies

In addition to the several biblical problems highlighted above, the argumentation of neo-subordinationist complementarians contains a number of inherent logical inconsistencies. Two of those will be discussed below.¹³⁷

Essential, Functional Subordination in Eternity Is Ontological Subordination

One of these inconsistencies can be seen in the following statement by Bruce A. Ware, a representative complementarian scholar, who subscribes to neo-subordinationism:

An authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. . . . The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. As such, the

¹³⁵The complementarian, Robert Letham, recognizes the magnitude of grounding the subordination of women to men “ontologically in the being of God,” and how it strongly reinforces the complementarian position by essentially eliminating any past or future possibility for functional equality between men and women (“The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52 [1990]: 74). He writes, “Consequently, the headship of the man is not a punishment on the woman deriving from the fall and is not therefore something which redemption in Christ is designed to erode and to replace. It is not a past phenomenon which we have a duty and privilege to eradicate. Instead, it belongs to the future. Since it is grounded ultimately on the eternal relations of the Trinity and is native to man from creation, sin has not introduced it but spoiled and defaced it, while redemption is not to replace it but to fulfill and to purify it. It is to be embodied increasingly and progressively in this present age. . . . It will be perfected at the parousia” (ibid.).

¹³⁶Woodrow W. Whidden II, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve agree: “We would therefore suggest that the Trinity provides no compelling clues, one way or the other, when it comes to the issue of what sort of leadership roles each gender should receive in the church. We must decide the issue on other biblical principles” (*The Trinity*, 277).

¹³⁷For other logical and philosophical problems with neo-subordinationism, see Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity?*, 169–194.

Son submits to the Father, just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence.¹³⁸

Grudem also uses the idea of equal essence but eternally subordinate roles between the Father and the Son as the model for how husbands and wives are to relate: “Just as the Father and Son are equal in deity and equal in all their attributes, but different in role, so husband and wife are equal in personhood and value, but they are different in their roles God has given them. Just as God the Son is eternally subject to the authority of God the Father, so God has planned that wives be subject to the authority of their husbands.”¹³⁹

Herein lies a major logical problem. The question must be asked of them: how can one who is permanently subordinate due to an intrinsic quality, be equal in essence to the one to whom he or she is subordinated? Adam Omelianchuk highlights this complementarian inconsistency in the context of male-female relations: “Woman is subordinated to man solely by virtue of her femaleness; this is the decisive factor that assigns her to a place of subordination. Although woman is said to be equal [to man] in her essential being, she is considered subordinate (unequal) because of her essential being. Such a contradictory conclusion is incoherent and denies that the Bible is logical.”¹⁴⁰ Applying Omelianchuk’s argument to the neo-subordinationist view of the Trinity identifies the same logical inconsistency. If the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father because of his intrinsic and essential quality of being the Son, then it follows that the Son is not equal in essence to the Father. Erickson’s reasoning leads him to the same conclusion:

If the Father’s authority over the Son and Spirit and the Son’s and Spirit’s subordination to the Father is a part of the very structure of the Trinity, so that it could not be otherwise, then this superiority and subordination are not contingent, but necessary, characteristics of each of the persons. That means that they are not accidental but essential qualities, and the essence of the Son is different from and inferior to that of the Father. In other words, invariable and inevitable differences in authority imply ontological, as well as functional, subordination.¹⁴¹

Thus, it is tautological reasoning to suggest that the Son is equal in essence yet eternally subordinate in function to the Father because he is ontologically

¹³⁸Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 21.

¹³⁹Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 46.

¹⁴⁰Adam Omelianchuk, “The Logic of Equality,” *Priscilla Papers* 22.4 (2008): 25.

¹⁴¹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 308. Rebecca Merrill Groothuis echoes this same concern: “If Christ’s subordination is not limited to a specific project or function but characterizes his eternal relationship with God, then Christ is not merely functionally subordinate; he is by nature subordinate. Subordination is what he is, what he always has been, what he always will be. It is a matter of ontology (i.e., being), not merely of function” (*Good News for Women: A Biblical Picture of Gender Equality* [Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997], 57).

the Son, just as it is to say that women are equal in nature but permanently subordinate in function to men because of their ontological “femaleness.”¹⁴² As Omelanchuk perceptively notes, such an assertion would imply that “the Bible is illogical.”¹⁴³

Where Is the Father-Son and Male-Female Connection?

Additionally, finding an analogous connection between the Father-Son and male-female relationships in the first place is a questionable leap of logic¹⁴⁴ that is certainly not biblically warranted.¹⁴⁵ There seems to be no obvious or necessary parallel between the two. Even if the relationship between the Father and the Son correlated literalistically with human relationships, it would seem most obvious for it to be applied to those between father and son or parent and child, not between male and female. Giles identifies some additional logical issues involved with this analogy proposed by neo-subordinationist complementarians:

The Trinity is a threefold relationship; the man/woman relationship is twofold. In only appealing to the Father/Son relationship, this argument leaves out the Holy Spirit. He is forgotten. If God’s threefoldness were stressed, and it was agreed the Trinity was prescriptive of human relations, then threesomes would be the ideal! Furthermore, the Father/Son relationship is a picture of a male/male relationship, not a man/woman relationship. Most of us would not want to build on this observation! . . . It

¹⁴²A tautology is a “needless or meaningless repetition in close succession of an idea, statement, or word” (“Tautology,” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, 2344).

¹⁴³Omelanchuk, “The Logic of Equality,” 25.

¹⁴⁴Paul C. Maxwell, who subscribes to neo-subordinationism, recognizes this by stating that “[t]he ‘analogy’ between Father-Son and husband-wife does not exactly fit. . . . The minimalistic dynamics of oneness and sameness among the relative persons do not carry over into marriage. The claim that there is an analogy between the Trinity and marriage emerges as a more seriously strange concept the more the specifics of the claim are considered. . . . The line of analogical continuity and discontinuity is drawn in such a convenient place [only a corresponding authority analogy] that it should put the clear lack of evidence, combined with the sheer hermeneutical gymnastics these appeals require, in a light of theological suspicion. There is radical discontinuity intertwined with the very terms claimed to have continuity in these sorts of appeals, which should at the very least give both camps [complementarians and egalitarians] pause to reflect on whether their appeals are biblical” (“Is There an Authority Analogy Between the Trinity and Marriage? Untangling Arguments of Subordination and Ontology in Egalitarian-Complementarian Discourse,” *JETS* 59.3 [2016]: 566).

¹⁴⁵Cole perceptively points out that “when the NT writers want to inform the [social] consciences of their readers, they move from some aspect of the narrative of the gospel to do so. . . . NT writers emphasize imitating the historic Christ in his post-incarnation ministry, not in the inner life of the essential Trinity (e.g., Rom. 15:1–3; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Pet. 2:21–23; 1 John 2:6)” (*He Who Gives Life*, 89). This is definitely true in the case of Eph 5:21–33. See n155 in this article.

seems the correlation between the Trinity and the man/woman relationship simply does not make sense.¹⁴⁶

Some actually have gone as far as making the parallel between the Father-Son relationship and male-male relationships—a more logical, but biblically and theologically problematic, parallel. This has been accomplished by building on the analogy between the Trinity and sexual relations that the twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar had established.¹⁴⁷ While Balthasar did not intend the sexualization of the Trinity (which he rejected), says neo-subordinationist complementarian Paul C. Maxwell, “in painting such a strong ontological analogy between human sexual difference and the Trinitarian relations, Balthasar may have opened an analogical door which he cannot shut.”¹⁴⁸ Indeed he has.

To illustrate what modern theologians have done with this open door, Maxwell uses an article by Gavin D’Costa in which D’Costa argues that “queer relationships are at the ontological heart of the Trinity” because of Balthasar’s “analogy between the Trinity and human gender relations.”¹⁴⁹ “Thus, queer relationships are divinely sanctioned as long as such relationships also represent an overflowing love to the wider community.”¹⁵⁰ In evaluation of D’Costa’s argument, Maxwell writes,

In a sense, it is difficult to refute D’Costa’s basic Trinitarian point: that if the Trinity is an archetype for sexual difference . . . , and if at its very heart is a male-male relationship between a Father and Son, then there seems to be a closer one-to-one analogy between a homosexual relationship than

¹⁴⁶Kevin Giles, “CBE and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Priscilla Papers* 25.4 (2011): 21.

¹⁴⁷According to Maxwell, Balthasar “wrote that the foundation for sexual difference between husband and wife should be located in the ontological relationship . . . between the Father and the Son” (“Authority Analogy?,” 566; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 5 of *The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1998], 91). See also Megan K. DeFranza, *Sex Difference in Christian Theology: Male, Female, and Intersex in the Image of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 201.

¹⁴⁸Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?,” 567n69. See also Barbara K. Sain, “Through a Different Lens: Rethinking the Role of Sexual Difference in the Theology of Hans Urs Balthasar,” *Modern Theology* 25.1 (2009): 72, cited in Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?,” 567.

¹⁴⁹See Gavin D’Costa, “Queer Trinity,” in *Queer Theology: Rethinking the Western Body*, ed. Gerard Loughlin (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 272–279, cited in Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?,” 567–568; DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 201. Maxwell cites a few other examples (see *ibid.*, 567n72): Kathy Rudy, who additionally argues for communal sex, particularly that which takes place in some gay bars (“Where Two or More Are Gathered: Using Gay Communities as a Model for Christian Sexual Ethics,” *Theology and Sexuality* 2 [March 1996]: 81–99, cited in DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 201); and Robert E. Gross (“Proleptic Sexual Love: God’s Promiscuity Reflected in Christian Polyamory,” *Theology and Sexuality* 11 [2004]: 52–63).

¹⁵⁰Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2001), 56, as cited in DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 202.

a heterosexual one. The point here is merely that an established authority analogy between the Trinity and marriage opens the door to granting an uncomfortable amount of theological legitimacy for queer theology.¹⁵¹

Indeed, modern theologians have opened the door of sexual ethics even more widely with this Trinity and human gender analogy in order to support incest, *ménage à trois*, polygamy, and communal sex, in addition to homosexuality.¹⁵² Thus, “[b]y sexualizing . . . the relationality between the members of the Trinity, [neo-subordinationist complementarians] are inadvertently weakening the very sexual ethic they are working so hard to defend.”¹⁵³ This is not a door that neo-subordinationist complementarians would want to leave open!¹⁵⁴

Moreover, the connection of the Son’s incarnational subordination to the Father with male-female relations entirely misses a crucial point regarding Christ’s obedience to the Father. In John 15:10, Jesus compared the obedience and love of his disciples to his commands with his own obedience and love to the Father during his incarnation. Furthermore, 1 John 2:6 states explicitly that “whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.” In other words, Jesus’s ethical life of incarnational obedience to

¹⁵¹Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?,” 568.

¹⁵²DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 186–239. She highlights Marilyn McCord Adams, an Episcopal priest and philosopher, who makes a case for *ménage à trois*, polygamy, incest, and homosexuality, building it on the analogy of the Trinity and human gender. See *ibid.*, 200; Marilyn McCord Adams, “Trinitarian Friendship: Same-Gender Models of Godly Love in Richard of St. Victor and Aelred of Rievaulx,” in *Theology and Sexuality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Eugene F. Rogers Jr. (London: Blackwell, 2002), 352. Adams notes, however, that incest has a problem, namely, “inequality—the imposition on a minor who is unable to grant consent. But, given the equality and coeternality of Father and Son, incest in the Trinity does not suffer from the same weakness” (DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 200). See Adams, “Trinitarian Friendship,” 335.

¹⁵³DeFranza, *Sex Difference*, 186. She makes this comment regarding Stanley Grenz’s and John Paul II’s social models of the image of God and human sexuality, but it equally applies to the Trinity and human gender model that neo-subordinationist complementarians assert.

¹⁵⁴Some complementarians have claimed that the egalitarian view of male-female relations opens the door for the acceptance of homosexuality and transgenderism in the Christian church. For examples, see Council of Adventist Pastors, *The Adventist Ordination Crisis*, 111–114; Koranteng-Pipim, “Homosexuality and the Church,” in *Here We Stand: Evaluating New Trends in the Church*, ed. Samuel Koranteng-Pipim (Berrien Springs, MI: Adventists Affirm, 2005), 535–563; Wellesley Muir, *Daughters of Inheritance: A New Look at Women’s Ordination* (Roseville, CA: Amazing Facts, 2010), 65–88. As has been demonstrated in this article, it is the neo-subordinationist hermeneutic, which connects male-female relations to the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity to support complementarian gender roles, that, in reality, has provided a fruitful foundation for queer, feminist, and other theologians to build their cases for the adoption of a plethora of alternate sexual practices to monogamous, heterosexual marriage—including homosexuality—in the Christian church.

God is a biblical call for *all* who claim to be his disciples to follow in his footsteps. Stanley J. Grenz with Denise Muir Kjesbo rightly point out that

the complementarian argument misunderstands [this] intent of Christ's example. Nowhere does the New Testament assert that the Son's obedience to the Father is a model of how one gender (women) should relate to the other (men). . . . Jesus' obedience to the One he called "Abba" serves as the model for how all human beings—male or female—should live in obedience to God.¹⁵⁵

The biblical call to follow the moral example of Jesus's obedience during his incarnation is given to *all* Christians, whether male or female.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, a connection between the Father-Son relationship and male-female relations is logically inconsistent and nowhere asserted in Scripture; as such, it should not be utilized for support by either side in the gender debate.

Inaccurate Reporting of the Development of Christian Thought

Besides the biblical and logical problems with neo-subordinationism, the argumentation has little *orthodox* support in the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian thought. Grudem and other neo-subordinationist complementarians claim that the "Christian church throughout history has affirmed both the subordination of the Son to the Father with respect to their roles, and the equality of the Son with the Father with respect to their being."¹⁵⁷ However, this is not an accurate description of orthodox Christian thought throughout the ages. Thus, it is important to analyze this claim by examining the thinking of early Christians on the Trinity. A few key related issues will be highlighted in this examination, but the limited scope of this article does not allow for a complete survey of the Christian tradition throughout church history.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵Stanley J. Grenz with Denise Muir Kjesbo, *Women in the Church: A Biblical Theology of Women in Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 153. See also Groothuis, *Good News for Women*, 57. In fact, when Paul desired to ground theologically his call for wives to respect and submit to their own husbands and for husbands to love, cherish, and sacrifice themselves for their own wives, he did not use an analogy of intra-Trinitarian relations. Rather, he did so by making an analogy between the Christ-church relation (a christological-ecclesiological, not Trinitarian, analogy) and the wife-husband relation. See Eph 5:22–31. "[T]he Bible only compares the husband's leadership role to that of Christ's in the church, not to that of the Father over the Son during the incarnation," (Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 276).

¹⁵⁶"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" (Keener, "Subordination within the Trinity," 50).

¹⁵⁷Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 415. See Kovach, "Egalitarians Revamp Doctrine," 1.

¹⁵⁸For a more thorough accounting of orthodox Christian tradition throughout church history, see Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

Proposed Theological Models for the Triune God

The primary Trinitarian, christological, and pneumatological controversies in church history arose in the early centuries CE when the first Christians “were forced to rethink the doctrine of God they had inherited from Judaism because of Jesus’ ministry, death and resurrection and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit” at Pentecost.¹⁵⁹ Specifically, “[t]he more emphatic the church became that Christ was God, the more it came under pressure to clarify how Christ related to God.”¹⁶⁰ Early Christians felt a need to formulate a logical model that affirmed both the uniqueness and oneness of God (Deut 4:35, 35; 6:4; Isa 42:8; 43:11; 45:5; 46:9) and the full, equal deity of Jesus (John 1:1–3; Col 1:15–20) and the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7–15; Acts 5:3–4) with the Father.

Monarchianism, meaning “sole sovereignty,” was one of the first basic models proposed. The dynamic monarchianism (built on adoptionism) of Theodotus of Byzantium (who came to Rome around 190 CE) asserted that God the Father was the only supreme, eternal, self-existent God, and that Jesus “was an ordinary man, although a completely virtuous one,” who became Spirit-filled at his baptism to perform powerful miracles of God. Some of his followers believed that Jesus became divine at one point.¹⁶¹ Sabellius (fl. c. 217–c. 220) proposed modalistic monarchianism, which “denied all distinctions within the Godhead . . . and affirmed that the Son and the Spirit were simply modes in which God appeared.”¹⁶² Christianity did not adopt Theodotus’s or Sabellius’s versions of monarchianism for the obvious reason that the first rejected the full divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the second denied their distinct personhood from the Father.

Subordinationism was another basic model proposed to explain the Trinity. It excluded modalism by affirming the full personhood of the Son and the Spirit, but it “implied that the Son and the Spirit were secondary and tertiary subordinates to the one true God” ontologically.¹⁶³

Press, 2002), 21–117; Hedberg, *Women, Men, and the Trinity*, 25–48; Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity?*, 139–168; Gary W. Deddo, “The Trinity and Gender: Theological Reflections on the Differences of Divine and Human Persons,” *Priscilla Papers* 22.4 (2008): 4–13.

¹⁵⁹Giles, “Trinity and Subordinationism,” 272.

¹⁶⁰Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Maiden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 61, as cited in Fortin, “The Trinity, and Adventism,” 6.

¹⁶¹Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 83; Canale, “Doctrine of God,” 142–143; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 303.

¹⁶²Justo L. González, *A History of Christian Thought*, rev. ed., 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970), 1:145. Noetus of Smyrna (c. 200 CE), Epigonus, and Praxeas also taught modalism in the second and third centuries, though in a less complete and sophisticated form. See Canale, “Doctrine of God,” 142–143; Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 83; Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 304.

¹⁶³Giles, “Trinity and Subordinationism,” 273.

Arius (250 or 256–336 CE) is most well known for the fourth-century controversy he agitated by his extreme subordinationist theism, which asserted that since the Son is not an emanation of, consubstantial with, or a being similar to the Father, he must out of necessity have a beginning.¹⁶⁴ Thus, there was a time when he did not exist.

Contrary to Arius, Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 298–373 CE); the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great (330–379 CE), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 331–395 CE), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390 CE); Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE); and others rigorously upheld the Trinitarian formula, μία οὐσία, τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις (*mia ousia, treis hypostaseis*; “one nature, three persons”), meaning that the Godhead was composed of one divine essence/substance/being (Greek: οὐσία [*ousia*]; Latin: *substantia* or *essentia*) in which three divine *hypostases* or persons (Greek: ὑποστάσεις [*hypostaseis*]; Latin: *personae* or *substantiae*) share equally.¹⁶⁵ They asserted that “the being/nature/essence and the works/operations/functions of the Father and the Son are one. The three divine persons are one in being and one in action. *Who they are and what they do* cannot be separated.”¹⁶⁶

The Church’s Theological Formulation for the Trinity

In response to the controversies caused by these competing models of the Trinity (all of which are not spelled out here for the sake of brevity), the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE was called by emperor Constantine. Out of that council came a Christian creed, which was refined and expanded in 381 CE at the Council of Constantinople and reaffirmed at the Councils of Ephesus (431 CE) and Chalcedon (451 CE). It excluded both monarchianism, Arian subordinationism, and tritheism by championing the position of Athanasius that God is ὁμοούσιος (*homoousios*; Latin: *consubstantialis*)¹⁶⁷ or one “same nature” in three ὑποστάσεις or “persons.” The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not merely ὁμοίος (*homoios*) or “similar,” ὁμοιούσιος (*homoiousios*) or “similar in nature,” and certainly not ἀνόμοιος (*anomoios*) or “unsimilar” and ἕτεροούσιος (*heteroousios*)¹⁶⁸ or “different in nature.” The Son, as well as the Holy Spirit, is “of one substance with the Father.”¹⁶⁹ Thus, the basic teaching was that

¹⁶⁴González, *History of Christian Thought*, 1:262–263.

¹⁶⁵For an example, see Augustine, *Trin.* 1.4.7–6.13; 5.8.10. See also the discussion in Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 138–156.

¹⁶⁶Giles, “Trinity and Subordinationism,” 275; emphasis original.

¹⁶⁷This is similar to the use of the “homo-” prefix in the English terms “homogeneous,” meaning “of the same kind,” and “homosexual,” meaning “of the same sex.”

¹⁶⁸This is similar to the use of the “hetero-” prefix in the English terms “heterogeneous,” meaning “of a different kind,” and “heterosexual,” meaning “of a different sex.”

¹⁶⁹John Norman Davidson Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longmans, Green, 1950), 215–216, as cited in González, *History of Christian Thought*, 1:267.

there is one living true God; the one true God is manifested as Father, as Son, and as Holy Spirit; the difference between them is only in regard to their origin as expressed in terms of relations: relationally, the Father is ungenerated [*sic*], the Son is generated, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father[;] the one God of three Persons is an absolute unity of being, consciousness, and will.¹⁷⁰

*The Problem with the Eternal Generation of the Son
and the Eternal Procession of the Spirit*

There was at least one biblical problem, however, with this early creedal formulation. It enshrined the eternal¹⁷¹ begetting or generation of the Son¹⁷²—based on a misunderstanding of the Greek words μονογενής (*monogenēs*) as “only-begotten” instead of “one-and-only” or “only unique” (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9)¹⁷³ and πρωτότοκος (*prōtotokos*) as “firstborn” instead of “supreme/pre eminent one” (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; Rev 1:5)¹⁷⁴—as well as the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷⁵ Thus, the persons of

¹⁷⁰Donkor, *God in 3 Persons*, 12. This is a summary that he provides of the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity, with which he disagrees.

¹⁷¹The term “eternal” in this context of the Son’s generation and the Holy Spirit’s procession refers to the Greek metaphysical concept of timelessness, meaning outside of time or incompatibility with time (no succession of past, present, and future). See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 29.3.

¹⁷²The creed reads, “[We believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only [Μονογενῆ] Son of God, begotten [γεννηθέντα] from the Father before all ages, [God from God,] Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten [γεννηθέντα], not made, of one Being [ὁμοούσιον] with the Father, through whom all things were made” (Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. [Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000], 22–23). “The eternal generation of the Son is commonly defined to be an eternal personal act of the Father, wherein, by necessity of nature, not by choice of will, he generates the person (not the essence) of the Son, by communicating to him the whole indivisible substance of the Godhead, without division, alienation, or change, so that the Son is the express image of his Father’s person, and eternally continues, not from the Father, but in the Father, and the Father in the Son” (Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology: Rewritten and Enlarged* [New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1878], 182). See also Origen, *Princ.* 1.2.11.

¹⁷³See discussion in Petersen, *God in 3 Persons*, 14–15; idem, “Jesus—The ‘One and Only,’ or ‘Only Begotten’: The Meaning,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, ed. Paul B. Petersen and Robert K. McIver (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2014), 29–34.

¹⁷⁴See Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 121–129; Ekkehardt Mueller, “The Firstborn in Colossians 1:15,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity*, ed. Paul B. Petersen and Robert K. McIver (Cooranbong, NSW: Avondale Academic Press, 2014), 65–86.

¹⁷⁵The creed reads, “[We believe] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds [ἐκπορευόμενον] from the Father [and the Son], who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets”

the Trinity were distinguished not by authority, role, or function (as neo-subordinationist complementarians suggest), but by eternal derivation and causality—the Father is eternally ungenerated, the Son is eternally generated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is eternally spirated (proceeds) from the Father and the Son (*filioque*).¹⁷⁶ It is important to understand that this distinction was not intended to detract in any way from the full equality of the Trinitarian persons.¹⁷⁷ Rather, it was purposed to explain God’s “threeness” in “oneness” and to defend it against monarchianism, Arian subordinationism, and tritheism. Thus, the general historical trajectory of orthodox Christianity was to fight against notions of subordinationism.

Nevertheless, the problematic formulation of Trinitarian derivation left the door open for some Christian thinkers to assert some form of subordination in the Trinity. This is due to the fact that in current logic the idea of origination—whether or not it is eternal—seems to indicate some kind of subordination.¹⁷⁸ Interestingly, some modern-day complementarians reject the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son in their published

(Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 23). The eternal procession of the Holy Spirit “designate[s] the relation which the third person sustains to the first and second, wherein by an eternal and necessary, i.e., not voluntary, act of the Father and the Son [*filioque*], their whole identical divine essence, without alienation, division, or change, is communicated to the Holy Ghost” (Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 189–190).

¹⁷⁶Nonna Verna Harrison demonstrates this in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. See “Gregory of Nyssa on Knowing the Trinity,” in *The Holy Trinity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Khaled Anatolios, Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 55–61.

¹⁷⁷See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Ors.* 29.12–17; 40.43; 42.15. Christopher A. Beeley demonstrates that Gregory of Nazianzus never saw a contradiction between the monarchy of the Father as the cause of the Son (eternal generation) and the Holy Spirit (eternal procession) and the full equality of the three persons. See *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light*, OSHT, ed. David C. Steinmetz (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201–217.

¹⁷⁸Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 307–308. Gulley points out that “the Nicene concept of a shared nature (*homoousion*) between Father and Son should have been sufficient to accomplish” the defeat of Arian subordinationism (*God as Trinity*, 100). But this ultimately failed due to the assertion of the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, which “placed the Son in a subservient position to the Father, which was the same in kind (not degree) as the position of Arius (Son created by the Father in eternity)” (*ibid.*). Canale agrees that eternal generation and procession imply subordination: “Unfortunately a subtle form of Monarchianism and ontological subordinationism is preserved when the differences of the persons are explained metaphysically by recourse to the ideas of generation and procession (“Doctrine of God,” 144). See also Remwil R. Tornalejo, “Reexamining the Eternal Generation of the Son and Its Implications to the Doctrine of the Trinity” (paper presented at the 68th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society and the 2016 Autumn Symposium of the Adventist Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, 16 November 2016), <http://www.atsjats.org/site/1/docs/2016/papers-triune-god/Tornalejo%20-%20Reexamining%20the%20Eternal%20Generation%20of%20the%20Son%20-%20ATS%202016.pdf>.

writings, yet maintain neo-subordinationism.¹⁷⁹ In order to support their contemporary belief in neo-subordinationism without eternal generation, these complementarians turn to early Christian theologians, even though those theologians maintained eternal generation without subordination.¹⁸⁰ This appears to be a case of “grasping” for historical authorization.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹See Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 162n3; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 254n38, 1233–1234.

¹⁸⁰Very recently, during a panel discussion at the 68th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (2016) in San Antonio, Texas, both Grudem and Ware verbally changed their position on the eternal generation of the Son due to pressures from the evangelical community. During their surprising announcement, they explained that they now embrace the eternal generation of the Son but are unclear as to what it means in particular. Nevertheless, it is a teaching included in the early Christian creeds, and so they have accepted it as a valid Trinitarian conception. Even so, they misuse the original intention of eternal generation, which was to defend against Trinitarian subordination, not support it.

¹⁸¹See Erickson’s discussion in *Tampering with the Trinity?*, 179–184. Curiously, Giles, an egalitarian who has written much to oppose neo-subordinationism, is supportive of eternal generation of the Son in spite of the modern logic pointing toward subordination (see his defense of this doctrine in *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012]), but he asserts that it excludes the idea of subordination, as did early Christian theologians (*Jesus and the Father*, 239–240). He asserts that eternal generation serves merely to differentiate the Father and the Son in their intimate, loving, and coequal relationship.

However, it seems that even if the Son is said to be generated/begotten timelessly or eternally, the logical implication of subordination in the concept of derivation or origination cannot be avoided for modern thinkers. Therefore, it seems difficult to uphold the full ontological and functional equality of the Father and Son and yet continue to maintain eternal generation and eternal procession.

Furthermore, though upheld in the Christian creeds, this teaching of derivation in the Trinity seems foreign to Scripture. Thankfully, Giles acknowledges this to some degree. He says that eternal generation is “not directly taught in Scripture,” even though he still sees it as implied there. He goes on to state that the “eternal procession of the Spirit does not seem to be mentioned at all in Scripture” (*ibid.*, 239n166). In this case, Grudem’s statement that the idea of eternal generation should be taken out of modern theological conceptions of intra-Trinitarian relationships is shared (*Systematic Theology*, 1234). Erickson agrees: “It appears to me that the concept of eternal generation does not have biblical warrant and does not make sense philosophically. As such, we should eliminate it from theological discussions of the Trinity” (*Tampering with the Trinity?*, 251). Canale also agrees: “There is . . . no ground within the biblical understanding of the Godhead for the idea of a generation of the Son from the Father” (“Doctrine of God,” 126). Thus, “[t]he procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son (John 15:26; 14:16, 26; Acts 2:33) is to be understood not in an ontological sense, but rather in a historical sense as the inner divine activity involved in sending the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as the representative of Christ’s presence, sacrifice, and ministry. In other words, the procession of the Spirit does not refer to an inner process in the makeup of the trinitarian being as classical theology came to believe” (*ibid.*, 132).

The Main Thrust of Christian Thought through History

A careful survey of Christian history will likely lead one to similar conclusions as those expressed here by Nancy Hedberg:

Certainly, over the years, there have been theologians who have supported functional subordination or whose views are so ambiguous it is impossible to discern their perspective on this topic. However . . . in examining the thinking of prominent theologians such as Augustine, Athanasius, Basil, John of Damascus, Warfield, Calvin, Rahner, and Barth, I have detected far more emphasis on equality of both essence and function than on functional subordination. It is difficult . . . to see how hierarchists can claim that the timeless, orthodox Christian view is that the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father.¹⁸²

Erickson comes to similar conclusions, stating that “[i]t is difficult to contend that throughout its history the church has taught the eternal functional subordination of the Son (and the Spirit) to the Father.”¹⁸³ Nevertheless, as helpful as historical considerations may be in understanding the development of Christian thinking on the Trinity over time, in the end, these historical considerations are not authoritatively dogmatic evidences for supporting one view over the other; only Scripture should take that role. The truth is that both sides may be able to find some historical support for their differing perspectives. Even so, it is fair to say that neo-subordinationist complementarians have exaggerated the orthodox historical support for their neo-subordinationism, and that they certainly have no historical support earlier than the late twentieth century (as was shown earlier) for making an analogy of authority and subordination between the Father-Son relationship and male-female relations.

Ramifications for Soteriology and the Character of God

Finally, neo-subordinationism has several negative implications for Christian theology. Only a few of these can be assessed here due to present constraints. To begin this discussion, it is important to realize the profound harm done to Christian theology by neo-subordinationism that Bilezikian identifies when he says that “[a] low Christology results in a weak soteriology.”¹⁸⁴ If the implications of neo-subordinationism are advanced, they inevitably lower Christ functionally, and, arguably, ontologically (as discussed above), to the position of a mere subordinate of the Father. This lowering of God the Son logically leads to grave systematic consequences for the doctrine of salvation and the character of God, that is if one is being consistent and coherent. This is apparent in the following ways.

Firstly, Scripture teaches that only God himself could truly redeem the world from sin as the needed perfect and blameless sacrifice, since “all have

¹⁸²Nancy Hedberg, “One Essence, One Goodness, One Power,” *Priscilla Papers* 25.4 (2011): 9.

¹⁸³Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity?*, 167.

¹⁸⁴Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 66.

sinned” (Rom 3:23) and since “all . . . like sheep have gone astray” (Isa 53:6). If Jesus is lowered in any way from full equality with the Father, his eligibility to serve as Sacrifice and Savior for the human race begins to crumble. Because “the redemptive power of the cross derives from the fact that the One who died on it was fully God,” Christ’s death on the cross is undermined and minimized when Christ is made merely a subordinate of the Father.¹⁸⁵ God himself must be fully and equally in Christ to pay the penalty for sin (Rom 6:23) so to reconcile the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19).¹⁸⁶

Secondly, neo-subordinationism can deeply taint the character of God because of the way it can affect the penal substitutionary view of the atonement. Romans 3:21–26 describes the sacrifice of Christ for human sin as an expiation and propitiation (ἱλαστήριον [*hilastērion*]) that removes the sin-barrier between God and humanity, satisfies divine justice, and turns aside the wrath of God.¹⁸⁷ When Christ is understood, as the Scriptures teach,

¹⁸⁵Ibid.

¹⁸⁶Neo-subordinationist complementarians do not intend to do any harm to the ontological equality of the Son and the Father, but vigorously claim to uphold it. Thus, the assertion above could be viewed as an invalid concern about their view of the Trinity. However, as was discussed in the section on logical inconsistencies, making the Son’s functional subordination eternal and based on his being as Son—as does neo-subordinationism—logically lowers the Son ontologically in relation to the Father. There is no doubt that this will have significant negative impact on redemption, if this thinking is carried throughout one’s theological system.

¹⁸⁷The verbal cognate ἱλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai*) in Heb 2:17 and the masculine nominal cognate ἱλασμός (*hilasmos*) in 1 John 2:2, 4:10 of ἱλαστήριον are also used concerning Christ’s sacrifice for sin. In both classical Greek and Greco-Roman literature, the Greek word ἱλαστήριον was indicative of an implement by which one achieves both expiation to remove what is offensive and propitiation to appease a god or ruler’s wrath. Contemporary authors of Paul largely used ἱλαστήριον substantivally as a technical term to refer to the golden lid of the ark of the covenant of the Hebrew sanctuary—commonly called the “mercy seat”—which was the place where propitiation and expiation were accomplished in the Hebrew sacrificial system. Philo used ἱλαστήριον a total of six times, all of which are references to the “mercy seat” (*Her.* 166; *Fug.* 100, 101; *Cher.* 25; *Mos.* 2.95, 97). However, it may also indicate an implement of a propitiatory and/or expiatory function. Josephus uses ἱλαστήριον substantivally as an object of propitiation/expiation (*Ant.* 16.179–182). Of the twenty-eight occurrences of ἱλαστήριον in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint (LXX), twenty-one of them (Exod 25:17–22; 31:7; 35:12; 38:5, 7–8; Lev 16:2, 13–15; Num 7:89) are used substantivally to translate the Hebrew word, כַּפֹּרֶת (*kapporeth*), which is the Old Testament term to designate the “mercy seat” (six of the other occurrences are also connected to other parts of the sanctuary: five appearances are in Ezek 43:14, 17, 20 in reference to the side of the altar of burnt offering and one in Amos 9:1 referring to the top of the pillars in the sanctuary). The last remaining occurrence of ἱλαστήριον is in 4 Macc 17:22 in speaking of martyrdom. Importantly, ἱλαστήριον is used attributively in this passage to modify θανάτου (*thanatou*; “death”) in the context of sin, God’s wrath against that sin, a divinely provided ransom and purification through blood, and the giving up of life to achieve the ransom. Hence, a clear propitiatory and expiatory usage emerges from this passage. In the New

as being one ontologically and functionally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the passage portrays the triune God as removing the sin-barrier on his own initiate and placating his own wrath against sin by himself through suffering the death penalty in place of humanity in the person of the Son (Rom 6:23), who was made “to be sin who knew no sin” (1 Cor 5:12). Thus, God is both the subject and object of divine wrath against sin. In this way, a rich witness is given concerning the character of God and his profound love in the plan of redemption.¹⁸⁸

However, viewing Christ as a subordinate of the Father emphasizes his role as the object of wrath and can diminish his balancing role as the subject. In such a case, God could be regarded as bloodthirsty, demanding the life of his Son in order for his wrath to be dissuaded; and indeed he has been.

Testament, ἱλαστήριον appears only once outside of Rom 3:25 and is found in Heb 9:5. The author of Hebrews uses ἱλαστήριον substantively in alignment with the tradition of the LXX simply to indicate the lid of the ark of the covenant.

Harmonizing the use of ἱλαστήριον in Rom 3:25 with all of this data leads one to conclude that ἱλαστήριον in this text carries both expiatory and propitiatory senses. First of all, according to Isaiah 59:1–2 (LXX), ἁμαρτία (*hamartia*; “sin”) separates humanity from God. In Rom 1:18–3:20, Paul made it abundantly clear that universal sin makes all human beings worthy of a revelation of God’s wrath and judgment and deserving of the punishment of death (Rom 1:18, 32; 2:12, 19). Thus, in order for humanity to stand justified before God and experience reconciliation in their relationship with him, the sin-barrier must be expiated—removed and cleansed. The use of τὴν πᾶρεσιν (*tēn paresin*; “the passing over”), along with ἁμαρτυμάτων (*hamartumatōn*; “sin”) in Rom 3:25, clearly indicates that Jesus’s death is addressing the sin problem—to “pass over” it—thus, expiation.

Second, Rom 3:25 follows a lengthy description of the revelation of the wrath of God in Rom 1:18–3:20. In order for God to be just and demonstrate his righteousness, a key concern of Rom 3:25–26, sin cannot simply be excused. God’s wrath and judgment must be satisfied; in other words, someone must bear sin and experience God’s wrath against it. Isaiah stated in Isa 53:4 that Jesus as the suffering sin-bearing Servant was stricken, smitten, and afflicted by God. Furthermore, Paul wrote later in Rom 5:9—seemingly to expound on what he wrote in Rom 3:25, since their contents are very similar—that believers are saved from God’s wrath through Christ’s blood sacrifice. This implies that Jesus bore God’s wrath on the cross so that those who believe may escape it—thus, propitiation. In sum, Paul’s use of ἱλαστήριον in Rom 3:25 to refer to Jesus’s sacrificial death indicates that it served as an expiation of the sin barrier between God and humanity, as well as a propitiation to turn divine wrath away from humanity. Thus, the penal substitutionary view of the atonement is in view in Rom 3:21–26.

¹⁸⁸“The deity of Christ is the full deity of the entire triune Godhead. . . . Therefore we can truthfully say that God, in satisfying His nature of loving justice, did not take His wrath out on an innocent third party or some unwilling victim. Rather, in Christ He has met the needs of justice through His own willingly given divine self-sacrifice. . . . The great truth of the Holy Trinity and the atoning death of Christ speaks eloquently that God has, in His Son, borne the penalty of sin as our substitute and made an infinitely valuable and powerful provision for the full reconciliation of the entire human race” (Whidden, Moon, and Reeve, *The Trinity*, 267). See also Woodrow W. Whidden II, “God Is Love—Trinitarian Love!” *JATS* 17.1 (2006): 118–119.

Woodrow W. Whidden II, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve observe that “[m]any Christians . . . have expressed deep misgivings about the whole concept of Christ offering a sacrifice of substitution to satisfy God’s nature of justice. They argue that such a view is not only morally questionable, but that it makes God resemble some angry ogre intent on taking out His wrath on an unwilling third party.”¹⁸⁹ Also, D. Glenn Butner, Jr. notes that there is “widespread concern” with such a model of the atonement because of its potential for promoting “a culture of violence against the powerless.”¹⁹⁰ The overemphasis of the Son as the object of wrath, which honors a “power structure resulting in suffering of the subordinate,” can easily be “echo[ed] in the created order in ways that harm the weak and powerless.”¹⁹¹ Neo-subordinationism can legitimize this major objection against the biblical penal substitutionary view of Christ’s atonement. However, maintaining the ontological and functional equality of the Trinitarian persons and, thereby, keeping the balance of Christ as both subject and object of divine wrath helps to answer this objection. Therefore, as demonstrated here, neo-subordinationism can undermine the loving and sacrificial character of God.

Finally, by implication, neo-subordinationism presents the incarnation and passion of Christ as merely obedience to the authority of the Father. This has a significant impact on the way one understands the motivation of Christ in the work of redemption. Bilezikian points out that “[i]t makes a lot of difference whether God in Christ offered his life out of sacrificial love, as the Scriptures affirm he did, or whether Christ acted out of obedience because he had no choice but to subject himself to the authority of the Father.”¹⁹² If neo-subordinationism indeed suggests that Christ was motivated by command (coercion) of the Father to serve as a sacrifice for the world, then a motivation of voluntary love is precluded. Thus, the cross event no longer is a demonstration of the love of God and Christ for the world, but rather a demonstration of Christ’s subordination to the Father’s authority over him. Furthermore, it excludes what is often called the “Council of Peace” or “Covenant of Redemption,” during which the persons of the Trinity unitedly designed a plan of salvation for how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit would resolve the sin problem and voluntarily assume functions or roles in the carrying out of this redemptive plan.¹⁹³ The idea of a covenantal council seems

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 261. See also Whidden, “God Is Love,” 113.

¹⁹⁰D. Glenn Butner, Jr., “Crumbling Cathedrals of the Mind: How Eternal Functional Subordination Undermines Transactional Atonement Theory,” *Preserving the Trinity* (2016): 13.

¹⁹¹Ibid.

¹⁹²Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 66.

¹⁹³See Gulley, *God as Trinity*, 141–142; Warfield, “The Trinity,” *ISBE* 5:3020–3021. See also Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 121–122, 187, 207–208. For biblical evidence of this Trinitarian covenant, see Pss 2:7–9; 110; Joel 2:28–32; Zech 6:12–13; Matt 22:41–45; Mark 12:34–37; Luke 20:41–44; 22:29; Acts 2:32–36; 13:32–33; Rom 1:1–4; 1 Cor 2:7–10; 15:24–28; Gal 4:4; Eph 1; 4:4–10; 2 Tim 1:9–10; Heb 1; 5:5–10; 6:13–20; 7; 8:1–6; 10:12–17; 1 Pet 1:20;

to imply an intra-Trinitarian deliberation of some sort, but such deliberation would simply not be necessary if the Father issues commands and the Son merely obeys them.

Neo-subordinationism, then, is a significant deviation from Scripture. It offers a lowered Christology that weakens soteriology by devaluing the penal substitutionary atonement that was accomplished for humanity through the death of Christ. This, in turn, taints the character of God.¹⁹⁴ Additionally, it warps Christ's motivation of self-sacrificial love that stands behind the cross event into a mere demonstration of authority and obedience in the Trinity. This proposed intra-Trinitarian dynamic precludes any need for the Trinitarian Covenant of Redemption.

Summary

In summary, the eternal, functional subordination of the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both the Father and the Son as an analogy for male-female relations is a relatively new argumentation that some complementarians have introduced to strengthen the foundation of their position on the role subordination of women to men in the gender debate. This neo-subordinationist argumentation creates some serious, unwarranted problems for Christian theology. Firstly, it fails to provide the evangelical community with an adequate Trinitarian model for all the theological, christological, and pneumatological data revealed in Scripture. Secondly, it lacks inherent logical consistency. Thirdly, it offers a different account of the development of orthodox Christian thought throughout the ages of church history from that shared by the majority of current scholarship. Finally, it also could severely undermine the atonement of Christ and mar the true character of God, if the full extent of its implications is carried consistently throughout one's entire theological system.

Conclusion and Recommendations for Moving Forward

Because of its problems and weighty implications for Christianity, one should be careful not to make a one-to-one analogy between the Father-Son relationship and male-female relations. As such, neo-subordinationism should be excluded from the discussion on gender roles.¹⁹⁵ This is not to say that theology proper should not inform one's entire theological system of faith and practice. It should, but its influence should only go as far as Scripture

Rev 13:8. Helpful exegetical-theological commentary on some of these passages can be found in J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2016), 49–124.

¹⁹⁴For a more detailed discussion of the impact that neo-subordinationism can have on transactional theories of the atonement, see the fuller discussion in Butner, Jr., "Crumbling Cathedrals," 9–15.

¹⁹⁵Cole is also "not convinced" that scholars should be erecting "social models for marriage, church, and society based on speculative reconstructions of the inner life of the Trinity" (*He Who Gives Life*, 91).

allows. Regarding gender roles, this entails affirming what is exegetically and canonically-theologically “discernible, demonstrable, and defensible”¹⁹⁶ from the text, namely, the full equality and “relationality”¹⁹⁷ (unity in plurality) of all humanity—no matter one’s gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc. (Gal 3:28)—because all bear the *imago Dei* (Gen 1:26–28).¹⁹⁸

Thus, to move the debate on gender forward, the analogy between the Father-Son relation and male-female relations should be dropped from the debate, since there is no biblical or logical warrant for such an analogy.¹⁹⁹ Evangelicals, including Seventh-day Adventists, and other Christians, who are now involved in the discussion on gender roles, should return to the utilization of proper biblical and theological hermeneutics; conduct, once again, biblical and historical studies that explore relevant data in the areas of anthropology and ecclesiology; and avoid reading the ontology of humanity and the church into the ontology of the triune God. Finally, they should also carefully consider Bilezikian’s three recommendations.²⁰⁰ Firstly, do not muddle with the triune Godhead; especially do not lower the majesty of Christ when Christians are called to exalt him. “If some people’s belief system requires the subordination of women, they should not build their hierarchy at the expense of Christological orthodoxy.”²⁰¹ Secondly, cease using the term “subordination,” which is reminiscent of Arianism, and, in its place, speak of Christ’s voluntary self-humiliation. Lastly, “[l]et us not use God to push our ideological agendas.”²⁰² It is inappropriate to read perceived differences of gender roles into the economic functions and then into the immanent relationships and being of the persons of the Trinity in order to have a stronger grounding for a complementarian position. This is making God into one’s *own* image. “Let the Father be God, let Christ be God, let the Holy Spirit be God—all three in one, ‘equal in power and glory’ for all eternity.”²⁰³

*“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all”
(2 Cor 13:14).*

¹⁹⁶John C. Peckham, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 209.

¹⁹⁷This is a research topic that cannot be explored in this article due to present constraints. For an excellent discussion on what is meant by “relationality” and “unity in plurality,” see Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, 29–72. See also Cole, *He Who Gives Life*, 91.

¹⁹⁸Every fallen human being still bears the *imago Dei* (image of God), even though sin has marred it to some degree.

¹⁹⁹See Maxwell, “Authority Analogy?,” 565–569.

²⁰⁰Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-jumping,” 66–68.

²⁰¹*Ibid.*, 67.

²⁰²*Ibid.*, 68.

²⁰³*Ibid.*