

ARE THERE RANKS IN THE TRINITY?

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I have only been to the Pentagon (the headquarters of the Department of Defense of the United States) once, to the office of the Chief of chaplains. As our host escorted us to his office, we met and passed numerous persons in the corridors. The thought occurred to me, “My wife would love this place.” It is not that my wife is a great advocate of the military, although she appreciates all that the men and women in uniform do to protect US citizens. Rather, she believes that there should be a law requiring everyone to wear a nametag at all times. There, in the Pentagon, I could tell at a glance not only what a person’s name was, but also how important that person was, for each one’s uniform displayed both the wearer’s name, as well as an insignia denoting his or her rank. As any who have served in the military know, rank is very important, because it also is an indication of relative authority. A sergeant is subordinate to a lieutenant, who, in turn, is subordinate to a captain, and so on, all the way up to the general of the army.

The question we are considering in this article is whether the triune Godhead has within it ranks denoting differing authority, and whether such ranks, if they exist, are permanent and necessary. In approximately the past quarter century, this question has become the subject of increasing debate among conservative Christians. Two basic positions have formed.

Statement of the Two Basic Positions

One of these positions, which we will initially term simply “View A,” says that such distinctions of rank are present in the Trinity, and that they are eternal, necessary, and irreversible. Thus, the Father is “the supreme member of the Trinity,” and the Son and the Holy Spirit are everywhere and always subordinate to Him.¹ The Father’s will is supreme, and the Son and the Spirit carry out that will. There is no alteration of this pattern, so the Father never carries out the will of the Son.² This view insists that there is no difference in

¹Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 46.

²*Ibid.*, 8.

the essence, nature, substance, or being of the three.³ Each of them is eternally deity, to the same extent and in the same way as each of the others. It is with respect to their relative authority that the distinctions take place.

The other view, “View B,” also holds that the nature or essence of the three persons is exactly the same.⁴ It also agrees that, for a period of time, one or two of the members of the Trinity was subordinate in authority to the Father.⁵ This subordination, however, was temporary, for the purpose of carrying out a particular task. When that role was completed, that person returned to a status of equal authority with the Father. In eternity past and eternity future, there was and is no differentiation of authority among the three persons.⁶

We need now to move beyond these generic designations of “A” and “B” to something more descriptive. Some have termed them “complementarian” and “egalitarian,” respectively.⁷ However, I find the use of these terms not to be helpful. For one thing, this tends to correlate the views of the members of the Trinity with views of the relationship between male and female, particularly within marriage. I think it is unwise to attempt to connect the contrasting views in the one area with those in the other. Such an approach is especially used by those who believe that the husband is the final authority within a marriage, and who use 1 Cor 11:3 to attempt to establish that connection: “But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” Apart from the interpretative problems of the passage, such a connection seems to me to be illegitimate, and that is true of both sides of the issue.

The second problem, however, is that this is an inaccurate application of the terms. Even though different roles are performed by the different persons of the Trinity, the cooption of the term by one view seems improper. For the most part, those of the second view do not insist that each of the persons performs exactly the same role as each of the others. The issue, then, is not whether the persons complement each other in their actions, but whether the complementation is vertical or horizontal. The use of these terms to designate the two views confuses the issue of whether their roles are different, with whether one role is superior to the other. If the idea of complementation is to be used, the two should probably be designated as hierarchical complementarian and egalitarian complementarian.

³Ibid., 43.

⁴Philip Cary, “The New Evangelical Subordinationism: Reading Inequality into the Trinity,” in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 5.

⁵Kevin Giles, “The Trinity without Tiers,” in *New Evangelical Subordinationism*, 269n23.

⁶Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS* 40.1 (1997): 59.

⁷Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2006), 13–15.

Those who like firm labels have attached more technical terms, such as “Eternal Functional Subordination” (EFS), to the views.⁸ I personally have used the terms “Gradational Authority” for the former and “Equivalent Authority” for the latter, attempting to make them not merely designators, but denotators, and to avoid trying to gain an advantage by stipulation.⁹ These terms have not received wide acceptance and, despite my good intentions, one commentator thought “these terms have a mischievous intention.”¹⁰ In another attempt to avoid the sort of postmodern stipulative definition that is currently so common in academic discourse, I will here refer to the two views respectively as the eternal subordination view and the temporary subordination view, emphasizing the issue of subordination and noting that both sides insist that the subordination is functional, not essential. That does have the disadvantage of putting the emphasis on the negative, rather than on the positive elements of each view. The term “submission” is more positive and emphasizes the Son’s initiative. Because the term “subordination” is so widely used, however, it will be employed herein.

The Arguments for Each View

We turn now to specific arguments advanced by the proponents of each of these positions. In the process, a more complete exposition of each view will also emerge.

The Eternal Subordination View

A number of different considerations are advanced within this position:

(1) The terminology of Father and Son are among the most often used titles for the first two persons of the Trinity in Scripture. Proponents of the eternal subordination view, such as Wayne A. Grudem, contend that the biblical names Father and Son are permanent, intentionally assigned, and indicative of the nature of the relationship between the two. Just as human fathers possess superior authority over their sons, so must the heavenly Father have such superiority over the Son, Jesus. The frequent use of such designators indicates this authority.¹¹

⁸Thomas McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 175.

⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 21.

¹⁰John Ploughman, “Millard Erickson and the Trinity—Gradational? (1),” *Faith: Theology: Culture*, 11 June 2009, <https://johnploughman.wordpress.com/2009/06/11/millard-erickson-and-the-trinity-gradational-1/>.

¹¹Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 249–250.

(2) Expressions of taxis or ordering in the statement of the names, such as the baptismal formula in Matt 28:19, are understood as indicating different levels of authority.¹²

(3) In Scripture there are passages in which the Son declares that he has come to do the Father's will. For this view, these indicate the priority of the Father in relationship to the Son. These are not simply restricted to the Son's work while on earth, for they seem to indicate that his very coming was because of the Father's will, and to do that will.¹³

(4) Passages that speak of the Father as the subject of creation, predestination to salvation, providence, and other crucial divine works are used as indicators of the supreme authority of the Father.¹⁴

(5) Those who hold the eternal subordination view argue for the necessity of this sort of subordination to the differentiation of persons. If it were not the case that the Son is subordinate to the Father, then there would be no distinct persons, but rather simply person A, person A, and person A. In that case, the Trinity would not exist.¹⁵

(6) Passages describing the periods before and after Jesus's ministry on earth are utilized in such a way that the relationship of superiority and subordination is said to be not merely during that finite time period, but also eternal. Of these, the most powerful is 1 Cor 15:24–28.¹⁶

(7) References to the Son as sitting on the right hand of the Father, not only now but in the eternity before his becoming incarnate and in that which will follow his return and the final judgment, are used to show the Father as possessing authority over the Son.¹⁷

(8) Historical arguments are made that this is the traditional view of the church. The eternal subordinationists cite early church theologians, the ecumenical councils and creeds, as well as later confessions of faith, as evidence for their position.¹⁸

(9) Proponents of this view also use theological arguments. For example, they assert that divine immutability would prevent such a change in the relationship between Father and Son as the temporary subordination view claims.¹⁹ As noted above, such a structure of the Trinity is considered necessary to differentiation of the persons.

¹²Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 72.

¹³*Ibid.*, 77–78.

¹⁴Wayne A. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father," in *New Evangelical Subordinationism*, 232–235.

¹⁵*Idem*, *Systematic Theology*, 251.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Idem*, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 410–414.

¹⁸*Idem*, "Biblical Evidence," 248–251.

¹⁹*Idem*, *Systematic Theology*, 250.

(10) The gradationist authority view claims that distortive implications follow from the opposing view. For instance, the equivalent authority view comes very close to modalism, the idea that the three persons in Scripture are actually three manifestations or revelations of one person, and to patripassianism, the view that the Father suffered on the cross.²⁰

The Temporary Subordination View

The adherents of this view also cite a variety of arguments:

(1) Regarding the term “Son,” contrary to the view just presented, many of these theologians contend that the primary meaning of the term in Scripture is not derivation or subordination, but similarity.²¹

(2) Variation in the order of the names, as they are listed throughout Scripture, are seen as evidence of equality.²²

(3) References to the Son initiating some of the works attributed to God are said to demonstrate his equal authority with the Father. These include choosing persons, even for eternal salvation (Matt 11:27; John 13:18a; 15:19; 5:21), sending the Holy Spirit (15:26; 16:7), judging the world (Matt 25:31–32; 2 Cor 5:10), and several other functions.²³

(4) Texts such as Phil 2:4–11 and Heb 5:8 are viewed as asserting that Jesus acquired or learned special obedience to the Father or that obedience began with his incarnation and ended with his ascension.²⁴

(5) References to the Son becoming the Son of the Father, such as Acts 13:33 and Heb 1:5, are seen as being in a temporal rather than eternal, context.²⁵

(6) Proponents of this view point out ontological implications of the eternal subordination position. If the subordination of the Father to the Son is eternal and necessary, so that it could not have been otherwise, then this logically entails that the subordination must be of nature, rather than merely of function.²⁶

(7) Regarding petitionary prayer, if the Father is the one who decides, wills, and acts, and the Son carries out that will, then it is logical to address such prayers to the Father alone. This concept, explicitly endorsed by Ware²⁷ but rejected by Grudem,²⁸ seems to follow logically from the conception of relative authority espoused. According to the temporary subordination view, such a concept runs contrary to New Testament prayers directed to the Lord

²⁰Idem, “Biblical Evidence,” 258–259.

²¹Benjamin B. Warfield, “Trinity,” *ISBE* 5:3020.

²²Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 109–110.

²³Ibid., 124.

²⁴Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping,” 60.

²⁵Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity*, 118.

²⁶McCall, *Which Trinity*, 177–182.

²⁷Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 18.

²⁸Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 381.

Jesus by Stephen (Acts 7:59–60), Paul (2 Cor 12:8–9), and the early church (Rev 22:20). These appear to be genuine prayers, which were not, at least in the biblical text, rejected or corrected.²⁹

(8) This view asserts that statements in the history of the Christian tradition, which are claimed to bear on this issue, are difficult to interpret because they were written in different cultural contexts and were not always consistent, sometimes even within the same statements. Nevertheless, there are several indications by different theologians, as well as ecumenical creeds, that favor the idea of equality of authority.³⁰

(9) This view references texts indicating unitary action of the persons to demonstrate equality. Both numerous biblical texts and historical thinkers, such as Augustine and Calvin, seem to indicate that the actions of each of the members of the Trinity, while primarily attributed to one person, are actually in varying ways and degrees, actions of the three persons jointly.³¹

(10) The equivalent authority view asserts that there are dangerous theological consequences of eternal subordination. The emphasis of the eternal subordination view on the separation of actions, authority, and wills of the three persons, implies tritheism, the doctrine that these are three separate beings, rather than a three in one.³²

The Basis for Choosing a View

The argument has continued for some time now, at an accelerated pace and, at times, with a heightened intensity. Both sides of the debate claim that the arguments establish their own view as true. Little progress appears to have been made toward a resolution. As I have suggested elsewhere, whether or not the subordination is eternal, the debate over it threatens to become so.³³ How do we go about attempting to choose between two such sharply differing views? Both are thoroughly developed, documented, and argued. What is necessary is a set of criteria for evaluating any hypothesis. While methodology is more fully developed in the fields of natural science, any assertion or collection of assertions requires some methodology and criteria, if one believes that there is such a thing as objective truth, and is seeking to determine it.

One preliminary observation is in order. We should not expect to find all of the evidence aligned behind one of the alternatives, and none behind the other. This expectation assumes an epistemological absolutism that is hardly realistic. All of us humans have limitations to our knowledge and understanding. Only God is omniscient. We also have our biases and blind spots. We suffer from “confirmation bias,” the tendency to be more positively

²⁹Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity*, 228–230.

³⁰Giles, “The Nicene and Reformed Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Priscilla Papers* 32.3 (2017): 4–7.

³¹Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity*, 32–38.

³²Giles, “Trinity without Tiers,” 284.

³³Erickson, “Language, Logic, and Trinity: A Critical Examination of the Eternal Subordinationist View of the Trinity,” *Priscilla Papers* 31.3 (2017), 8.

impressed by considerations that support what we already believe than those that contradict it. When I teach a critical thinking course, I have the students engage in certain exercises to “de-subjectivize” themselves. Even so, we should expect that not all of the evidence will appear to support just one alternative, and as Christians who believe in the noetic effects not only of finitude (Isa 55:8–9) but also of original sin (1 Cor 13:12; 2 Cor 4:5), this should not be surprising. The dangers with epistemological absolutism are two-fold. On the one hand, there is the tendency to conclude, if one finds one weakness in an opposing view, that one has thereby refuted the view. Conversely, there will be an attempt to rebut every charge of a flaw in the case for one’s own view, often resulting in tenuous and far-fetched interpretations of the data. Rather, the aim should be to ascertain which view has, on balance, the greater weight of support and follow that view. However, one must continue to evaluate the data and be prepared to change one’s view if the balance changes. This means evaluating how strong or conclusive is the evidence for a view—a consideration with which anyone who has ever taken a statistics course is familiar.

Internal Criteria

In practice, we usually evaluate by using two types of criteria: internal and external. In the case of life-views, there may also be pragmatic criteria, but the other two types are especially relevant here. Internal criteria deal with how a view relates to itself; external criteria pertain to its relationship to considerations outside of the theory itself.³⁴

There are two aspects to internal criteria. The first is consistency. Does a proposition avoid denying what it is asserting? This is a negative test, because an internally consistent assertion or set of them can be false, but a self-contradiction cannot be true. Now, you may say, “But I can believe contradictory truths,” or “consistency is a mark of small minds,” but you cannot communicate contradictions, because the hearer or reader does not know which proposition to believe. I have an American Philosophical Association T-shirt. On the front it says, “The sentence on the back of this shirt is false.” On the back is written, “The sentence on the front of this shirt is true.” Now if the sentence on the back is indeed false, then the sentence on the front is not true, in which case, it is not true that the sentence on the back is false, and by inference the sentence on the front of the shirt is true, making the sentence on the back false, as a result of which the sentence on the front is not false, and so forth. You do see the point. This is sometimes called “the liar’s paradox,” or, as one philosopher called it, “charley-horse between the ears.”³⁵ If I tell you, “I never tell the truth,” what are you to make of it?

³⁴For elaboration of these criteria, see Charles W. Morris, *Writings on the General Theory of Signs*, Approaches to Semiotics 16 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971). Morris’s work is an adaptation and interpretation of the thought of Charles Saunders Peirce. For a modified form of Morris’s scheme, see Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 146–166.

³⁵Gordon Haddon Clark, *The Atonement*, Trinity Paper 17 (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1987), 32.

There is one other very important concept connected with this idea of consistency. I call it the issue of autoreferentiality. By that I mean the question of whether a criterion applied to all other views is applied to one's own. I am constantly impressed, but not surprised, at how often this happens. It was found in Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of meaning,³⁶ and proved to be the Achilles Heel of Logical Positivism, to say nothing of the sociologists of knowledge who analyzed all species of knowledge using the epistemological categories of sociology, but who stuttered and fumbled when asked about the implications of their theory for that theory itself.³⁷

The other aspect of internal criteria is coherence. Any number of sentences may be internally consistent, but have no relationship to one another. Coherence systems are made up of propositions that support and enhance one another. There is almost an aesthetic quality to coherent systems.

It is important, in wrestling with evaluation, to note that a theory must meet its own criteria, as well as criteria that apply to all theories of its type, but not necessarily fit the requirements of a rival theory. Yet this is one of the most common logical errors I see in theological and other academic debates. One cannot fault another view for failing to meet one's criterion unless it is also integral to that view, or is a universal criterion. Actually, most fallacies of this type take place not at the point of evaluation but at the point of interpretation, where another's thought is read through one's own categories so that one finds internal contradictions in the other's thought. This is why we must so carefully understand ourselves and our own views.

External Criteria

To be true, however, a theory must not merely be internally consistent and coherent. Many works of fiction fulfill those criteria. Library holdings are divided into two sections, fiction and non-fiction, and it is this relationship to objective reality that differentiates them. Because we are seeking to determine which of these mutually exclusive theories is true, we must inquire about the relationship between the assertions of each system and the world of reality.

The first of these external criteria is applicability. Put popularly, does this ring true to what I can know? That may be empirical sensory data. Or it may be the biblical text, if that is what the theory is attempting to account for. In the latter case, does it explain the biblical passages it appeals to with a minimum of distortion? Is its explanation a natural one, and a simpler one than alternative explanations? This is the scientific principle of parsimony, or to use the earlier philosophical version, the Law of Occam's Razor. The geocentric theory of the universe ultimately failed because it had to continue to add epicycles until the theory collapsed under its own weight, as compared

³⁶Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922), 108.

³⁷Peter J. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 12–13; Robert Bierstadt, introduction to *The Social Determination of Knowledge*, by Judith Willer (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971), 2.

to the heliocentric theory that explained the same phenomena with fewer concepts. In our present inquiry, we will ask whether the exegesis of the passages appealed to by each hypothesis gives a more natural rendition of those passages than the other does. Of course, a sophisticated exegesis is not necessarily a literal or acultural rendition of the Scripture, so this principle must not be applied simplistically. Nonetheless, a theory must account for what it attempts to account for.

The other external dimension is that of adequacy. Some accounts of specific experiences describe that particular experience well, but scarcely serve as a satisfactory account for the whole range of experiences that we have. Similarly, certain theories can account well for certain biblical passages and certain doctrines but not others. So, in this case, the theory that is to be preferred is the one that can deal with the broader gamut of biblical teaching.

The Burden of Proof

We are now faced with the choice of which of these two views has more support and, therefore, which one we should adopt. At this point, I would usually go into great detail in examining the respective arguments, but limitations of space prevent that here. I have, however, attempted to do that in print elsewhere.³⁸ Here I will attempt something more modest, and such an option does exist. I have pointed out that both views agree that the Scripture teaches that during his time of earthly ministry, the Son was subordinate to the Father and carried out the Father's will. The eternal subordination view, however, adds something more to that area of common agreement: that the subordination was eternal and was inherent in the very nature of the Trinity. As such, the burden of proof rests upon those who contend that true understanding of the Trinity goes beyond the common agreement. The issue becomes this: Is there adequate basis for affirming that the subordination of the Son to the Father is eternal and not merely temporary? We may then concentrate on examining their arguments.

Biblical Considerations

The eternal subordinationists cite certain biblical data that support the idea of eternal subordination. One of these is the terms "Son" and "Father." This, claims Grudem, is an evidence that the terminology is intended to convey that the relationship between these two members of the Trinity is the same as that between earthly fathers and sons, namely, that the father has authority over the son.³⁹

There are several problems with this contention, however. One is the question of whether the names "Father" and "Son" were used in eternity past. Did the two address one another, using language, with these names? Interestingly, Ware and Grudem have criticized open theists for failing to recognize anthropomorphisms as such, yet they seem to have done the same

³⁸See Erickson, *Tampering with the Trinity*.

³⁹See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249–250.

here.⁴⁰ Further, if one takes the analogy in a literal fashion, is not the authority relationship of human fathers and sons a temporary and changeable matter, in which the child outgrows the parent and may at some point become the guardian of the parent? Beyond that, however, is a problem of circularity. How do we know that the Father is superior in authority to the Son? We know that because of the use of those terms and the fact that human fathers have authority over their sons. How do we know the latter assertion, however? Here the eternal subordinationists appeal to New Testament texts like 1 Cor 11:3, “But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.” This is then extended to children in the family, through several additional texts, such as Eph 3:14–15, “For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” In other words, we know that the proper relationship of son to father in human society is because of the relationship of the heavenly Father and Son, and we understand the relationship of Father to Son in the Trinity because these terms mean the authority of fathers over their sons in human families. This is circularity, and of a very tight variety at that.

The terminology also involves other problems. For one thing, the act of begetting, or of the Father becoming the Father of the Son, seems to be applied to temporal points. Psalm 2:7 says, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father,” and this is quoted twice in the New Testament, in Acts 13:33 and Heb 1:5. In the Acts passage, it is related especially to the resurrection and enthronement of Jesus. For the Father to say to the Son at some point in earthly history, “You are my Son; today I have become your Father,” poses a problem for the neat appeal to the use of these terms as evidence of an eternal relationship.

Another troublesome passage is the majestic attribution of names to the Messiah, in Isa 9:6, “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” The passage, widely recognized as referring to the Messiah, calls him “Everlasting Father.” Not only is the name “Father” applied to him, but also the adjective “Everlasting” is added to it.

The eternal subordinationists argue for the supremacy of the Father’s authority on the basis of the priority of the Father’s name in Matt 28:19.⁴¹ It should be noted, however, that this order varies. In fact, Giles has compiled a table showing that when Paul lists the three persons together, the Son is mentioned first in sixteen cases, the Spirit first in nine, and the Father in only six.⁴² Other pertinent New Testament passages are 1 Pet 1:2, where the order is Father, Spirit, and Jesus Christ, and Jude 20–21, where the order is Holy Spirit, God, and Lord Jesus Christ. It should also be noted that, whereas Jesus’s statements and John’s writings predominantly use the terminology of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Paul actually preferred the names, God, Lord, and Spirit.⁴³

⁴⁰E.g., Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 73–90.

⁴¹Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 72.

⁴²Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 109–110.

⁴³Warfield, “Trinity,” 5:3019.

Surveying these considerations, I conclude that the biblical terminology of Father and Son that is applied to the first two members of the Trinity cannot be used to establish a permanent and eternal authority of the former over the latter. As B. B. Warfield wrote a century ago in his typical measured fashion, “If in their conviction the very essence of the Trinity was embodied in this order, should we not anticipate that there should appear in their numerous allusions to the Trinity some suggestion of this conviction?”⁴⁴ He also says of Paul, “It remains remarkable, nevertheless, if the very essence of the Trinity were thought of by him as resident in the terms ‘Father,’ ‘Son,’ that in his numerous allusions to the Trinity in the Godhead he never betrays any sense of this.”⁴⁵

Beyond these considerations, there are several passages that present direct contradiction to the eternal subordination model. We have noted two of these earlier. One is Phil 2:6–8: “who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing [literally “emptied himself”], taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross!” It appears from this passage that the obedience that he displayed during his earthly residence was something that was not previously present in the eternity before.⁴⁶ It was not death to which he became obedient, but that was the extent of his obedience. Grudem contends that it was his honor and glory that the Son surrendered,⁴⁷ but that is not mentioned in the passage. It was the very nature—μορφή of God and the μορφή of a servant—that was involved, and equality was the issue. This interpretation seems to be eisegetical. The same problem is found with Heb 5:8: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered.” Here, the Son is said to have learned or acquired something that was not true of him previously. Grudem contends that the passage does not say that this was the first time that the Son had learned obedience, and he is correct. Note, however, that this is an argument from silence. It seems to assume that we are justified in believing anything that the passage does not explicitly reject, a view whose implications are far reaching, to say the least.

We should note that there are also passages that are problematic for the temporary subordination view, probably the most significant of which is 1 Cor 15:24–28, which seems to teach that the Son will in the eternity future be subject to the will of the Father. Calvin taught that the passage was asserting that the incarnate Son will at the end turn over the Kingdom to the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ This is a plausible interpretation, especially if

⁴⁴Ibid., 5:3020.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Bilezikian, *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as a Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 194.

⁴⁷Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism*, 409.

⁴⁸John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. William Pringle, 2 vols., Calvin’s Commentaries 39–40 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848–1849), 40:32–33.

one attempts to reconcile the passage with other pertinent considerations. In my judgment, however, it is not as simple and likely an interpretation of the passage as is the contention that the Son will turn over the Kingdom to the Father and will be eternally subordinate to him. Bear in mind, however, that our goal is to find the view with the fewest and least serious difficulties.

Philosophical Issues

There are philosophical problems with the eternal subordination model. The insistence that without one member of the Trinity being subordinate to another they would be indistinguishable assumes the identity of indiscernibles, a conception that is problematic, and would eliminate the possibility of identical twins, for example.⁴⁹ More serious is the problem of essence. Both Grudem and Ware insist that the authority of the Father over the Son is eternal and necessary. It could not have been otherwise. If that is the case, however, then the Son's subordination is necessary, not contingent, as it would be if it depended on his coming to earth as the God-man, with a fully human body and psyche. But if a subject possesses a predicate necessarily rather than contingently, then that predicate is essential, not accidental. That means that the Father has an essential predicate that the Son does not have, and vice versa. They are different in essence.⁵⁰

Theological Issues

There also are significant theological problems with the eternal subordination view. For one thing, the incarnation is diminished. In this view, Jesus gave up less (namely equal authority) in the incarnation than he would have if the temporary subordination view is true. Similarly, the glorification is reduced, for what he reassumes is not equality of authority with the Father. Of course, there is no theological virtue in adding something that Scripture does not teach, but it is worth noting that the glory of Christ is diminished. Further, as we shall see, there is such a strong separation of the persons that tritheism is a real danger.

The Alternative: Temporary Subordination

But what of the other view, that of temporary subordination? Does it fare any better? Bear in mind that if the burden of proof rests on the affirmative (the assertion that the subordination of the Son extends backward and forward from the earthly ministry of Christ into eternity), then the temporary subordination view need not prove that it is positively true. Yet, it must deal with the problems raised against it by the eternal subordination view. As John Baillie's professor once wrote on a paper that Baillie had submitted to him, which had criticized a certain theory, "Every theory has its difficulties, but you

⁴⁹Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," *Mind* 61.242 (1952): 153–164.

⁵⁰McCall, *Which Trinity*, 188.

have not considered whether any other theory has less [*sic*] difficulties than the one you have criticized.”⁵¹

The Problem: Initiative of the Father

While many of the texts that are offered as criticism of temporary subordinationism have been rebutted above, we must still address the issue of certain initiatives and actions attributed to the Father that seem to indicate a greater authority than that of the Son. Is there a way through this theological thicket that is consistent and coherent and accounts for more of the relevant facts with less distortion than any of the other hypotheses? I believe there is. The eternal subordinationists cite several of these actions: predestining some to salvation, sending the Son into the world, judging sins, etc. This seems to suggest a position of supremacy for him. The assumption is that if these are attributed to him, then he alone is the actor.

There is an alternative to this explanation, however. We may note two suggestions from historical theology. The first is a quotation from Augustine:

He [the Spirit] will not therefore depart when the Father and the Son come, but will be in the same abode with them eternally, because neither will He come without them, nor they without Him. But in order to intimate the Trinity some things are separately affirmed, the Persons being also each severally named; and yet are not to be understood as though the other Persons were excluded, on account of the unity of the same Trinity and the One substance and Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. (Augustine, *Trin.* 1.9.19)

Augustine expresses the same idea several times in this work. A similar thought is found in the following from John Calvin: “Therefore, our most merciful God, when he willed that we be redeemed, made Himself our Redeemer in the person of his only-begotten Son.”⁵² This seems to affirm that the Father was the redeemer, as much as was the Son.

Suppose then, that we inquire whether the actions attributed to one member of the Trinity should be considered the work of that person alone, or rather of all the members of the Trinity jointly, with one of the persons being the prime actor of that particular act. Examining several such works with this model in mind, proves illuminating.

Choosing of Persons for Eternal Life

The Father: “who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling of his blood” (1 Pet 1:2).

The Son: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to those to whom he is pleased to give it” (John 5:21).

⁵¹John Baillie, *Invitation to Pilgrimage* (New York: Scribners, 1942), 15.

⁵²John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.12.2. The entire chapter is germane to this consideration.

Sending of the Holy Spirit

The Father: “But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you” (14:26; cf. 14:16).

The Son: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me” (15:26; cf. 16:7).

Access to the Father

The Son: “I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6).

The Spirit: “For through him we both [Jews and Gentiles] have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:18).

Judging of the World

Father: “Why, then do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat” (Rom 14:10).

Son: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive that which is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Cor 5:10).⁵³

Intercession

Son: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (Heb. 7:25; cf. Rom 8:34).

Spirit: “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot utter” (Rom 8:26–27).

Indwelling of the Believer

Son: “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col 1:27).

Spirit: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” (1 Cor 6:19).

Son and Spirit together: “The world cannot accept him [the Spirit], because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:17–20).

⁵³See also the judgment scene in Matt 25:31–32.

Father also: “Jesus replied, ‘If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him’” (14:23; cf. 1 Cor 3:16–17).

Giving of Life

Father and Son: “For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it” (John 5:21).⁵⁴

The Spirit: “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (6:63).⁵⁵

Love

Father: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (3:16).

Son: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you” (15:9).⁵⁶

It appears, then, that the approach of Augustine and Calvin is helpful in resolving the apparent contradictions in the shared divine actions. Note that this approach resolves many, although not all, of the passages appealed to by the eternal subordination view and troublesome to the temporary subordination view.

The Charge of Deviant Doctrinal Implications

The eternal subordinationists have made two theological charges against those who propose the temporary subordination view. One is that this implies modalism, the idea that there is one person in the Godhead, who successively manifests himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ This, however, seems misplaced. The eternal subordination view does not assert that there is only one person performing differing functions. Rather, they insist that there are three persons, who act as a unity, with one person taking the primary part in a given action. To use a sports analogy, we are talking about a team, in which linemen block for the quarterback, who throws a pass, caught by the wide receiver. The quarterback does not block the pass rushers, throw a pass, then run down the field and catch his own pass. The point, rather, is that all eleven men are playing their respective roles in running the same play.

⁵⁴Note also John 10:28–30, where the giving of life by the Father and by the Son is described in identical terms.

⁵⁵There are numerous other gifts that are given by each of the three.

⁵⁶It would, of course, be possible to divide the objects of love, so that the Father loves the whole human race, but the Son loves only those who become his followers. That the love of the Father and of the Son coincide is supported by Paul in Rom 8:35–39: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . [nothing] in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

⁵⁷Grudem, “Biblical Evidence,” 258.

The other is the charge that the temporary subordinationist view comes close to patripassianism.⁵⁸ The idea that each person participates in each of the actions means that the Father suffers on the cross, the ancient heresy of patripassianism, and a corollary of modalism.⁵⁹ This, however, is not at all what is involved in the temporary subordination view. The Son was the one who was crucified, not the Father. The Father does not suffer in the same sense in which the Son does. Rather, there is a sympathetic suffering and thus a participation in the suffering. The charge of patripassianism seems itself to stem from viewing the issue from the perspective of the impassibility of God, now recognized by many evangelicals to have been influenced by Greek philosophy.⁶⁰

Conclusion

It is my judgment that, when all the evidence has been weighed, the temporary subordination view accounts better for more of the relevant evidence with less distortion, and suffers from fewer difficulties, than does the view of eternal subordination. Until such time as the balance of evidence shifts, I must continue to adhere to the former view.

⁵⁸Ibid., 257.

⁵⁹J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 120.

⁶⁰John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 149.