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The Evangelical Theological Society and the doctrine of the Trinity

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KEY WORDS: Arianism, being, Christology, Father, Wayne Grudem, George Knight III, role, Son, submission, subordination, Bruce Ware, women.

In America the *Evangelical Theological Society* is a very significant organization with over four thousand members. It claims to be the voice of conservative evangelical scholarship. In its *Doctrinal Basis* only two matters are made fundamental to the evangelical faith: belief in the inerrancy of the Bible in its original autographs and belief in a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, three 'uncreated' persons, who are 'one in essence, equal in power and glory'.¹ In the history of the ETS the first fundamental belief has caused many a painful disruption in the evangelical family, the second has not. In this paper I argue that critical consideration should be given to what several leading theologians of the ETS are teaching on the Trinity because it would seem to implicitly contradict what the ETS statement of faith says on the Trinity. ETS members are bound to believe that the three divine persons are *one in essence and equal in power*. To argue that the Son is *eternally subordinate in authority* to the Father, denies that he is equal in power with the Father and the Spirit and by implication, that he is *one in essence/being* with the Father and the Spirit.²

The novel post 1970s doctrine of the eternally subordinated Son

In his highly influential book, *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship*

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- 1 The words on the Trinity were added in 1990 to exclude people with a high view of inerrancy who rejected the historic doctrine of the Trinity as spelt out in the Creeds and Reformation confessions.
 - 2 If he is *eternally* the subordinate or submissive Son and cannot be otherwise, then his submission or subordination defines his person and being. He *is* the subordinate and submissive Son. This is the language of ontology. Thus not surprisingly those who speak of the eternal subordination or submission of the Son, as we will show, almost invariably use ontological language to explain their position. This paper takes up issues not in my book, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), and thus for the substantiation and explanation of many points in this essay, including this one, my book should be consulted.

of *Men and Women*, published in 1977,³ George W. Knight III first formulated the novel argument 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. He thus speaks of a 'chain of subordination'⁴ in the Trinity adding that the Son's subordination in authority has 'certain ontological aspects'.⁵ This last comment is somewhat surprising because one of the completely new elements in his seminal case for the permanent subordination of women is that women are not (ontologically) inferior to men, only permanently role or functionally subordinated.⁶

This new teaching on the Trinity came to full fruition in 1994 with the publication of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.⁷ He is emphatic that the *eternal subordination of the Son in authority* stands right at the heart of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.⁸ What he teaches, he claims repeatedly, is what the best of theologians from the past and the creeds teach.⁹ For Grudem, the Father has 'the role of commanding, directing, and sending,' and the Son has the role of 'obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us'.¹⁰ It is differing authority, he says, that primarily differ-

3 George Knight III, *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

4 *Ibid.*, 33.

5 *Ibid.*, 56.

6 Before this time theologians spoke of men as 'superior', and women as 'inferior.'

7 Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

8 After I read the paper in abbreviated form at the 2006 annual ETS conference in Washington D.C. Wayne Grudem who was present asked to read the paper before publication to check that I had expressed his position fairly and quoted him accurately. I was pleased to give him a copy of the paper. He asked for no corrections.

9 This claim is simply not true. I outline the facts. 1. No one prior to 1970 ever spoke of 'role' subordination. This expression comes from the post 1970s conservative evangelical case for the permanent subordination of women. 2. No one prior to 1970, as far as I can see, has ever argued for equality in being/essence/nature *and* subordination in role/function/work/ operations. Orthodoxy has held that to eternally subordinate the Son in his works or authority implies his subordination in being and vice versa. 3. Grudem quotes Charles Hodge in support but Hodge actually argues for the subordination of the Son in his 'mode of subsistence and operations', which implies subordination in being and function (on this see my *Jesus and the Father*, 34-37). What Hodge teaches is not what Grudem teaches. Grudem holds that the Son is eternally subordinated in function/role (i.e. operations) *not* in being (i.e. subsistence). What is more B. B. Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity', in B. B. Warfield, *Biblical Foundations* (London, Tyndale, 1958), 109-113, argues against what Hodge teaches. All that Warfield will allow is the temporal functional subordination of the Son in the work of redemption, i.e. a temporal voluntary subordination. This is historic orthodoxy, simply using the word 'function' instead of 'operations', or 'works'. 4. Grudem quotes other late 19th and early 20th century theologians in support but none of them teach role or functional or operational subordination apart from ontological subordination and in any case quoting people who are wrong does not make something right.

10 *Systematic Theology*, 250.

entiate the divine persons. He writes, 'Authority and submission between the Father and the Son... and the Holy Spirit, is the *fundamental difference* between the persons of the Trinity.'¹¹ And again, 'If we did not have such differences in *authority* in the relationships among the members of the Trinity, then we would not know of any differences at all.'¹² For Grudem, nothing is more important than the authority structure both in the Trinity and between men and women. It is, he says, 'the *most fundamental* aspect of interpersonal relationships in the entire universe.'¹³

Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* was the first evangelical systematic theology to enunciate the doctrine of the *eternal subordination of the Son in function/role and authority*. Now other major theological textbooks written by conservative evangelicals have appeared teaching much the same thing. The four volume, *Systematic Theology* by Norman Geisler, is one example.¹⁴ In his chapter on the Trinity he says, 'All the members of the Trinity are equal but they do not have the same roles... some functions are subordinated to others.' The Father's 'function is superior.'¹⁵ The Son's 'submission is eternal.' He relates to the Father as a son, that is subordinately. 'This functional subordination in the Godhead is not just temporal and economical: it is essential and eternal.'¹⁶ If the Son's subordination is 'essential' and 'eternal' surely it is ontological? The Son's eternal subordination defines his person. It is what is 'essential' to his being.

Dr Bruce Ware has the same understanding of the Trinity. In his book, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*,¹⁷ he argues that the eternal subordination of the Son in authority to the Father 'marks the *very nature* of the *eternal Being* of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three Persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority... the Son submits to the Father.'¹⁸ Thus he concludes that a 'hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead.'¹⁹ Again the ontological language used should be noted. Ware says he is arguing for eternal functional subordination but uses the ontological language of *nature* and *eternal being* to define the Son's subordination.

At this point four observations must be made. First, the doctrine of an eternally subordinated Son in function and authority is found only in post 1970s

11 Wayne Grudem, (ed.), *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossways, 2002), 31.

12 Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah, 2004), 433.

13 *Ibid.*, 429. Italics added.

14 Minneapolis: Bethany, 2003. Dr Geisler, it is to be noted, has resigned from the ETS. He left the association because he thought it was too tolerant of members who embraced 'Open theism.'

15 *Ibid.*, 2, 290.

16 Geisler, *ibid.*, 291.

17 Wheaton: Crossway, 2005, 21.

18 *Ibid.*, 291.

19 *Ibid.*

conservative evangelical writings. It is unknown in mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic works on the Trinity.²⁰ Second, virtually everyone who advocates the *eternal* subordination of the Son is committed to the *permanent* subordination of women. In my view the latter gives rise to belief in the former.²¹ Third, the principal developers and advocates of this novel teaching on the Trinity, who have just been listed, have all been at one time presidents of ETS,²² or in the case of Dr Ware to be president in 2008. And fourth, because of the conservative evangelical credentials of these theologians, and the popularity of their writings, this novel, and I think dangerous, doctrine of the Trinity is now widely assumed by conservative evangelicals to be what orthodoxy teaches. In 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.²³

Terminology

In the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity a number of words used of God as one and three gradually became technical terms and agreed synonyms in differing languages (Greek, Latin and English) were recognized. In speaking of God as one, the terms 'being', 'substance', 'essence', and 'nature' were accepted as synonyms. In speaking of any one of the divine three the words 'person', '*hypostasis*' and 'subsistence' were taken as synonyms. Given this fact the ETS doctrinal affirmation that God is 'one in essence' means exactly the same as if it said that God is one in 'nature,' 'being,' or 'substance'.

In developing their doctrine of the Trinity to correspond to their case for the permanent subordination of women Knight and those who follow him introduced a number of terms not found in the historic doctrinal tradition. For example, in speaking of what the divine persons do, the tradition speaks of the 'works' or 'operations' of Father, Son and Spirit. In contrast Knight and his followers speak of the 'functions' or 'roles' of the divine persons. The terms 'power' and 'authority' are another example. The doctrinal tradition predominantly uses the term 'power' – God is omnipotent, all powerful. In contrast, Knight and Grudem *et al.* speak of the subordination of the Son in 'authority'. Men have 'authority' over the women set under them just as the divine Father has 'authority' over the Son.

The word 'authority', technically defined, indicates that someone has the right to exercise leadership, whereas the word 'power' implies the ability to assert leadership or achieve an end. However, the words may be used synonymously and often are in everyday speech. This is the case in the Bible (e.g. Lk 4:36, 9:1).

20 Karl Barth is not an exception. True he speaks of the eternal Son as obedient and as Servant but always in dialectical tension. At one and the same time the eternal Son is also the sovereign Lord. See Giles, *The Father and the Son*, 274-305.

21 I substantiate this assertion in *Jesus and the Father*, 41-53.

22 Dr Knight 1995; Dr Geisler 1998; Dr Grudem 1999.

23 See further on this my *Jesus and the Father*, 17-33.

It also seems that the words are used synonymously by those with whom I am debating. When they speak of the differing *authority* of the Father and the Son they seem to mean much the same as if they had spoken of the differing *power* of the Father and the Son. In any case I cannot see how anyone could distinguish these terms when used of God. If the divine three are equal in power, as the ETS doctrinal statement says, then they must be equal in authority and vice versa.

Whether or not these two specific words can be distinguished when used of the triune God is, however, academic. The words 'power' and 'authority' in this discussion both designate essential divine attributes. Orthodoxy with one voice holds that all divine attributes are equally shared by all the divine persons. God is one in being and attributes. If the Father is all powerful, all loving, and all knowing, then so too are the Son and the Spirit.

In what follows I will therefore assume that when the ETS doctrinal statement speaks of the triune God as 'one in essence' it means the same as if it had said *one in being*, the expression Knight, Grudem and most English speaking theologians today prefer. And when it speaks of the divine three as 'equal in power' it means the same as if it had said *equal in authority*, what Knight, Grudem and large numbers of contemporary conservative evangelicals deny.

The Bible

The New Testament puts the confession, 'Jesus is Lord', right at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. This confession declares the resurrected and exalted Son of God is God in the fullest sense and as such has absolute authority (Matt. 28:18; Eph.1:20-21; Col. 2:10). He functions as the supreme ruler because he *is* the supreme ruler: function indicates ontology. The title 'Son' in the New Testament also speaks of divine rule,²⁴ as well as intimacy with the Father. When the Father addresses Jesus as 'my beloved Son'²⁵ he is indicating that he is to reign as the king's son in all power and authority. This title should not be understood on the basis of human experience to suggest subordination as the original Arians did and contemporary evangelical subordinationists to a man do today.²⁶ Often in the New Testament the ruling authority of the Son is spoken of in the imagery of him 'sitting at the right hand of God' (Acts 2:33; Col. 3:1 etc). In the book of Revelation the imagery is different. The Father and the Son rule from the one

24 So John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 658-61.

25 Mk 1:11.

26 The argument is that because human sons are subordinate to their Fathers so too is the divine Son to his Father. In other words human relations explain divine relations. Not only is this moving by analogy from human life to divine life but also the analogy breaks down once the fact is noted that the human father-son relationship changes as the years pass. I will come back to this matter shortly in dealing with the title *Son* in the New Testament. For a recent conservative evangelical expression of this reasoning see C. Cowan, 'The Father and the Son in the Fourth Gospel; Johannine Subordination Revisited', *JETS*, 49/1 (2006), 115-35, particularly 129-34.

throne 'for ever and ever' (7:10-12, 11:15; cf. 1:6, 18).

For Paul the Son's obedience is strictly limited to his work as the second Adam who is perfectly obedient (Rom. 5:12ff; 1 Cor. 15:22; Phil. 2:8), or in the book of Hebrews to the 'days of his flesh' (Heb. 5:7-9). In the gospel of John the Son gladly does the Father's will (4:34, 5:30, 6:38-39, etc.), but the evangelist never suggests that Jesus is under compulsion to do as the Father commands, or can do no other. Rather, says Thompson, John thinks of Jesus as the 'instrument or expression of the Father's will'.²⁷ The word *obedience* is never used in connection with the Father-Son relationship in John.

Without seriously discussing this biblical teaching I have just outlined that ascribes to the exalted Christ absolute authority my debating opponents take as proof of their position 1 Corinthians 11:3, 'God is the head of Christ'. In both the patristic debates about the Trinity and in Calvin this text gains little attention because it is not taken to suggest the eternal subordination of the Son. In contrast, in the contemporary evangelical case for the eternal (authoritative) 'headship' of the Father over the Son, 1 Corinthians 11:3 is central and much discussed. Grudem tells us this verse is 'decisive' for his understanding of the Trinity and women.²⁸ He says that Paul here refers to a 'relationship of authority between God the Father and God the Son, and he is making a parallel between that relationship in the Trinity and that between a husband and wife in marriage'.²⁹ Basic to Grudem's case is his thesis that the Greek word *kephale* when used metaphorically (translated into English as 'head'), always means a 'person in authority over'. Grudem's premise seems to be that words have one fixed meaning and that the context in which they are found does not matter. Virtually all linguists are of another opinion. Any given word has a range of meanings, and the context is the most important indicator of that meaning. Thiselton holds that Paul is playing on the 'multiple meanings' of *kephale* in 1 Corinthians 11:3ff.³⁰ No single meaning for the word can be dictated. Whatever it means in v. 3, he says, 'it does not seem to denote a relation of "subordination" or "authority over."'³¹ If Paul is arguing that *women*³² are set under men in authority, it is unlikely he would then

27 Marianne Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster, 2000), 150.

28 Grudem, *Biblical Foundations*, 47. The importance of this verse for this case is seen in that there are eleven references to 1 Cor. 11:3 in the 'Scripture References' at the back of the book, most of them discussing this verse for over a page.

29 *Ibid.*, 49.

30 A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 812-23, quote 820. For a full overview of studies on this word see Alan F. Johnson, 'A Meta Study of the Debate over the Meaning of "Head" (*Kephale*) in Paul's Writings', *Priscilla Papers*, 20:4 (2006), 21-29. He concludes that 'the actual evidence' for *kephale* meaning authority over 'is shrinking' (27).

31 *Ibid.*, 816.

32 Throughout this passage Paul has, at least in the first instance, men and women in mind, not husbands and wives. The evidence is as follows: (1) he is here ruling on how men and women as such should dress when leading in church; marriage never comes

say in v. 4 that women can lead in prayer and prophesy in church, the two most important ministries in that church, as long as they cover their 'heads'.

In 1 Corinthians 11:3 Paul does not allude to a fourfold hierarchy, God-Christ-man-woman, but to three paired relationships in which in each case one party is the *kephale* of the other. They are not ordered hierarchically. Paul speaks first of Christ and man, then man and woman, and last of God and Christ. Rather than subordinating the persons in a descending 'chain of command',³³ or 'hierarchy of headship',³⁴ Paul is differentiating the 'persons' paired to introduce the main point he wants to make in the whole passage, namely that what a man or woman has or has not on their 'head' when they *lead in church* should reflect God-ordained sexual differentiation.³⁵

All should be able to agree that 1 Corinthians 11:3 is a difficult text, but to interpret it to mean that the Father eternally has authority over the Son is not convincing. Such an idea is nowhere else suggested by Paul and would contradict his teaching that Christ now reigns as Lord and is 'head over all things' (Eph. 1:22; Col. 2:10). Here we need to remember that evangelical theological exegesis can never allow an interpretation of one difficult-to-understand text that would suggest a contradiction within scripture. The rule is that difficult-to-understand texts must always be interpreted so that they harmonize with what is plain and primary in scripture. What is central to the New Testament is Christ's unqualified lordship. It is in this light that that 1 Corinthians 11:3 must be understood.

Evidence for the eternal subordination of the Son in authority is also found by my debating opponents in the biblical language of 'sending' (c.f. John 8:42; 17:3, 23) and in the titles 'Father' and 'Son'. They argue that because Jesus is sent by the Father he must have to do as he is commanded: therefore he is subordinated.³⁶ The fourth century Arians first made this argument. It is always tempting to interpret the Scriptures on the basis of human experience, but good exegesis should begin by seeking to discover what the biblical authors had in mind when

into view; (2) he speaks of 'every man' and 'every woman' in vv. 3, 4, 5; (3) in vv. 11-12 men as such are born of women, not husbands of wives; (4) there were unmarried women in the church at Corinth (cf. 1 Cor. 7:8, 25), and we know from Acts that some women prophets were unmarried (Ac 21:9). Knight, *New Testament Teaching*, 35, note 13, gives seven reasons why the Greek nouns *aner* and *gune* that can mean either man and woman or wife and husband must mean in this passage man and woman in general.

33 Michael Harper, *Equal and Different: Male and Female in the Church and Family* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994), 121.

34 Tom Smail, *Like Father, Like Son* (Milton Keynes, Bucks: 2005), 260; Paul Barnett, *1 Corinthians* (Ross-shire, Christian Focus, 2000), 200.

35 So Thiselton, *ibid*, 800-53, and many other contemporary commentators.

36 This argument is developed in stark form by Cowan, 'The Father and the Son', 117-22. One of his many less convincing arguments is that 'the subordination' of the Son is indicated by the fact that Jesus says, 'messengers are not greater than the one who sent them' (John 13:6). He seems to forget there are three possibilities: greater, equal, lesser/subordinate.

they wrote. There has been much debate in recent years on the force and ideas behind this 'sending' language. It is generally conceded that behind this terminology lies the idea of 'agency'. The Son represents the Father. I am persuaded that the most plausible interpretation of this sending language is in terms of the Jewish *Shaliach* concept.³⁷ In Rabbinical writings the one sent (the *Shaliach*) has the same authority as the one who sends him: he is as the sender himself. This principle is stated many times: 'The one who is sent is like the one who sent him.'³⁸ In this case, the one sent is none other than the Father's only Son. Thus Jesus says, 'Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father *who sent him*' (John 5:23, italics added). This means that the sending terminology is best understood as underscoring the unity between the Father and the Son in their work (John 5:17-18; 10:29-30), and as explaining how the words of the Son are the words of the Father (John 3:34; 12:50; 14:10-11). To disobey God the Son is exactly the same as to disobey God the Father. Nevertheless it is to be recognized that the human language of sending distinguishes the persons – the Father is the one who sends, the Son the one who is sent – but the emphasis falls on the authority of the Son as expressing the authority of the Father. Differentiation of course does not imply subordination. Two people can be differentiated yet be equals in dignity and authority.

Evangelicals who argue for the eternal subordination of the Son in authority also consistently claim that his title 'Son' proves that he is eternally set under his Father's authority. This argument is repeated in almost every example of this distinctive evangelical doctrine. Cowan typically says, 'the Father-Son language in John seems to imply a hierarchical relationship.'³⁹ The evidence in support of this opinion is drawn mainly from human experience. Human relationships are used to explain divine relationships. Following unwittingly exactly the argument of Arius once again, we are told that all human fathers have authority over their sons and this fact explains the divine Father-Son relationship. The titles themselves, 'Father' and 'Son', indicate that the Father commands and the Son obeys. In reply to this argument I have already noted that in the New Testament the title 'Son' speaks of Jesus' royal prerogatives. He is the King's anointed Son who rules in all majesty and authority. John Frame says that in the New Testament, 'there is considerable overlapping between the concepts Lord and Son... both indicate Jesus' power and prerogatives as God. Lordship presupposes sonship, sonship implies lordship.'⁴⁰

In this appeal to the ordinary, everyday meaning of the words 'send', 'son' and 'father' to prove that Jesus as the eternal Son of God is permanently subordinated to the Father in authority, language used of God is understood literally, or to

37 See C. G. Kruse, 'Apostle', in J. B. Green and I. H. Marshall (eds.), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 1992), 30.

38 m.Ber.5:5, b. B Mes. 96a, b Hag 10b, b Men. 93b, b Naz 12b, etc.

39 'The Father and the Son', 134.

40 *The Doctrine of God*, 661.

use the technical term, 'univocally'. This is exactly how the fourth century Arians understood language about the Father and the Son. In reply to them Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Augustine argued this practice leads to idolatry – the depicting of God as a human being. For this reason orthodox theologians have generally agreed that all human language used of God should be understood analogically. Human words can convey truth about God, but the content of the human words used of God is found not by appeal to human relationships and experience but in revelation. It is from the Bible we learn what the titles 'Son,' 'Father,' and the word 'sent' mean when used of the divine persons.

I conclude my brief summary of biblical teaching on the unqualified lordship of Christ by quoting Cornelius Van Til, 'a consistent biblical doctrine of the Trinity [implies] the complete rejection of all subordinationism'.⁴¹

The historical debate

Arius was quite convinced that the Son is eternally set under the Father's authority. The Son must do as the Father commands. For Arius and all who in the fourth century were called 'Arians', God the Father is an unoriginated Monad, and for this reason the Son and the Spirit are radically different and unlike him. They could be spoken of as 'God' but not in the same sense as the Father. On this basis the Arians taught that the Father and the Son (in the early stage of the debate it was these two divine persons who were always in focus) are of different being *and authority*. That Arius ontologically subordinated the Son to the Father is well known. What is less well known and adequately recognized is that he and all the other so-called fourth century 'Arians' also subordinated the Son in authority. Richard Hanson in his monumental study of Arianism says the Arians consistently taught that the Son 'does the Father's will and exhibits *obedience and subordination* to the Father, and adores and praises the Father, *not only in his earthly ministry but in Heaven*'.⁴² In their important study, *Early Arianism*, Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh actually make the eternal subordination in authority of the Son the primary element in Arian theology, the Son's ontological subordination was simply a necessary logical outcome.⁴³ They write, 'At *the center* of Arian theology was a redeemer *obedient* to his Father's will'.⁴⁴ And for 'Arius and his fellow thinkers... the Father and the Son relationship [was] a relationship in which the former was prior, superior, and dominant.... Conceived relationally rather than ontologically [it] was marked by dependence rather than co-equal-

41 *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), 104.

42 R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 103. Italics added.

43 Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

44 *Ibid*, x, italics added.

ity'.⁴⁵ What *authority* the Son had was of a 'derivative character'.⁴⁶ The supreme Father gave it to him: 'The derivative character of *the power and authority* manifest in Jesus' ministry was traced by Arian exegetes from a series of biblical texts which spoke of the things bestowed on him by the Father'.⁴⁷ Thus, 'the savior who the early Arians discovered in Scripture and promulgated in their writings was never far from an obedient servant who followed God's commands'.⁴⁸

What completely surprised me in reading this book was that the way Gregg and Groh described the essence of Arianism is almost identical to how many contemporary evangelicals depict the divine Father-Son relationship. The Father is prior and supreme. He rules over the Son. Any authority the Son has is derived from the Father.

Athanasius

In reply to 'the early Arians' Athanasius would not allow any disjunction or separation between the Father and the Son in being, work, or divine attributes, especially in *authority*. The God of the Bible, he held, is not a monad who has a subordinate Son. He is for all eternity a triad of inseparable and equal divine persons. Athanasius writes, 'The faith of Christians acknowledges the blessed Triad as unalterable and perfect and ever what it was'.⁴⁹ Because the Son and Father are inseparably one God, Athanasius asked the Arians, 'Must not he who is perfect be equal to God?'⁵⁰ He of course believed only an affirmative answer was possible. Athanasius's tenacious belief that the Father and the Son cannot be divided or separated in any way leads him to repeatedly lay down what I call the Athanasian *rule*: 'The same things are said of the Son which are said of the Father, except for calling him Father'.⁵¹

From this it follows that Athanasius cannot allow that the Son is eternally set under the Father in being or authority. The logic and consistency of his reasoning is compelling. At no point at any time does he waver from his belief that the Father and the Son are inseparably one in being, work/function, *and authority*.

Athanasius specifically affirms that the Father and the Son are equally omnipotent. Speaking of the Son he says,

'[He] is seated upon the same throne as the Father'.⁵²

45 Ibid, 91.

46 Ibid, 6.

47 Ibid, 91. Italics added. For this Arian argument and Athanasius' reply, see Athanasius, 'Discourses Against the Arians', in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.), *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church. Second Series*, (henceforth *NPNE*), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 4:3.36 (413). For all the following references to historical sources I give the reference and the page number in brackets. Sometimes the references are not easy to locate.

48 'Discourses', 24.

49 Ibid, 4:1.18 (317).

50 Ibid, 1.10 (327).

51 Ibid, 4:3.4 (395), 3.5 (395), 3.6 (396), 'The Councils', *NPNE*, 4:3.49 twice (476).

52 'Discourses', 4:1.61 (341).

'He is Lord and King everlasting'.⁵³

'For he ever was and is Lord and sovereign of all, being like in all things to the Father'.⁵⁴

'He is Lord of all because he is one with the Father's Lordship'.⁵⁵

The Cappadocians

Arguments against the idea that the Son is set under *the authority* of the Father fill the voluminous writings of the Cappadocians. It is clear why this is so. Eunomius, the Cappadocians' arch neo-Arian opponent, subordinated the Son in being, origination, and *authority* to the Father. In his *Confession of Faith* that he sent to the emperor Theodosius in 383, Eunomius professes,

'We believe in the one and only true God..., he has no sharer of his Godhead or participator of his glory, *nor joint possessor of his authority*.'

'And we believe in the Son of God... He is *obedient* in creating and giving being to things that exist, *obedient* in all his administration, not having received his being Son or God because of his *obedience*, but from his being Son and being generated as only-begotten God, being *obedient* in words, *obedient* in acts...'⁵⁶

In their reply to Eunomius's teaching, the Cappadocians, like Athanasius, first of all make a clear distinction between the Son of God as God and the Son of God in the incarnation. They argue that the subordination the Son chose in becoming incarnate in no way impinged on his divine status as equal with God the Father. Gregory of Nyssa writes, 'We recognize two things in Christ, one divine, the other human (the divine by nature, but the human in the incarnation. We accordingly claim for the Godhead that which is eternal and that which is created we ascribe to his human nature)'.⁵⁷

As for the biblical comments on the incarnate Son's *obedience*, the Cappadocians take these to refer solely to Christ's soteriological work culminating in the cross. In this work, he is rightly seen by them as the second Adam, the representative human being.⁵⁸ Gregory of Nyssa addressing Eunomius writes: 'the mighty Paul' says 'he became obedient (Php 2:8)... to accomplish the mystery of redemption by the cross, who had emptied himself by assuming the likeness and fashion of a man... healing the disobedience of men by his own obedience'.⁵⁹ Similarly Gregory Nazianzus says the Son, 'became obedient... by becoming for

53 Ibid, 2.13 (355).

54 Ibid, 2.18 (357).

55 Ibid, 3.64 (429).

56 The reconstituted text in full is given in Hanson, *The Search*, 619-21. I have simply quoted the relevant sections from the text he gives. Italics added.

57 Gregory of Nyssa, 'On the Faith: To Simplicius', *NPNF* 5, (337).

58 As Gregory of Nazianzus says explicitly. See 'Theological Orations', *NPNF* 7, 4.5 (311).

59 Gregory of Nyssa, 'Against Eunomius', *NPNF*, 5:2.11 (121). See also Basil, 'Letters', *NPNF*, 8:261.2 (300).

our sakes flesh, a servant and a curse, and sin'. He did so according to 'his free will'. Noting that Christ goes voluntarily and freely to the cross (John 10:18) he adds, 'Even in the time of his passion he is not separated from his authority; where can heresy possibly discern the subordination to authority of the King of Glory?'⁶⁰ Then later he says, 'In his character as the Word he is neither obedient nor disobedient. For such expressions belong to servants, and inferiors.... In character of the form of a servant, he condescends to his fellow servants'.⁶¹

For the Cappadocians the divine Father and Son can only have one will because they are one in being. They recognized that to teach that the Son must submit his will to the will of the Father and the Spirit submit his will to the will of the Father and the Son, as Eunomius and the other Arians did, introduced tritheism. For them what the Father wills and what the Son wills are always one. In reply to the Arians who made much of the Son going, speaking, and doing as the Father wills, Basil argues that the Son's 'will is connected in indissoluble union with the Father. Do not let us then understand by what is called a "commandment" a peremptory mandate delivered by organs of speech, and giving orders to the Son, as to a subordinate, concerning what he ought to do. Let us rather in a sense befitting the Godhead, perceive the transmission of will, like the reflection of an object in a mirror, passing without note of time from Father to Son'.⁶²

Eunomius's attempt to explain God in human categories by likening the Son to a servant who only has delegated authority particularly angered Gregory of Nyssa. Eunomius put his argument in this way. 'In a wealthy establishment one may see the more active and devoted servant set over his fellow servants by the command of his master, and so invested with superiority over others in the same rank and station'.⁶³ 'Transfer this notion to the doctrines concerning the Godhead, so that the Only-begotten God, though subject to the sovereignty of his superior, is in no way hindered by the authority of his sovereign in the direction of those inferior to him'.⁶⁴ Eunomius's reasoning, Gregory holds, leads to 'heresy'. The triune Godhead is 'simple, uncompounded and indivisible'. If the Father is 'Lord', so too is the Son. It is not possible for them to have 'contrary attributes'. Setting the Son under the Father's authority in this way, Gregory says, leads to idolatry: 'He who affirms the Only-begotten to be a slave, makes him out by so saying to be a fellow servant with himself: and hence will of necessity... worship himself instead of God. For if he sees in himself slavery, and the object of his worship also in slavery, he of course looks at himself, seeing the whole of himself in that which he worships'.⁶⁵

Because the Cappadocians cannot allow human language used of God to be taken literally, they never suggest that the name *Father* implies authority over

60 Gregory of Nazianzus, 'Theological Orations', *NPNF*, 4:6 (311).

61 *Ibid.*

62 Basil, 'On the Spirit', *NPNF*, 8:8.20 (14).

63 Gregory of Nyssa, 'Against Eunomius,' *NPNF*, 5:10.12 (226).

64 *Ibid.*

65 *Ibid.* (227).

the Son. Their constant teaching, as we have seen, is that the Father and the Son have the same divine attributes, most importantly omnipotence. Gregory of Nazianzus puts their position succinctly. 'To us there is one God, for the Godhead is one... though we believe in three persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is one before or after another; nor are they divided in will or parted in power'.⁶⁶

It should be noted that whereas the Arians argued that the Son is subordinated in 'authority', as do many evangelicals today, the pro-Nicene theologians argue with one voice that the divine three are one in being and 'power': alike omnipotent. The oneness in power of the Father and the Son is a very important issue for Gregory of Nyssa.⁶⁷ Barnes gives three reasons for this, i. Power is a scripturally based term. Jesus is called 'the power of God' (1 Cor. 1:24). ii. *Oneness in power* between the Father and the Son is the established terminology in the Nicene tradition. iii. In Gregory's philosophical thinking power was a technical term that spoke of 'the affective capacity' of an existent.⁶⁸ In other words for Gregory power is fundamentally linked to identity. Thus if the Father and the Son are one in being then they are one in power.

Augustine

Augustine likewise gives no support whatsoever to the idea that Christ is eternally set under the Father's authority. He cannot because he insists on the 'inseparable equality' of the divine three. He is implacably against subordinating the Son to the Father in any way. The late Arians against whom Augustine is arguing made much of the biblical language of 'sending', arguing that if Christ was sent by the Father he must be under the Father's authority. Augustine does not concede to this argument. In reply he argues that sending does not necessarily entail subservience, only that the one sent comes 'from' the sender. He thus concludes that just as the terms 'unbegotten' and 'begotten' differentiate the Father and the Son, while not suggesting any eternal subordination, so too do the terms 'sending' and 'being sent'.⁶⁹ What Augustine has seen clearly is that human terms such as 'begetting' and 'sending' when used of divine persons do not necessarily have the same content as they do in everyday speech – they are thus not to be taken literally. Building on this principle Augustine formulates one of his several rules of interpretation. Texts that speak of the Son's sending by the Father do not teach that 'the Son is less than the Father, but that he is from the Father. This does not imply any dearth of equality, but only his birth in eternity'.⁷⁰

In Augustine's model of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit can never

66 Gregory of Nazianzus, 'On the Holy Spirit', *NPNF*, 7:14 (322). Italics added.

67 Michel Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Theology* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

68 *Ibid.*, 1. For Barnes's developed discussion of Gregory's philosophical understanding of power see pp. 10-15.

69 Edmund Hill (translator), *The Trinity* (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 4.29 (174). All references to *De Trinitate* (*The Trinity*) are from this translation.

70 *Ibid.*, 2.3 (99).

be set in opposition, or divided in being, work, or *attributes*. Given the premise that the divine three are 'equal and indivisible' in substance and divinity, it follows that they must be 'equal and indivisible' in activity and attributes, especially power and authority. He reasons this way because in the Bible what God does indicates who God is. Quite explicitly he speaks of the unity of work and will of the divine three. 'The Trinity works inseparably in everything that God works',⁷¹ and 'The Father and the Son have but one will and are indivisible in their workings'.⁷² From this it follows that the divine three are one in their attributes. He writes, 'The Father is almighty, the Son is almighty, the Holy Spirit is almighty; yet there are not three almighties but one almighty... so whatever God is called with reference to self is said three times over about each of the persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'.⁷³ To argue that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are divided and separated by differing authority or any other attribute, Augustine would rule, is to breach divine unity. It implies both tritheism and subordinationism.

As far as I can see there is general agreement with the conclusions reached by Herman Bavinck, who says that in Augustine, 'all subordinationism is banished',⁷⁴ and by J. N. D. Kelly, who states that Augustine 'rigorously excluded subordinationism of every kind'.⁷⁵

The Athanasian Creed

In the so-called Athanasian Creed composed in about AD 500, what is basically Augustine's teaching on the Trinity is identified as 'the catholic faith'. In this creed the unity of the divine Trinity is to the fore, and any suggestion that the Son or Spirit is subordinated in being or authority is unambiguously excluded. Three clauses specifically deny that the Son is less than the Father in authority. 'So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet there are not three almighties but one almighty'. 'So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord and the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet not three Lords but one Lord.' 'In this Trinity none afore or after another: none is greater or less than another... all are co-equal'. The only difference allowed between the members of the Trinity is that of differing origination, and this does not in any way imply subordination in being, work, or authority. Nothing could be plainer. The Athanasian Creed is emphatic. The Father, Son, and Spirit are 'co-eternal' and 'co-equal' God, and therefore indivisible in power and authority. Thus it is asserted 'Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit'.

Calvin

In arguing for the full divinity of Christ Calvin says that Christ 'functions' as God.

71 *Ibid*, 1.8 (70); c.f. 2.3 (99).

72 *Ibid*, 2.9 (103).

73 *Ibid*, 5.9 (195). In 3.12 (197) he gives two lists of attributes shared by the divine three.

74 *The Doctrine of God*, translated by William Hendricksen (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1951), 283.

75 *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1968), 272.

His divinity 'is demonstrated by his works',⁷⁶ and his works depict him as omnipotent God. Christ governs 'the universe with providence... by the command of his own power (Heb. 1:13)'.⁷⁷ Calvin holds that in forgiving sins, Christ 'possesses not the administration merely but the actual power of the remission of sins'.⁷⁸ Likewise, in healing the sick and raising the dead 'he [Christ] showed forth his *own power*'. He was 'the real author of the miracles'.⁷⁹ In appealing to the Old Testament Calvin writes, 'Christ is brought forward by Isaiah both as God and as adorned with the highest power, which is the characteristic mark of the one true God'.⁸⁰ He is to be identified with 'true Jehovah'.⁸¹ Later in specifically combating the idea that the Son is eternally subordinated in authority he says, 'Whatever is of God is attributed to Christ.' He rules 'in majesty as King and Judge'.⁸² The Father, Son, and Spirit create in 'common' and '*common also [is] the authority to command*'.⁸³ It is beyond dispute. For Calvin, the Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparable in work or function and one in their attributes. They are indivisible in divinity, being, authority, power, and majesty.

The Confessions

The Reformation and post-Reformation confessions could not more emphatically affirm *oneness in divine essence* and *power* or to use synonymous terms, *oneness in being and authority* among the three divine persons.

The Augsburg Confession of 1530 states, 'There are three persons in this one divine essence, equal in power and alike eternal.'

The Belgic Confession of 1561, article 8, says, 'All three [are] co-eternal and co-essential. There is neither first nor last: for they are all three one, in truth, in power, in goodness, and in mercy.' The Son is neither 'subordinate' nor 'subservient.'

The Thirty Nine articles of the Church of England of 1563, article 1, says, 'in the unity of this Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity.'

The Westminster confession of 1646, article 2, says, 'in the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity.'

The 1689 London Baptist confession, chapter 2 paragraph 3 speaks of 'three subsistences' who are 'one substance, power, and eternity.'

The Methodist Articles of Religion of 1784 says, 'In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity.'

76 *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. John T. McNeill (ed.), Ford Lewis Battles (trans.), (London: SCM, 1960), 2.13.12 (135).

77 *Ibid.*, 1.13.12 (136). Italics added.

78 *Ibid.*

79 *Ibid.* Italics added.

80 *Ibid.*, 1.13.9 (131).

81 *Ibid.*, 1.13.9 (132).

82 *Ibid.*, 1.13.24 (152).

83 *Ibid.*, (153). Italics added.

Conclusion

Nothing in this paper should be read to question eternal divine differentiation, threeness in the one God. I write seeking to reinstate historic orthodoxy among evangelicals. Orthodoxy makes oneness and threeness in God absolutes. I endorse this premise without any reservations. Modalism is the heresy that denies that the Father, Son and Spirit are eternally distinct 'persons'. I do not do this. What this paper opposes is separating and sharply differing the divine persons on the basis of differing attributes, specifically the attribute of authority. Historic orthodoxy rejects differing the divine persons on this basis because it leads inevitably to the heresies of tritheism and subordinationism.

To teach that the Son must obey the Father, and the Spirit must obey the Father and the Son, implies each has their own will. For all eternity the Son must submit his will to the Father's will, and the Spirit his will to the Father and the Son. Three separated 'persons,' each with their own will, is the error of tritheism. It is the breaching of divine unity. At the 2006 Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting held in Washington, DC, Dr Ware publicly admitted he believed that each divine person had their own will.⁸⁴

If the Father is 'above' the Son in authority and the Father and the Son 'above' the Spirit in authority then we have hierarchical ordering in the Trinity. The three divine persons are not 'coequal' in power and authority. An eternal descending order of authority in the Trinity implies necessarily a descending order in divine being. The Father is omnipotent God, God in the fullness of divine being, the Son a bit less omnipotent and thus a bit less in divine being, and the Spirit a bit less again. Is this not the essence of Arianism?

Recognizing the dangers of separating and sharply differentiating the divine persons on the basis of differing attributes historic orthodoxy unambiguously affirms that the Father, Son and Spirit are one in essence/being *and* one in power/authority. For this reason the Evangelical Theological Society in its doctrinal statement rightly excludes those who cannot give full and unambiguous assent to the belief that the three divine persons are 'one in essence, equal in power and glory.' To deny this, or the inerrancy of the Scriptures, the ETS doctrinal statement rules is to deny what is foundational to the evangelical faith.

Abstract

Significant evangelical leaders today teach that the Son is eternally subordinated in authority to the Father, sometimes using ontological terms. This teaching would seem to stand in stark tension with the primary Christian confession that 'Jesus is Lord' and to contradict the Athanasian Creed which teaches that all three divine persons are 'almighty' and 'Lord', 'none is before or after, greater or lesser', and all are 'co-equal'. What is more, it would seem to contradict virtually all the Protestant Reformation and post-Reformation Confessions which speak of the three divine persons as equal in being/essence and work/function.

⁸⁴ I was present when he said this as were I estimate at least two hundred others.