

THE ETERNAL RELATIONAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON TO THE FATHER IN PATRISTIC THOUGHT*

I. INTRODUCTION

Renewed interest has arisen regarding the doctrine of the Trinity in recent years, and rightly so since it is the center around which Christian theology revolves and the topic has dominated the study of theology from the very beginning of this doctrine's formulation in the second century of the Christian era until the present.¹ The Church stands united against all aberrations of the Trinity: those that would divide the essence of the Trinitarian God into a tritheism, those that make the essence of the Father and Son different—ranging from the semi-Arians of Nicea, or to full-blown Arianism, or those who would reduce the Godhead to the unipersonal God of Modalism.

One issue, however, that increasingly divides evangelicals is that of the meaning of the subordination of the Son to the Father within the Holy Trinity. The Fathers often speak of the subordination of the Son to the Father, and this theme is continued especially in the theologians of the Reformation and up to the present day. One finds considerable discussion because of the struggles that the church encountered in defining in what sense was the Son not only a man but also God, and how such a doctrine could not clash with the firm monotheism that it rightly inherited from the Jewish faith and the teaching of the Lord Jesus and the apostles. Since Arianism fervently argued for subordination of the Son, borrowing from Origen (though abusing his teaching), I believe one encounters a theological "fruit of the poisoned tree," when one does not distinguish the ways in which the term subordination may be understood. Can there be any kind of subordination of the Son to the Father, or even real distinctions between these divine persons without playing into the hands of the Arians? It is this latter matter that I take up in this chapter.

Before proceeding to develop the teaching of the Fathers on the subordination of God the Son to God the Father, let me set forth what I believe to be the manner in which this must be discussed and the assumptions I make in addressing the subject. First, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to decide whether the doctrine of the eternal relational subordination to the Father is biblical or not—and consequently whether the church fathers misunderstood Scripture. The task before us is to determine whether the

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¹ Cornelius Van Til *The Defense of the Faith* Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955, 3rd ed. rev. 1967), 12. See also Roger Olson and Christopher Hall, who say: "To be sure, at times trinitarian theology has taken flights of speculative fancy and lost any solid connection with salvation and Christian worship, devotion, and discipleship. But in the whole and in the main the doctrine of the Trinity has always been affirmed and defended by Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Christians as the uniquely identifying concept of God in Christianity because it is rooted in and necessary to the reality of salvation and implied by the logic of divine revelation." Roger E. Olson and Christopher Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 3. Several contemporary scholars have rejected different aspects of the theology and terminology of the early creeds. See, for example, Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 317-341.

relational—not ontological—subordination of the eternal Son to the Father was the orthodox doctrine of the early patristic church and the doctrine that we have received over the ages from those who formed the creeds of the church to which many of us adhere.

Second, the issue is not whether the Son of God, as to His humanity, was subordinate to the Father, and even subjected and inferior, being a man, and whether due to this the eternal Son of God, God of God, was functionally under the Father's authority, to which most would readily agree.

Third, it is not at issue whether any subordination that may exist is other than a distinction of His person and not His essence that He eternally and equally shares with the Father and the Spirit. Christians are united, other than blatant Arians, that there is no subordination of nature, which is shared undivided with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, the issue is not whether the Son is a created being (e.g. Arius) or equal in only some attributes such as eternity or whether the Son shares all of the undivided essence of Deity (see the Nicene Creed), but whether the eternal Son, who is the equal possessor of all of the attributes of deity may, in relation to the person of the Father, be eternally subordinate in His person while equal in the immanent Triune Godhead.

Fifth, the issue is not whether the person of the Son and the person of the Father and the person of the Holy Spirit are one person, nor whether the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit indwell each other (*perichoresis*), which they do, but whether the distinction is more than simply that there are three persons; that is, the personness has real meaning of distinction (as do their names have real meaning of distinction) of roles, and that as distinct persons, they have within the Trinity of one Being.

Sixth, the question of the subordination of the Son within the immanent Trinity is not directly tied to the current debate on male and female roles and authority within marriage.² Certainly much of the contemporary interest in the question of the Son's subordination has to do with the complementarian-egalitarian debate among evangelicals, and in the broader Christian community, in which the authority and order relationship between the Father and the Son has been used as a model of the role relationship of authority and submission between a husband and wife,³ but it is not a necessary consideration. As important as the matter of role relationships in a marriage may be, and even though the relationship of the Father to the Son may have value to understanding the manner in which husband and wife relate, this issue is not as important as to how the Father, Son and Holy Spirit relate as persons within the Godhead, and whichever position one takes on the question of husband-wife roles within marriage, it does not impinge on

² This motive is often the charge against those who believe in relational subordination, but such is false. Persons may believe that the intratrinitarian relationship and roles may serve as model for husband and wife, but one's belief regarding intratrinitarian role is not dictated by egalitarian or complementarian perspectives as evidenced by authors in this volume. For example, Craig Keener holds egalitarian perspectives on male and female roles but agrees with the author on the nature of the Trinitarian relationships, whereas Dennis Jowers differs with the author on the role relationships of the Father and Son, yet agrees with the author on male and female roles.

³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; Zondervan, 1994), 459.

how one must view the issue of the subordination of the Son.⁴ In view of this, I will refrain from discussion in this paper of the current complementarian-egalitarian controversy and will give my attention to the issue of the eternal role relationship of the Father and the Son as articulated in patristic theology. Only when this is resolved may there be an appropriate application of the functional distinction of Father and Son, if any, to the male and female debate of today.

What is at issue is whether the Son and the Father are equal in regards to authority within the Godhead *ad intra* and not whether the Son, as God has authority toward the creation *ad extra*. That the Son possesses equal power (omnipotence) with the Father and the Spirit is not in question, since this relates to the nature that all three distinct persons share in common. However, is authority an attribute of Triune God *ad intra* in which an unequal relationship exists between the persons? Is authority, if it is not an essential attribute of the essence of God, a relational manner in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit associate with each other from all eternity that distinguishes their persons from each other, even as they share in common the essence of Deity? Thus, the Father is always Father, and over the Son and the Spirit, and the Son is always the Son, begotten from the Father and in subjection to Him.

II. THE CURRENT DEBATE REGARDING THE ETERNAL SUBORDINATION OF THE FATHER TO THE SON

A. *Some evangelicals are heretics*

The need to make a determination of whether the eternal subordination is the historic view of the Church becomes especially important to evangelicals today because of the amazing, and often vitriolic, claims by some that those who believe in the eternal relational subordination of the Son are in fact heretics. Such claims were made in two different papers by Gilbert Bilezikian. Under the title “The Re-emerging Heresy” he says,

... I regret to recognize that some insidious reformulations of the doctrine of the Trinity are being propounded in our day by evangelical Christians who profess to adhere to the full authority of scripture. . . . It is a tragic observation that in their eagerness to try to discredit the egalitarian movement its opponents are willing to use any means, even to the extent of tampering with the church’s historic commitment to trinitarian theology.⁵

Similarly, in another article, he further accuses complementarians of distorting the divine model of the Trinity in order push an agenda, that of hierarchy:

From within our own ranks a potentially destructive redefinition of the doctrine of the Trinity is being developed that threatens its integrity at what has historically proven to be its most vulnerable point: the definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The promoters of this approach are not heretics bent on subverting the faithful. They are well-meaning but overzealous guides who venture into the dangerous waters of Christological speculation only obliquely, while attempting to press other issues. It is possible that, in their eagerness to prove their point, they do not even realize that they may be found tampering with the Church’s historic commitment to trinitarian

⁴ When looking at the teaching of the theologians of the church below, their belief in a role subordination of the Son within the Trinity had no ties to any discussion of male-female roles in marriage, and the question of how the Father and Son relate is not of importance to the question of this book.

⁵ Gilbert Bilezikian, “Subordination in the Godhead, A Re-Emerging Heresy,” a transcript of a recorded lecture given at the National Conference of Christians for Biblical Equality, Wheaton College, August, 1993.

doctrine.⁶

Whether this charge is true or not, it is not appropriate that we evangelicals castigate each other, calling names, especially that of heretic, when good people differ. It does not move the debate forward in a constructive manner. This is especially true in light of his chide, “Don’t mess with the Trinity.”⁷ In light of a study of the Fathers who gave us the creeds and expounded them for us, I believe the caution should be directed toward Bilezikian, since the early church fathers indeed did accept order and ranking among the persons of the Trinity, and I believe, even subordination of relationship, though certainly not subordination of nature, the latter being the issue at Nicea.

An additional example of the kind of accusation leveled by Belizikian, namely, that those who hold to the relational subordination of the Son to the Father have created a doctrine that is different from what has been held in the Church until now, has also been made by Kevin Giles. He has written two books that argue that the subordination taught by evangelical complementarians such as Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, John MacArthur and others is a restatement of the early heresy of subordination in the early church condemned at Nicea and afterwards.⁸

I am confident that those who oppose relational subordination are sincere in their accusations but they fail to understand the teaching of the Church over the centuries. The church did oppose a form of subordination set forth by Arian, and earlier by Justin and Origen. Rainbow explains the distinction,

The outstanding instances of Subordinationism in the history of dogma were Arianism, which made the Son a created being, and Pneumatomachianism, which did the same for the Holy Spirit. Some of the ante-Nicene fathers, such as Origen, perhaps under the influence of Neo-Platonism with its concept of levels of being, seem to have assigned to the Son a substance inferior to that of the Father (though they viewed him at co-eternal with the Father), or speculated that the generation of the Son was an act of the Father's will; those constructions also qualify as Subordinationist. Since the evangelical theologians whom Dr. Bilezikian has in mind reject these views and affirm that the Son is of the same being (ὁμοούσιος) with the Father; since, moreover, no council has ever condemned the idea that the Person of the Son is subject to the Person of the Father, provided that their identity of essence be upheld; the accusation of Subordinationism in this case may be dismissed.⁹

B. Orthodox theologians of former days, and the present

⁶Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping: Subordination In The Godhead,” JETS, 40:1 (March 1997), 57-58.

⁷Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping,” 65.

⁸Kevin N. Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), and Kevin N. Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). Dr. Giles, in his book *The Trinity & Subordination*, lists me as a supporter of his view. He quotes a portion of my book *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* that says “that orthodox trinitarianism ‘unhesitatingly sets forth Father, Son and Holy Spirit as co-equal and co-eternal in the Godhead with regard to both the divine essence and function.’” Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordination*, 22. When one reviews the pages from which he quotes, it becomes obvious that I speak of this co-equality in reference to essence and not to the personal associations of the persons of the Trinity. The reference to function speaks to the operations of the Trinity *ad extra* of the persons of the Trinity who share the same divine essence.

⁹Paul A. Rainbow, “Orthodox Trinitarianism and Evangelical Feminism: A Response to Gilbert Bilezikian,” unpublished paper, p. 3. It appears that Origen’s use of terms may be what causes many scholars to question his orthodoxy by Nicean standards, but a fuller evaluation of his terms in light of his biblical analysis would seem to give him the benefit of the doubt. See Henri Cruzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) for fuller discussion of this.

Those who consider evangelicals as heretics if they embrace relational subordinationism equally indict a number of church fathers in the early centuries as well as several theologians of the past and many since the reformation. Let us examine a few.

St. Thomas Aquinas does not speak directly to the matter of relational subordination, but he explores a very important item, namely, for there to be a distinction between the persons of God within the commonality of the divine essence, there needs to be basis by which they are distinct. Understanding names as designations, without there being intrinsic characteristics that adhere to the name, is meaningless.

In whatever multitude of things is to be found something common to all, it is necessary to seek out the principle of distinction. So, as the three persons agree in the unity of essence, we must seek to know the principle of distinction whereby they are several. Now, there are two principles of difference between the divine persons, and these are origin and relation [*origo et relatio*]. Although these do not really differ, yet they differ in the mode of signification; for origin is signified by way of act, as generation; and relation by way of the form, as paternity. [*Nam origo significatur per modum actus, ut generatio; relatio vero per modum formae, ut paternitas*]

Some, then, considering that relation follows upon act, have said that the divine hypostases are distinguished by origin, so that we may say that the Father is distinguished from the Son, inasmuch as the former begets and the latter is begotten. Further, that the relations, or the properties, make known the distinctions of the hypostases or persons as resulting therefrom [*sive proprietates manifestant consequenter hypostasum, sive personarum distinctiones*]; as also in creatures the properties manifest the distinctions of individuals, which distinctions are caused by the material principles.

This opinion, however, cannot stand—for two reasons. Firstly, because, in order that two things be understood as distinct, their distinction must be understood as resulting from something intrinsic to both [*Primo quidem, quia ad hoc, quod aliqua duo distincta intelligantur, necesse est eorum distinctionem intelligi per aliquid intrinsecum utrique*]; thus in things created it results from their matter or their form. Now origin of a thing does not designate anything intrinsic, but means the way from something, or to something; as generation signifies the way to a thing generated, and as proceeding from the generator. Hence it is not possible that what is generated and the generator should be distinguished by generation alone; but in the generator and in the thing generated we must presuppose whatever makes them to be distinguished from each other [*Unde non potest esse, quod res genita, et generans distinguantur sola generatione; sed oportet intelligere tam in generante, quam in genito ea, quibus ab invicem distinguuntur*]. In a divine person there is nothing to presuppose but essence, and relation or property. Whence, since the persons agree in essence, it only remains to be said that the persons are distinguished from each other by the relations [*Unde, cum in essentia conveniant, relinquitur, quod per relationes personae ab invicem distinguantur*]. Secondly: because the distinction of the divine persons is not to be so understood as if what is common to them all is divided; because the common essence remains undivided; but the distinguishing principles themselves must constitute the things which are distinct [*sed oportet, quod ipsa distinguuntia constituent res distinctas*]. Now the relations or the properties distinguish or constitute the hypostases or persons [*vel proprietates distinguunt, vel constituunt hypostasem, vel personas*], inasmuch as they are themselves the subsisting persons; as paternity is the Father, and filiation is the Son, because in God the abstract and the concrete do not differ. But it is against the nature of origin that it should constitute hypostasis or person. For origin taken in an active sense signifies proceeding from a subsisting person, so that it presupposes the latter; while in a passive sense origin, as *nativity*, signifies the way to a subsisting person, and as not yet constituting the person.

It is therefore better to say that the persons or hypostases are distinguished rather by relations than by origin [*Unde melius dicitur, quod personae, seu hypostasem distinguantur relationibus, quam per originem*]. For, although in both ways they are distinguished, nevertheless in our mode of understanding they are distinguished chiefly and firstly by relations; whence this name *Father* signifies not only a property, but also the hypostasis; whereas this term *Begetter* or *Begetting* signifies property only; forasmuch as this name *Father* signifies the relation which is distinctive and

constitutive of the hypostasis; and this term *Begetter* or *Begotten* signifies the origin which is not distinctive and constitutive of the hypostasis.”¹⁰

Building on the argument of Aquinas, though the three persons share equally and indivisibly the one essence, for the relation of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit to properly distinguish them, some intrinsic qualities must exist in their unique persons. The other persons do not share this uniqueness, even as these persons share the entirety of the divine being. Thus, the Father is Father only of the Son, something that is founded on both by His intrinsic subsistence as Father and by His act as a Father of begetting the person of the Son and communicating the essence of the deity eternally to the eternal Son. As Henry well states,

That our Lord is eternally the Son of God, and that the term Son designates not merely his office but his nature as well, and moreover designates sameness of nature and hence equality with God, was affirmed already by the Nicene Council. That is what the Bible teaches. The personal names used of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, are terms of relation, not simply a relation to creatures and the world, not in consequence of development in time (e.g., the incarnation), but terms for a mutual eternal relationship between the persons of the Trinity in the Godhead.¹¹

John Calvin resists entering into the debates of the councils of the church when it concerns discussion of terms and ideas that are not specifically biblical in nature,¹² but nonetheless he does recognize that there is definitely a distinction, an ordering of the persons of the Triune God attributing to the Father “the beginning of activity” and the fountain of all things.” Moreover, though the Father is the fount of the Godhead, in which they share equally in the divine attributes, the distinctions of the persons must be recognized.¹³ Though Calvin does not speak of relational subordination, he does acknowledge that the order of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has important meaning, saying, “the observance of an order is not meaningless or superfluous, when the Father is thought of as first, then from him the Son, and finally from both the Spirit.”¹⁴ For example, after reviewing the teaching of Augustine, Calvin says “when we mark the relation that he has with the Father, we rightly make the Father the beginning of the Son.”¹⁵ He is speaking of the orthodox teaching that the Father is the fount of the Godhead as to the person of the Son and the Spirit, not as to time or creation, but the eternal begetting of the Son and

¹⁰Saint Thomas Aquinas and Fathers of the English Dominican Province, *Summa Theologica*, Complete English ed., summa.1.40.2.3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009), and Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Editio altera Romana, summa.1.40.2.3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009).

¹¹Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), 5:207.

¹²Henry says, “Calvin urges that the vocabulary and concepts of Scripture be kept at the center of every Christian statement of the doctrine of the Trinity: “On this, indeed, if on any of the secret mysteries of the Scripture, we ought to philosophize with great sobriety and moderation; and also with extreme caution, lest either our ideas or our language should proceed beyond the limits of the Divine word” (*Institutes*, I, 137). Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), 5:206.

¹³John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Ed. John T. McNeill, Library of Christian Classics, Vol XX (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 142-143: “It is not fitting to suppress the distinction that we observe to be expressed in scripture. It is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity. Indeed, although the eternity of the Father is also the eternity of the Son and the Spirit, since God could never exist apart from his wisdom and power, and we must not seek in eternity a ‘before’ or an ‘after’, nevertheless the observance of an order is not meaningless or superfluous, when the Father is thought of as first, then from him the Son, and finally from both the Spirit.”

¹⁴Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 143.

¹⁵Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 144.

communication of the divine nature.

Calvin, while recognizing that the persons of the Trinity share the exact same essence, believes that they nevertheless also have their own special quality. He paraphrases Augustine saying, “By these appellations which set forth the distinction . . . is signified their mutual relationships and not the very substance by which they are one.”¹⁶ Henry explains why Calvin, though agreeing with the Scriptures and the creeds, has little to say on the matter of subordination of the Son or the questions of generation of the Son and procession of the Holy Spirit:

Both Luther and Calvin preferred to abide by the simple statements of the Bible. In fact, because Calvin refrained from speculative statements about the ontological Trinity he was suspected of both Sabellianism and Arianism, suspicions that were wholly unfounded. Calvin noted the apparent confusion introduced into the Christian doctrine by God by the themes of generation and procession. Although Scripture affirms the generation of the Son and uses the verb *gennaō*, the difficulty of drawing valid inferences may have evoked Calvin’s disapproval of “curiosity.” He also expounded the essential divinity of the three persons more cautiously than the others. Like Augustine he emphasized that the personal names refer to reciprocal relations, not to the one essence. Each person, considered in himself, is God; in relation to each other, the persons are Father, Son and Spirit. Each person of the Trinity considered as God may be called the sole first cause. But the peculiar properties of the persons considered in themselves produce a certain order in which the original cause is the Father. In this way the unity of the essence is preserved and the order of the persons is retained.¹⁷

Charles Hodge, for example, argues that both the mode of subsistence and the operation (sometimes called economic) of the Trinitarian persons may be subordinate, and is to be distinguished from the form of subordination condemned in the fourth century creeds:

The creeds . . . assert the distinct personality of the Father, Son, and Spirit; their mutual relation as expressed by those terms; their absolute unity as to substance or essence, and their consequent perfect equality; and the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, as to the mode of subsistence and operation. These are Scriptural facts, to which the creeds in question add nothing; and it is in this sense they have been accepted by the Church universal.¹⁸

Hodge then explains that the distinction of the Father and the Son is one of “property” or characteristic that is expressed by the names they possess. The Father is Father in relation to the Son, and the Son is the Son in relation to the Father. “Paternity, therefore, is the distinguishing property of the Father; filiation of the Son; and procession of the Spirit. It will be observed that no attempt at explanation of these relations is given in these ecumenical creeds, namely, the Nicene, that of Constantinople, and the Athanasian. The mere facts as revealed in Scripture are affirmed.”¹⁹

From this eternal and personal distinction comes the perspective of subordination. But this is not the subordination propounded by Arius, in which the Son is created by the Father, but one of relationship as the eternal Son relates as the begotten one from the eternal Father, the begetter. The Son does not have an inferior essence to that of the Father, but a different relationship and mode of existence.²⁰

Hodge, in a retort to an opponent using Augustine, continues by arguing that

¹⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 143.

¹⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 5:206.

¹⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

¹⁹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:460.

²⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:460.

Augustine, the Greek fathers, and the creeds all support the subordination of the Son to the Father within the Trinity:

Gieseler says that Augustine effectually excluded all idea of subordination in the Trinity by teaching the numerical sameness of essence in the persons of the Godhead. This does indeed preclude all priority and all superiority as to being and perfection. But it does not preclude subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation. This is distinctly recognized in Scripture, and was as fully taught by Augustine as by any of the Greek fathers, and is even more distinctly alarmed in the so-called Athanasian Creed, representing the school of Augustine, than in the Creed of the Council of Nice.²¹

Reformed theologian, **W. G. T. Shedd** makes plain the distinction between the equality of the divine nature that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share in common, while at the same time are distinct from each other as to their personal properties. Shedd says, “The terms *first*, *second*, and *third* applied to the persons are terms of order and relationship only. They imply no priority of nature, substance, existence, or excellence. . . . The term *father* does not denote a higher grade of being, but exactly the same grade that the term *son* does. . . . So a person who possesses the divine nature is *ipso facto* divine, whether possessing it by paternity or filiation or procession.”²²

Stating the generally understood orthodox position of the order and relationship of the Father and Son, Shedd does not shy away from the perspective that the Son is subordinate relationship to the Father as the eternally begotten Son of God:

While there is this absolute equality among divine persons in respect to the grade of being to which they belong, and all are alike infinite and uncreated in nature and essence, there is at the same time a kind of subordination among them. It is trinitarian or filial subordination, that is, subordination in respect to order and relationship. As a relation, sonship is subordinate to fatherhood.²³

Shedd then continues to explain that the subordination of the Son is one of person and not of essence, and is to be distinguished from Arian subordination:

The trinitarian subordination of person, not of essence, must not be confounded with the Arian and Semiarian subordination, which is a subordination of essence as well as of person. Neither must it be confounded with the theanthropic or mediatorial subordination. This latter involves condescension and humiliation; but the trinitarian subordination does not. It is no humiliation or condescension for a son to be the son of his father. That the second trinitarian person is God the Son and not God the Father does not imply that his essence is inferior to that of the Father and that he is of a lower grade of being, but only that his sonship is subordinate to the Father’s paternity. The Son of God is an eternal not a temporal son; and an eternal son must have an eternal nature in order to be eternal. In the theanthropic or mediatorial sonship, there is a humbling, though no degrading of the eternal Son, because of the assumption into union with the divine nature of an inferior human nature. But in the Arian or Semiarian subordination, there is not only humiliation, but degradation. The Son of God, upon this theory, is of a lower grade of being than the Father because he is of a different essence or nature.²⁴

Swiss scholar **Frédéric Louis Godet**, deals at length with the subject of the subjection of the eternal Son to the Father, in a lengthy consideration of Paul’s teaching 1 Corinthians

²¹ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462.

²² William Greenough Thayer Shedd and Alan W. Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub., 2003), 250.

²³ Shedd and Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., 250.

²⁴ Shedd and Gomes, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., 250.

15:24-29, which speaks to the event at which the Son, at the end of all things, subjects Himself to the Father.²⁵

As the word is subordinate to the thought, and yet one with it, so in the notion of Son there are united the two relations of subordination and homogeneity. The living monotheism of Paul, John, and the other apostles was not less rigorous than ours, and yet it found no contradiction between these two affirmations. Now if, in Paul's view, it is so with the Son in His Divine state, must not the position of subordination have appeared in Him still more compatible with the character of the Son when He had once entered into the mode of being belonging to a human personality? Subordination was therefore, according to him, in harmony with the essential relation of the Son to the Father, in His Divine and human existence. If consequently He is called to reign, by exercising Divine sovereignty within the universe, it can only be for a time, with a view to the obtaining of a particular result. This end gained, He will return to His normal position: subordination relative to God the Father. Such, as it seems to me, is the true thought of the apostle.²⁶

Thus, Godet affirms that within the notion of the Son “the two relations of subordination and homogeneity” are present,²⁷ and according to the Paul, subordination is in “harmony with the essential relation of the Son to the Father, in His Divine and human existence. . . .”²⁸ The subordination of the Son, then, refers not only to His human nature, but to the essential relationship of the Son to the Father as God.

Baptist theologian **Augustus H. Strong** states explicitly the historic view of the church when he says, “The subordination of the *person* of the Son to the *person* of the Father, or in other words an order of personality, office, and operation which permits the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority.”²⁹ When speaking of the subordination of the person of the Son to the person of the Father, Strong removes the debate from the subordination advocated by Arius.³⁰

Strong says pointedly that he recognized an eternal subordination of the Son:

We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father, but we maintain at the

²⁵ Frédéric Louis Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin, Vol 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893), 367-68.

²⁶ Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin, Vol 2, 370-371.

²⁷ Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin, Vol 2, 370.

²⁸ Godet, *Commentary on St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. A. Cusin, Vol 2, 371.

²⁹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 342 (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004).

³⁰ Strong, alluding to the work of Dorner, says that Arianism was a reaction to Sabellianism: “Sabellius had reduced the incarnation of Christ to a temporary phenomenon. Arius thought to lay stress on the hypostasis of the Son, and to give it fixity and substance. But, to his mind, the reality of Sonship seemed to require subordination to the Father. Origen had taught the subordination of the Son to the Father, in connection with his doctrine of eternal generation. Arius held to the subordination, and also to the generation, but this last, he declared, could not be eternal, but must be in time.” Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 670. Wolfhart Pannenberg demonstrates this connection, “Only with Origen’s doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son did the concept emerge of an eternal trinity in God. But in Origen, too, this idea went hand in hand with that of the inferiority of the Son, a creature, to the Father. The Arians particularly stressed this inferiority in opposition to Sabellianism. They so debased the thought that there could be brought against them another doctrine of Origen, that of the essential unity of the Logos with the Father and his eternal generation, which means that there was no time when he was not. Defending the Nicene belief in the *homoousion* of the Son (and Spirit) with the Father, their equal deity, Athanasius vanquished subordinationism, insisting that we cannot think of the Father as Father without the Son and Spirit. He left no place for causally related gradations in the fulness of divine being. But this made even more urgent the question how to maintain the divine unity. Could it still involve the monarchy of the Father, or did it have to be formulated and supported in some other way?” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991-1998), 1:275.

same time that this subordination is a subordination of order, office, and operation, not a subordination of essence. “Non de essentia dicitur, sed de ministeriis.” E. G. Robinson: “An eternal generation is necessarily an eternal subordination and dependence. This seems to be fully admitted even by the most orthodox of the Anglican writers, such as Pearson and Hooker. Christ’s subordination to the Father is merely official, not essential.” Whiton, *Gloria Patri*, 42, 96—“The early Trinitarians by eternal Sonship meant, first, that it is of the very nature of Deity to issue forth into visible expression. Thus next, that this outward expression of God is not something other than God, but God himself, in a self-expression as divine as the hidden Deity. Thus they answered Philip’s cry, ‘show as the Father, and it sufficeth us’ (John 14:8), and thus they affirmed Jesus’ declaration, they secured Paul’s faith that God has never left himself without witness. They meant, ‘he that hath seen me hath seen the Father’ (John 14:9)... The Father, is the Life transcendent, the divine Source, ‘above all’; the Son is the Life immanent, the divine Stream, ‘through all’; the Holy Spirit is the Life individualized, ‘in all’ (Eph. 4:6). The Holy Spirit has been called ‘the executive of the Godhead.’ ” Whiton is here speaking of the economic Trinity; but all this is even more true of the immanent Trinity.³¹

Often called the dean of evangelical theologians, **Carl F. H. Henry** argues similarly to Hodge regarding subordination of mode of subsistence and operation, and that the subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father, as well as the eternal generation of the Son, is beyond doubt according to biblical testimony.

The biblical data put beyond doubt the subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father, and the eternal generation of the Son. Neither Scripture nor the ancient creeds explains these terms, however. The Nicene fathers expand these statements. They affirm the Father’s communication of the essence of the Godhead to the Son, so that the two have this essence in common, but avoided any derivation of the essence of the Son from the Father.³²

Consequently the subordination of the Son to the Father both *ad intra* and *ad extra* is not an indication of inferiority of essence but rather the fact that the Son comes from the Father, and also that the Father works through the Son. The three persons have a “common divine essence” yet regarding the personal subsistence and mode of operation the Son is of the Father (God of very God in the Nicene Creed), and the Spirit is from the Father and (or through) the Son.³³ Moreover, the eternal generation of the Son, according to the Fathers, carries with it the communication, not derivation, of the essence of the Godhead to the Son, so that they have the same essence in common. Henry, in agreement with the Bible and the creeds, concludes:

That our Lord is eternally the Son of God, and that the term Son designates not merely his office but his nature as well, and moreover designates sameness of nature and hence equality with

³¹ Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 342 (Bellingham, Wa.: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2004).

³² Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1999), 5:207.

³³ Henry, “The creeds speak of the subordination, distinction, and union of the three persons without implying an inferiority of any; since all three persons have a common divine essence, they affirm the Son’s subordination to the Father, and the Spirit’s subordination to the Father and the Son. This subordination pertains to mode of subsistence and to mode of operation. Consistent with the biblical data concerning mode of subsistence, the Son is of the Father and the Spirit is of the Father and the Son; as to mode of operation, the Father works through the Son, and the Father and the Son work through the Spirit. Each of the three persons of the Trinity is distinguished by its unique characteristic as expressed by the personal names. The first person is Father, in relation to the second; the second is Son, in relation to the first; the third is Spirit, in relation to the first and second. The property of the Father is paternity; of the Son, filiation; of the Spirit, procession. The three persons have a common intelligence, will and power since the essence of the Godhead is common to them, an intimacy of union expressed by the Greek term *perichōrēsis* and the Latin terms *inexistentia*, *inhabitation* and *intercommunio*. The purpose of these terms was simply to express that the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father, that where the Father is, there the Son and Spirit are, and that what one person of the Trinity is doing, all are doing.” Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 5:205-206.

God, was affirmed already by the Nicene Council. That is what the Bible teaches. The personal names used of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, are terms of relation, not simply a relation to creatures and the world, not in consequence of development in time (e.g., the incarnation), but terms for a mutual eternal relationship between the persons of the Trinity in the Godhead.³⁴

Though not explicitly advocating that the Son is in subjection to the Father in eternity, **Donald Bloesch** says that the Son has some form of dependence on the Father within the Trinity, and not vice versa. Though the members of the Trinity share in the work of each of the other persons, nonetheless there is a difference in function and the Son subordinates Himself to the Father within the Trinity.³⁵ He writes:

Within the Trinity there is a certain dependence of the Son on the Father and of the Spirit on the Father and Son. The Father alone is unbegotten, whereas the Son is begotten (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 Jn 4:9 KJV). At the same time, the members of the Trinity enjoy an essential equality in that all participate in the activities of the others. Yet there is a difference in function and therefore a voluntary subordination. The Son subordinates himself to the Father, and the Spirit carries out the directives of the Father and the Son. Within this diversity there is an overarching unity. The church through the ages has confessed one being in three persons, meaning here not separate individuals (this would be Tritheism), but agencies of relationship. Because the meaning of person has changed from an abiding mode of being or activity (*hypostasis*) to an independent or autonomous individual. Karl Barth has rephrased the Trinitarian formula: there is one person in three modes of being. This is not modalism, however, because these three modes of being denote eternal distinctions within God himself and not simply ways by which God relates himself to the world.³⁶

Last of all, there are a number of contemporary scholars who are convinced that there is a difference between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit being equally and indivisibly sharing the same essence of deity and these persons having personal relationships that distinguish them in authority, a distinction that is eternal based on personal factors unrelated to their common nature. These are the scholars who are viewed as heretics, or charitably misguided Christians by persons such as Bilezikian and Giles.

Some of the scholars who share similar positions to this author are Wayne Grudem,³⁷ Bruce Ware,³⁸ Robert Letham,³⁹ and John Frame,⁴⁰ but their views will not be

³⁴Carl Ferdinand Howard Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 5:207.

³⁵Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate over Inclusive God-Language* (Servant Publications Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1985), 32.

³⁶Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity*, 32. In his systematic theology Bloesch prefers interdependence and order of procession to the idea of subordination, and believes that whatever subordination is present in Scripture is mutual subordination. This wording seems different than that found in his book, *The Battle for the Trinity* and apparently removes him from the list of those who support the eternal subordination of the Son in any historic sense. Donald G. Bloesch, *God, the Almighty: Power, Wisdom, Holiness, Love* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 186.

³⁷Though I would hesitate to use “economic subordination,” since I view this form of subordination to be temporal and associated with the incarnational work of Christ, and prefer eternal relational subordination that refers to intrinsic distinctions of the persons of the Godhead to each other (and not the nature of God or to creation), in general I would agree with Grudem’s view: “This truth about the Trinity has sometimes been summarized in the phrase “ontological equality but economic subordination,” where the word *ontological* means “being.” Another way of expressing this more simply would be to say “equal in being but subordinate in role.” Both parts of this phrase are necessary to a true doctrine of the Trinity: If we do not have ontological equality, not all the persons are fully God. But if we do not have economic subordination, then there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another, and consequently we do not have the three distinct persons existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for all eternity. For example, if the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally “Father” and the Son is not eternally “Son.” This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed.” Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251.

addressed in the body of this chapter.

C. *The terms authority and power are both attributes of the divine nature by egalitarians*

Kevin Giles believes that both authority and power are expressions of the divine essence shared without distinction by the members of the Godhead so that the Father and the Son cannot be in positions of authority and submission within the Holy Trinity, and only so within the economic Trinity in which the Son took upon Himself humanity.

In my use of the words authority and power, and I am sure of many others, there is a clear distinction in their meaning, so that I generally use them in a specific way so as not to confuse them. Authority generally relates to “the right to act,” whereas power speaks of “the ability to act.” These meanings are consistent with the meanings of the Greek words ἐξουσία⁴¹ and δύναμις⁴² in the New Testament. Bauer-Danker-Ardnt-Gingrich lexicon defines ἐξουσία in the following manner,

1. a state of control over someth., *freedom of choice, right*
2. potential or resource to command, control, or govern, *capability, might, power*

³⁸ Ware states, “First, the Father is, in his position and authority, supreme among the Persons of the Godhead.” He further says, “God the Father receives the ultimate and supreme glory, for the Father sent the Son to accomplish redemption in his humiliation, and the Father alone stands supreme over all – including supreme over his very Son. All praise of the Son ultimately and rightly redounds to the glory of the Father. It is the Father, then, who is supreme in the Godhead- in the triune relationships of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and supreme over all of the very creation over which the Son reigns as its Lord.” Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 46, 51.

³⁹ Letham shies away from using the term “subordination” yet still acknowledges that “Western Trinitarianism has been based on the priority of the one divine essence and has had some difficulty doing justice to the distinctions of the three persons...this modalistic tendency poses the most immediate threat.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2004), 3. He continues, “God is one being and three persons. The three are of the identical essence and indwell each other. None is more God, or less God, than the others. In relation to each other, the Father begets the Son, and the Father (and the Son) spirate the Spirit. In the economy, the Father sends the Son, and the Father (and the Son) send the Spirit. These relations are irreversible. An order exists. Both the East and West recognize it...” Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 480.

⁴⁰ Frame says, “That the Father has some sort of primacy is implicit in the name Father, and of course the doctrines of eternal generation and procession suggest that the Father has some sort of unique “originate” role. So the church has generally spoken of the Father as the “first” person of the Trinity, and the Son and the Spirit as the “second” and “third” persons, respectively. Furthermore, if, as I have claimed, the economic activities of the persons are analogous to their eternal relationships, then the forms of economic subordination mentioned above suggest a pattern. The Son and the Spirit are voluntarily subordinate to the commands of the Father, because that kind of subordination is appropriate to their eternal nature as persons.” He goes on, “We may put it this way: There is no subordination within the divine nature that is shared among the persons: the three are equally God. However, there is a subordination of role among the persons, which constitutes part of the distinctiveness of each. Because of that subordination of role, the persons subordinate themselves to one another in their economic relationships with creation.” John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 720.

⁴¹ Matt 7:29; 8:9; 9:6, 8; 10:1; 21:23–24, 27; 28:18; Mark 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15; 6:7; 11:28–29, 33; 13:34; Luke 4:6, 32, 36; 5:24; 7:8; 9:1; 10:19; 12:5, 11; 19:17; 20:2, 8, 20; 22:25, 53; 23:7; John 1:12; 5:27; 10:18; 17:2; 19:10–11; Acts 1:7; 5:4; 8:19; 9:14; 26:10, 12, 18; Rom 9:21; 13:1–3; 1 Cor 6:12; 7:4, 37; 8:9; 9:4–6, 12, 18; 11:10; 15:24; 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10; Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:13, 16; 2:10, 15; 2 Th 3:9; Titus 3:1; Heb 13:10; 1 Pet 3:22; Jude 1:25; Rev 2:26; 6:8; 9:3, 10, 19; 11:6; 12:10; 13:2, 4–5, 7, 12; 14:18; 16:9; 17:12–13; 18:1; 20:6; 22:14.

⁴² Matt 7:22; 11:20–21, 23; 13:54, 58; 14:2; 22:29; 24:29–30; 25:15; 26:64; Mark 5:30; 6:2, 5, 14; 9:1, 39; 12:24; 13:25–26; 14:62; Luke 1:17, 35; 4:14, 36; 5:17; 6:19; 8:46; 9:1; 10:13, 19; 19:37; 21:26–27; 22:69; 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:22; 3:12; 4:7, 33; 6:8; 8:10, 13; 10:38; 19:11; Rom 1:4, 16, 20; 8:38; 9:17; 15:13, 19; 1 Cor 1:18, 24; 2:4–5; 4:19–20; 5:4; 6:14; 12:10, 28–29; 14:11; 15:24, 43, 56; 2 Cor 1:8; 4:7; 6:7; 8:3; 12:9, 12; 13:4; Gal 3:5; Eph 1:19, 21; 3:7, 16, 20; Phil 3:10; Col 1:11, 29; 1 Th 1:5; 2 Th 1:7, 11; 2:9; 2 Tim 1:7–8; 3:5; Heb 1:3; 2:4; 6:5; 7:16; 11:11, 34; 1 Pet 1:5; 3:22; 2 Pet 1:3, 16; 2:11; Rev 1:16; 3:8; 4:11; 5:12; 7:12; 11:17; 12:10; 13:2; 15:8; 17:13; 18:3; 19:1.

3. the right to control or command, *authority, absolute power, warrant*
4. power exercised by rulers or others in high position by virtue of their office, *ruling power, official power*
5. bearer of ruling authority
6. the sphere in which power is exercised, *domain*⁴³

Similarly, BDAG defines δύναμις as

1. potential for functioning in some way, power, might, strength, force, capability
2. ability to carry out someth., ability, capability
3. a deed that exhibits ability to function powerfully, deed of power, miracle, wonder
4. someth. that serves as an adjunct of power, resource
5. an entity or being, whether human or transcendent, that functions in a remarkable manner, power as a personal transcendent spirit or heavenly agent/angel
6. the capacity to convey thought, meaning⁴⁴

Giles has an entirely different perception of the words “power” and “authority” found in the lexica, and as used by me and others, and in so doing equivocates in their use. Although he admits, “*Authority* carefully defined implies the right to exercise leadership or achieve an end, whereas the word *power* implies the ability to assert leadership or achieve an end” he then ignores this and asserts, “However, the words may be used synonymously and often are in everyday speech. For this reason, I have taken the liberty to equate the terms *power* and *authority* in what follows. I assume that when those with whom I am debating speak of differing authority of the Father and the Son they mean much the same as if they had spoken of the differing power of the Father and the Son.” Having defined “power” and “authority” according to “everyday speech” rather than the actual definition of the terms and assuming his opponents’ *thoughts* rather than their actual words, Giles then simply pronounces the end of discussion: “This equating the two words should not be disputed, because if each divine person is all powerful without distinction, then each must have all authority without distinction.”⁴⁵ He then repeats this last assertion throughout his book.⁴⁶

I would suggest that it is more productive for clarity not to assume the interchangeability of these terms in dealing with another’s writing or address unless that person were to indicate he or she follows a similar practice to Dr. Giles. This confusion in his usage gives rise to his insistence that the Father and Son share the same authority and power, whereas I would assert that they share the same power, relating to their omnipotence, while the Father is over the Son as to authority, relating to their personal relationship within the Godhead, an intrinsic aspect of their personhood as Father and Son, not intrinsic to the common essence that each must share. Otherwise, one could not avoid the slide to modalism.

⁴³ ἐξουσία, BDAG, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. & ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957, 1979, 2000), 352-353.

⁴⁴ “δύναμις,” BDAG, 262-263.

⁴⁵ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 53.

⁴⁶ For example, see Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 77, 177, 229, 310.

Bilezikian makes a similar claim, even bringing into the conversation the doctrinal affirmation of the Evangelical Theological Society. Speaking of the addition of a Trinitarian statement added to the affirmation on the Scripture, he quotes the ETS statement: “God is a Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.”⁴⁷ He concludes from the statement, “With this addendum the ETS resoundingly affirmed the historic view of the Trinity. It recognized the oneness of the Godhead along with the eternity, the ontological identity and the equality in authority or sovereignty (“power”) and honor or status (“glory”) among the three persons of the Trinity.”⁴⁸ Unfortunately for Dr. Bilezikian’s argument is that I was on the executive committee when this statement was adopted and remember the discussion. The executive committee was concerned about modalists who might join the society, not those who held to eternal relational subordination. The terms “power and glory” reflected a Christian confession,⁴⁹ not “authority and rank” as he interprets them. There is no evidence here that power and authority are within the doctrinal affirmation of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Neither of these scholars produce a single quote from the fathers or the creeds for the identification of the terms “power” and “authority.” In fact, I have looked at a considerable number of these statements in the church fathers and have not seen such usage in the Trinitarian question of the Father and the Son’s internal relationship. Rather, the reference of God having authority and power refers to His work over the creation (assumed as Trinity), or the Son in His role as Lord over creation, and *not* to their internal relationship.⁵⁰ This distinction, in fact, may be the sense of 1 Corinthians 15:24-28. The Father has given to the Son “power and authority” (cf Matt 28:16) until “all things” are subordinated to the Son, and then the Son Himself (at the end, v. 24) becomes subject (ὑποτάσσω) to God the Father (vv 24, 27).

III. THE USE OF THE TERM SUBORDINATION BY THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

A. Definition of the Term “subordination”

⁴⁷ Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping,” 57.

⁴⁸ Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping,” 57.

⁴⁹ On this matter the confession reads, “There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties. (1 John 5:7, Matt. 3:16–17, Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:14, John 10:30),” *The Westminster Larger Catechism : With Scripture Proofs.*, Question 9 (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996); “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.⁽³⁸⁾ The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father;⁽³⁹⁾ the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Charles Hodge and A.A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith: With Questions for Theological Students and Bible Classes*, electronic ed. based on the 1992 Banner of Truth reprint., 55 (Simpsonville SC: Christian Classics Foundation, 1996).

⁵⁰ See e.g., Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 3.40; Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1.4.3.6.3.40 Vol. IV: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 480; Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 126, quoted in Arthur A. Just, vol. 3, Luke, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* NT 3 (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 287; from CGSL, Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke*. Translated by R. Payne Smith. Long Island, N.Y.: Studion Publishers, Inc., 1983; John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* (Exposition of the Orthodox Faith), Philip. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series Vol. IX, ECF 3.9.2.1.1.8 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997) Book I, Chapter VIII, page 10; John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John Homily LXII; Philip. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. XIV, ECF 2.14.1.1.62.0 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), p 229.

One of the difficulties in dealing with the subject of the Son's eternal subordination is the matter of definition, (something not unfamiliar in the history of doctrine) particularly of creedal terms relating to the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Jesus.

Merriam-Webster defines subordination, "submissive to or controlled by authority" or "placed in or occupying a lower class, rank, or position."⁵¹ This says nothing of essence, but only of role, a different matter. The 1828 edition of Webster defines subordinate as "To place in order or rank below something else; to make or consider as of less value or importance; as, to subordinate one creature to another; to subordinate temporal to spiritual things."⁵² Obviously the dictionary does not speak of intra-Trinitarian relationship, but the essential sense of the word speaks to one's role and not of one's nature.

R. C. and C. C. Kroeger define subordinationism as "a doctrine that assigns an inferiority of being, status, or role to the Son or Holy Spirit within the Trinity."⁵³ The Kroegers then seek to demonstrate that applying a subordinate status to the Son under the Father is an error repudiated by the Nicene Council and the church fathers, failing to recognize the differentiation that is made between the three ways in which the term is used in the writings of the church, relational subordination, incarnational subordination, and ontological subordination.⁵⁴

Bilezikian has made much of the fact that the word "subordination" does not occur in Scripture (though this is also true for the word Trinity) and then explains that the term is from the Latin *sub ordinate*, meaning "to order under,"⁵⁵ concluding that the usage requires that one would be subordinated, connoting "some coercion or obligation by reason of superior force or authority. Not only is the notion of such a relationship of subordination foreign to scriptures but their content teaches exactly the opposite."⁵⁶

Both the Kroegers and Bilezikian's definition of subordinationism is contrary to the definitions given by standard dictionaries of theology. Rahner and Vorgrimler define subordination to mean that the Son and Holy Spirit "do not fully possess the divine essence (*Homoousion*)."⁵⁷ Young defines the term as referring to "to any Christological position which subordinates the Son to the Father in such a way as to endanger his essential divinity" and continue by saying that "an orthodox subordination survived in the

⁵¹ Merriam-Webster Online, <http://lynx.eb.com/dictionary/subordinate> (last visited May 7, 2011).

⁵² "Subordinate definitions," <http://www.wordswarm.net/dictionary/subordinate.html> (last visited May 7, 2011).

⁵³ R. C. and C. C. Kroeger, "Subordination," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984), 1058. Millard Erickson reflects the same misunderstanding of subordination as is found in the works of the Kroegers and Bilezikian. "The doctrine that in essence and status the Son is inferior to the Father, or the Spirit is inferior to the Father and the Son. This is to be distinguished from functional subordinationism, which sees the role of the Son or the Spirit as temporarily subordinated to the Father during a period of ministry." Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Rev. ed., 1st Crossway ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 192.

⁵⁴ See below Shedd at f.n. 91 and accompanying text.

⁵⁵ "Order" is preferred term of Letham (see f.n. 39), but I believe, rightly understood, there is a difference without a distinction.

⁵⁶ Gilbert Bilezikian, "Subordination in the Godhead, A Re-Emerging Heresy," a transcript of a recorded lecture given at the National Conference of Christians for Biblical Equality, Wheaton College, August, 1993.

⁵⁷ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds., "Subordination," in *Dictionary of Theology*, (2nd ed; New York: Crossroad, 1981), 488.

doctrine that within the Trinity the Father was the fount, origin or cause of the Son and the Spirit.”⁵⁸ Cross and Livingston says that subordination is the “Teaching about the Godhead which regards either the Son as subordinate to the Father or the Holy Ghost as subordinate to both.”⁵⁹ Last of all, Komonchak, Collins and Lane say that subordination is “a view of Christ which maintains that he is not equal in substantial being with God the Father.”⁶⁰

Three other works of note provide additional understanding of how the concept of subordination condemned as a heresy pertained to denial that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were the one and indivisible God. This says nothing regarding relational subordination, which was embraced by the fathers of the patristic period. Roman Catholic theologian, Ludwig Ott, says that “subordinationism admits three different Persons in God but denies the consubstantiality of the Second and Third Persons with the Father, and therefore their True Divinity.”⁶¹ McBrien, says that subordinationism is a “second and third-century heresy which held that the Son and the Holy Spirit are less than the Father because they proceed from the Father. Therefore, the Son and the Spirit are not fully divine.”⁶² Speaking of Augustine, McBrien says,

He begins rather with the one divine nature itself and tries to understand how the three Persons share in that nature without dividing it. Subordinationism of every kind is rejected. Whatever is affirmed of God is affirmed equally of each of the Persons (*On the Trinity*, Book 5, chapter 9). ‘Not only is the Father not greater than the Son in respect of divinity, but Father and Son together are not greater than the Holy Spirit, and no single person of the Three is less than the Trinity itself’ (8, 1).”⁶³

In speaking of the theology of Athanasius, patristic scholar Johannes Quasten says, “There remains no room for subordinationism in such a doctrine of the Logos . . . Eternally begotten, the Son is of the Father’s substance, ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς, He is consubstantial to the Father He is ὁμοούσιος.”⁶⁴ The theology of Didymus the Blind is in line with the theology of Athanasius in defending consubstantiality of the three persons and thus rejects any subordinationism.⁶⁵

Not only is Belizikian’s definition outside the normal meaning of subordination in standard theology, but it is also is totally foreign to the use of subordination by the Church fathers, who often used the term of the Son within the divine Trinity *ad intra*. This was the perspective of patristic theology: that the Son originates eternally from the Father, and thus has the status of Son to the Father as a person, though equal in nature to the Father, one God with Him. When one uses the terms rank or status (one’s position

⁵⁸ Francis Young, “Subordinationism,” in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1983), 553-554.

⁵⁹ F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., ed., quoted in Rainbow, 2.

⁶⁰ Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, eds., “Subordinationism,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1987), 986.

⁶¹ Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford, IL: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1955), 51.

⁶² Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, Volume Two (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press, 1980), xlvi.

⁶³ McBrien, *Catholicism*, Volume Two, 298.

⁶⁴ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol III (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1983; first published 19550), 69.

⁶⁵ Quasten, *Patrology*, Vol III, 87.

relative to another),⁶⁶ there is no reason to make the charge of heresy unless the person means that the Son is then somehow lesser than the Father in regards to the essence of deity. (There needs to be charity in this discussion). Those who advocate relational subordination often use terms such as role or position of the Son under the Father. The Son occupies a sub-order (thus, subordination) to the Father in that He eternally is begotten from Him and distinct.⁶⁷ No inferiority of being or worth of the person is implied. Rather the Son's status as Son relates only that of one's position relative to another. Such a view was held by the fathers of the church is consistent with the biblical revelation and reason, as will be seen below.

Bilezikian believes that when the creeds affirmed the co-eternality, interdependency and unity of the divine substance they were “excluding any form of hierarchy, order or ranking among them that would pertain to their eternal state.”⁶⁸ This is simply a wrong understanding of what was decided. Nowhere in the early councils did the orthodox church exclude the ordering of the persons within the eternal Godhead. They only excluded any theological concept that would make any of the persons unequal in the divine essence, not as how the divine persons related to each other as persons. Observe the words of Gregory of Nyssa:

But in a Divine nature, as such, when once we have believed in it, we can recognize no distinctions suggested either by the Scripture teaching or by our own common sense; distinctions, that is, that would divide that Divine and transcendent nature within itself by any degrees of intensity and remission, so as to be altered from itself by being more or less. Because we firmly believe that it is simple, uniform, incomposite, because we see in it no complicity or composition of dissimilars, therefore it is that, when once our minds have grasped the idea of Deity, we accept by the implication of that very name the perfection in it of every conceivable thing that befits the Deity.⁶⁹

If someone believes the fathers or councils disallowed intra-personal distinctions that do not deny the divine essence, the burden of proof rests on them to provide clear examples, something no one has done so far to my knowledge.

Secondly, consideration should be given to the concern of the fathers to maintain the common equality of the persons of the Trinity while at the same time acknowledging unique personal distinctions. For example, Basil of Caesarea, when speaking of the Son

⁶⁶ “status: position relative to that of others; the relative social, professional, or other standing of someone or something from Latin stare ‘to stand’”. *New Oxford American Dictionary*, copyright © 2005–2009 Apple Inc.

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⁶⁷ John of Damascus, in his *De Fide Orthodoxa*, says, “The Father is one Father, and without beginning, that is, without cause; for He is not derived from anything. The Son is one Son, but not without beginning, that is, not without cause: for He is derived from the Father. But if you eliminate the idea of a beginning from time, He is also without beginning: for the creator of times cannot be subject to time. The Holy Spirit is one Spirit, going forth from the Father, not in the manner of Sonship but of procession; so that neither has the Father lost His property of being unbegotten because He hath begotten, nor has the Son lost His property of being begotten because He was begotten of that which was unbegotten (for how could that be so?), nor does the Spirit change either into the Father or into the Son because He hath proceeded and is God. For a property is quite constant. For how could a property persist if it were variable, moveable, and could change into something else? For if the Father is the Son, He is not strictly the Father: for there is strictly one Father. And if the Son is the Father, He is not strictly the Son: for there is strictly one Son and one Holy Spirit.” John of Damascus, *De Fide Orthodoxa* (Exposition of the Orthodox Faith), Philip. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series Vol. IX, ECF 3.9.2.1.1.8 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997) Book I, Chapter VIII, page 10

⁶⁸ Bilezikian, “Subordination in the Godhead, A Re-Emerging Heresy,” 5.

⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit against the Followers of Macedonius*, Philip. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Second Series Vol. V, ECF 3.5.1.3.0.0 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

being of the same nature as the Father's, explains the reason for the use of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* and the distinction of Father and Son. Basil says,

... in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence [*ousia*] so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis in order that our conception of Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear. If we have no distinct perception of the separate characteristics, namely, fatherhood, sonship and sanctification, but form our conception of God from the general idea of existence, we cannot possibly give a sound account of our faith. . . . Hence it results that there is a satisfactory preservation of the unity by the confession of the one Godhead, while in the distinction of the individual properties regarded in each there is the confession of the peculiar properties [*idiomata*] of the persons [*hypotases*].⁷⁰

The three persons are distinguished by names—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—but unless the distinctions are more than mere appellations one is dangerously close to a form of modalism.⁷¹ The reason why the Father is the Father and the Son the Son relates to genuine aspects of the personal subsistence that is different from the other person, even as they equally share the common essence of deity. The Son is eternally God of very God, begotten from eternity, and not created. The Son is sent to be the incarnate savior of the world due to His position and relationship within the Trinity. The Father could not be sent by the Son due to the position He occupies within the Trinity in respect to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the differences of the three persons are real and not merely distinguishing them for identification, as Basil acknowledges.

The third problem for the egalitarian view of the persons of the Trinity is the ostensible evidence that some who write against eternal subordination have not carefully

⁷⁰ Basil of Caesarea, The Son Is of God's Own Nature, *Letter 236.6, Ancient Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 2, "We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ," ed. John Anthony McGuckin and gen. ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 25. (Emphasis in text). Regarding the use of *hypotases*, the editor comments, "This had been a complicated semantic problem in earlier Christian generations, especially the third century, when the words *ousia* and *hypostasis* had been used by some writers as synonyms for essence (both having the sense of *ousia*). By the time Basil is writing, in the late fourth century, the distinction between the words is more generally observed: that *ousia*/essence/being should be the generic notion and *hypostasis*/person/subsistent should mean the particular "existent." This was the semantic foundation on which the Cappadocian fathers were able to lay out the explanation of orthodox trinitarian doctrine: three distinct and inseparably united persons (distinctly subsistent *hypostases*), all of whom shared the selfsame divine nature or essence (the one divine *ousia* of the Father). [10] Here Basil uses the word *prosopa* another synonym for *hypostasis*. The variety of different Greek christological and trinitarian terms that were being used in the fourth century but had not been standardized in their usage, as yet, caused much confusion in that period. [11] Some theologians, not least Latin-speaking ones, thought that if one confessed three *hypostases* in the Godhead, it was tantamount to admitting three divine essences and thus to confessing three gods. Basil is at pains to point out that their mistake is one of language, since three hypostases who share the selfsame essence means there can only one God." Basil of Caesarea, The Son Is of God's Own Nature, *Letter 236.6, Ancient Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 2, "We Believe in One Lord Jesus Christ," ed. John Anthony McGuckin and gen. ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 25. (Emphasis in text).

⁷¹ See the words of Aquinas in the text above, at f.n. 10, and accompanying discussion in the text. Origen apparently speaks similarly, though not as clearly, when he says, "Now there are many who are sincerely concerned about religion, and who fall here into great perplexity. They are afraid that they may be proclaiming two Gods, and their fear drives them into doctrines which are false and wicked. Either they deny that the Son has a distinct nature of His own besides that of the Father, and make Him whom they call the Son to be God all but the name, or they deny the divinity of the Son, giving Him a separate existence of His own, and making His sphere of essence fall outside that of the Father, so that they are separable from each other. To such persons we have to say that God on the one hand is Very God (Autotheos, God of Himself) . . . But the archetypal image, again, of all these images is the Word of God, who was in the beginning, and who by being with God is at all times God, not possessing that of Himself, but by His being with the Father, and not continuing to be God, if we should think of this, except by remaining always in uninterrupted contemplation of the depths of the Father." Origen, *Commentary on Gospel of John (Comm. Jo.)* Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. X: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, ECF 1.10.4.2.2.1 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

considered the many quotes of a large number of Church fathers who clearly recognize an ordering within the Trinity that implies subordinationism in regards to personal relationship (which will be provided in section V below). The persons of the Trinity are not interchangeable, merely some form of eternal genetic triplets. They each have an eternal distinguishable person with peculiar attributes in relation to the other two,⁷² even as they equally share the same divine essence. The Father can never be other than the Father, nor the Son be other than the Son, nor the Spirit be other than the Spirit. This is inherent in their persons.⁷³ Gregory of Nazianzus recognized the need for the distinction of the Trinitarian persons to be more than just a distinction in their appellations, so that their relationship defines their name:

“[Macedonius asks] What then is lacking to the Spirit to be the Son, for if nothing was lacking to him, he would be the Son? We say [Gregory answers] that nothing is lacking to him, for nothing is lacking to God; but it is the difference in manifestation, if I may say so, or in the relationship between them (*tes pros allela scheseos diaphoron*) which makes also the difference in what they are called” (*Discourse 31, 9, Sources chretiennes* No. 250, pp. 290-292).⁷⁴

This eternal order of the persons of the Godhead is seen in the creedal statements that the Father is begetter of the Son, and the Son the eternally begotten Son, and the Holy Spirit as proceeding from and (or through) the Son.⁷⁵ This eternal order of persons, it would seem to me, gives evidence of subordination (ordering) of persons of those who share the eternal nature of God.

B. Is the Subordination of Roles Within the Trinity Condemned at Nicaea?

The debate at Nicaea was not about role relationship between the Father and the Son but whether the Son was subordinate in His divine essence, a lesser divine being to that of the Father. There is consistency in the pre-Nicene church regarding this truth, even though the use of language by some fathers of the church sometimes obscured this reality.⁷⁶ For example, Origen⁷⁷ has been viewed as believing that the Son was a created

⁷² Gregory Nazianzus says, “Father is not a name either of an essence or of an action. . . . But it is the name of the relation in which the Father stands to the Son, and the Son to the Father. For as with us these names make known a genuine and intimate relation, so, in the case before us too, they denote an identity of nature between Him That is begotten and Him That begets.” Gregory Nazianzus, *Orations*, No 29, quoted in John R. Willis, ed., *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966), 191.

⁷³ St Hilary says, “When it [the apostolic faith] believes in the Son it has also believed in the Father, because the name of the Father likewise contains the name of the Son in itself. There is no father except through a son; the designation of a son reveals the father to us because there is no son except from the Father.” St. Hilary, *On the Trinity*, Bk 7, Chap 11, quoted in John R. Willis, ed., *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966), p. 190.

⁷⁴ The Father as the Source of the Whole Trinity - Greek and Latin Traditions About the Filioque, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-religion/1822648/posts>

⁷⁵ It is not my purpose in this chapter to enter into the *filioque* debate.

⁷⁶ David Bercot says, “When the student of the Nicene Creed comes to the phrase ‘Begotten, not made,’ it often appears that here there is a divergence between the Creed and the pre-Nicene church. There is, however, actually no difference in phraseology. The Nicene Creed affirms that the Son of God was begotten; he was not made or created out of nothing. The pre-Nicene church firmly believed this.” David W. Bercot, ed. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MASS: Hendrickson, 1998), 109. Origen says as much, “Let every one, then, who cares for truth, be little concerned about words and language, seeing that in every nation there prevails a different usage of speech; but let him rather direct his attention to the meaning conveyed by the words, than to the nature of the words that convey the meaning, especially in matters of such importance and difficulty. . . .” Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. IV: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325, 376 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

being or second god since he unfortunately spoke of the Son as “secondary God,”⁷⁸ a designation that did not rise to the crisp language of the Nicene Creed (“God of very God, begotten, not created”), since he appears to use the term “created” (κτίζω or γενητός), at times, to refer to “beget,” (γεννητός)⁷⁹ in an eternal sense.⁸⁰ Nonetheless, his identification of the Son as “God after the Father of all,”⁸¹ does not relegate the Son as less than the nature of the Father.⁸² Consequently, the Father, Son and Spirit are not inferior divine beings, but are one essence distinguishable in modes of existence from each other. The Father begets the Son as a person distinct from Himself, but sharing eternally the same essence. He, thus, does not beget an inferior person qualitatively, but does beget a Son who relates to Him as Father, and who, by personal subsistence (ὑποστασία) in which they are different, and not divine essence (οὐσία) in which they are the same, submits to the Father’s will.

If the Father, however, is responsible for the eternal begetting of the Son, and the Son is in eternal submission to the Father, an aspect of His eternal person, is not the Son inferior to the Father? Those who reject relational subordination are convinced this is so. This is because any subordination (other than economic or incarnational by the voluntary will of the Son) requires an inferiority of the divine nature of the Son, in their view. Due to this insistence, those who hold to eternal relational subordination are hesitant to use a word like “inferior” for fear of implying that the Son’s personal subsistence also implies essential inferiority as deity, even though such is impossible since essence is one reality and subsistence is another.

Giles considers that persons would be inferior in a personal sense to other persons only “if they could never hold the superior position whatever their gifts, training, or experience might be.” He then gives examples of an officer in the military who is

⁷⁷ For a careful examination of the life and theology of Origen, see Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), and particularly of his understanding of the Trinity and Incarnation, see 181-204.

⁷⁸ “And although we may call Him a “second” God, let men know that by the term “second God” we mean nothing else than a virtue capable of including all other virtues, and a reason capable of containing all reason whatsoever which exists in all things, which have arisen naturally, directly, and for the general advantage, and which “reason,” we say, dwelt in the soul of Jesus, and was united to Him in a degree far above all other souls, seeing He alone was enabled completely to receive the highest share in the absolute reason, and the absolute wisdom, and the absolute righteousness.” Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 5.39. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 561 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁷⁹ Lampe’s lexicon comments that the terms γεννητός and γενητός are often confused in the MSS so that it is difficult to know which one is meant. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 310, 312.

⁸⁰ Origen says, “On this topic some are wont to inquire whether, as the Father generates an uncreated Son, and brings forth a Holy Spirit, not as if He had no previous existence, but because the Father is the origin and source of the Son or Holy Spirit, and no anteriority or posteriority can be understood as existing in them.” Origen, *Treaty on First Principles (De Principiis 2.2.1.)*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. IV: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, 270 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁸¹ Origen, *Commentary on Gospel of John (Comm. Jo.)* Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. X: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ECF 1.10.4.2.1.11 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁸² “This, it has been maintained, furnishes a proof that the Son is not in substance different from the Father.” Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. X: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ECF 1.10.4.2.2.17 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

superior to a private, his inferior. This usage is okay, he indicates, because the officer can be demoted and the private promoted, thus not a permanent situation.⁸³ Applied to the divine Son of God, he continues:

[I]n case of . . . the divine Son in evangelical theological texts supporting the permanent . . . eternal subordination of the Son, the subordinate status is irrevocable and intrinsic: it can never change. It defines the person. If . . . the Son is *eternally* subordinated to the Father, [he is] in some way less than the one who is always over [him]. To emphatically deny that teaching the *eternal* subordination of the Son in function and authority and in some cases being as well does not indicate the Son is ‘inferior’ to the Father is an assertion without substance. The Son is either superior to the Father (and both sides reject this suggestion), or equal with the Father (as I would argue), or inferior to the Father. There are no other options. If the Son is eternally set under the Father in function and authority, he is less in some way than the Father. In plain English, he is inferior to the Father. In this usage the words *subordinate* and *inferior* are synonyms.⁸⁴

What he is seeking to demonstrate is that if the Son is always subordinate to the Father and the Father is never subordinate to the Son, and this relationship of authority can never change, then the Son is inferior to the person of the Father, and the Father is superior to the person of the Son. Consequently, because the Father and Son are greater and lesser in authority, the Father is greater than the Son as God (essence) and the Son is lesser than the Father as God (essence). Is Giles’ logic accurate? Must a person be a superior being, if he has authority over another person? Moreover, does this analogy hold when speaking of one indivisible God in three persons?

Let us examine Dr. Giles’ analogy given above in reference to a person who is an officer and a person who is a private. He argues that if the person who is a private cannot be promoted (given gifts, hard work, etc) to an officer also, then this person is inferior to the officer. Likewise, if a person who is an officer cannot be demoted (presumably due to lack of gifts or bad work, etc) to a lesser rank, then this person is superior to the person who is a private. Giles has committed the the genetic fallacy (an issue of comparing apples and oranges). One’s rank and one’s nature are simply not the same thing.

Let us readjust the analogy more in keeping with the issue of the Father and the Son. The fact that I could never become my own father and my father could never become me in no way indicates that I am a lesser human being than my father or my father a superior human being than me. A human father and son equally share a human nature (albeit divisible), and of necessity, but that I, as a human, am a different rank or status than my father does not imply inferiority of nature. It does, however, indicate that I have a different relationship to my father and he to me. Within the eternal realm a similar relationship may be found. The Father eternally begets the Son and the Son is eternally begotten. It is never the other way and cannot be. How they relate as Father and Son says nothing regarding an inequality of their one divine nature. The word “inferior” is from the Latin *inferus*, meaning “low” and speaks, among other things, of a person being lower in rank or status so that the word “inferior” is inappropriate when speaking of the equal and same attributes of the Trinitarian persons because they are the same, indivisible

⁸⁴ Giles has interweaved the question of male and female roles into his arguments, which I have excised in the main body since this is not the point of the analysis I desire to make. On the other hand, it does appear that this social issue is a driving force for Dr. Giles in his book and may color his understanding of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.

essence, unlike Giles' analogy. As Hodge says,

The principle of the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. But this subordination does not imply inferiority. For as the same divine essence with all its infinite perfections is common to the Father, Son, and Spirit, there can be no inferiority of one person to the other in the Trinity. Neither does it imply posteriority; for the divine essence common to the several persons is self-existent and eternal. The subordination intended is only that which concerns the mode of subsistence and operation, implied in the Scriptural facts that the Son is of the Father, and the Spirit is of the Father and the Son, and that, the Father operates through the Son, and the Father and the Son through the Spirit.⁸⁵

In regards to their divine qualities, the three persons are not greater or lesser, different or inferior. Their status may be different as persons but not their common nature. Conversely, though they share the same divine nature, the manner in which they express their distinct personhood is different. For example, even though the Father, Son and Spirit share the same will of the divine being, the way in which they express that will cannot be identical in expression. Otherwise, how can the Father truly love the Son and the Son love the Father, or the Father send and the Son be sent, or the Father give to the Son the right to have life in Himself? They share the same power but the Father and Son relate to the use of that power differently. For example the Father, Son and Spirit are the divine creator, but this creation occurs by Father through the Son, and not the Son through the Father. Apparently the will of the one οὐσία may be accessed in a different manner and for different purposes by each ὑποστάσις, so that the Father wills to love the Son, to give the Son, to send the Son, to create through the Son, whereas the Son wills to love the Father, to be given by the Father, to be sent by the Father, and to have the Father create through Him. Thus the nature of the persons is the same but the functions and relations of the persons are distinct and different, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*, both the immanent Trinity and the economic one. Thus, power is an attribute of the one nature shared equally by the three distinct persons but authority is a relation between the persons based on the order of the personal "beings" rather than the commonality of the one, undivided being of divinity.

C. Subordinate in Relationship to the Father, but not Subordinate in Nature to the Father

1. Conflation of Meaning in Definition of Subordinationism

One of the reasons for confusion in the discussion of subordination of the Son in the history of the Church relates to how the term "subordination" is defined. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* adds to that obfuscation, when it says, defining subordinationism, "A doctrine that assigns an inferiority of being, status, or role to the Son or Holy Spirit within the Trinity. Condemned by numerous church councils, this doctrine has continued in one form or another throughout the history of the church. In the early centuries, the struggle to understand the human and divine natures of Christ often led to placing the Son in a secondary position to the Father."⁸⁶ The Kroegers then blame the later heresies of Arianism, Modalism, Monarchianism, and Macedonianism on an "incipient

⁸⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:460.

⁸⁶ R. C. Kroeger and C. C. Kroeger, "Subordinationism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1058.

subordinationism” found in fathers such as Justin Martyr, Origen, and Tertullian.⁸⁷ We have already seen earlier that this perceived error in the early fathers is a result of incomplete and developmental terminology that is later refined, but not contradicted in the Nicene fathers. One cannot harshly judge the second century apologists and theologians who had not acquired terminology and clarified ideas forged in the midst of theological battles. As Peter Holmes rightly says, “After Arius, the language of theology received greater precision; but as it is, there is no doubt of the orthodoxy of Tertullian’s doctrine, since he is so firmly and ably teaches the Son’s *consubstantiality* with the Father—equal to Him and inseparable from him. [In other words, Tertullian could not employ a technical phraseology afterwards adopted to give precision to the same orthodox ideas.”⁸⁸

The Kroegers recognize that “the Nicene fathers ascribed to the Son and Spirit an equality of being or essence, but a subordination of order, with both deriving their existence from the Father as primal source.”⁸⁹ This being the case belies any claim that they might make that the councils condemn what in fact the fathers of these councils affirm. The Kroegers seek to argue for the equality of the persons of the Trinity in essence but deny to the persons the peculiar distinctions that make them Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, namely the order and role that they have within the Trinity. The Son and Spirit are different in rank, not nature, and different in role as the one who is generated rather than the Father who generates, and the one who proceeds rather than is begotten.

The Kroegers continue by referring to Athanasius as saying that in the Trinity none is before or after the other, and yet we know that this great Nicene theologian believed that the Son was begotten eternally from the Father the unbegotten one, an eternal order of person, one before the other. Athanasius, instead, was speaking of creation and nature, not the eternal relationship of the Trinitarian members.

Last of all, they mention the Second Helvetic Confession as condemning as heretics those who teach subordination of the Son or Spirit, and in this confession is clearly speaking of the heretical subordinations espoused by such groups and persons as the Monarchians, Novatians, Praxeas, Patripassians, Sabellius, Paul of Samosata, Aetius, Macedonius, Anthropomorphites, Arius, and not the orthodox subordination upheld by the Nicene Fathers.

2. *The Different Types of Subordination*

Little debate can be raised that the New Testament and the teachings of the Fathers recognized that the Son was in submission to the Father. There is abundant evidence of this submission in the writings of the New Testament and the patristic writings. What is really open for debate is whether all of the texts of the New Testament only speak of the incarnated Logos when referring to His subordination, or whether instead some may also

⁸⁷ R. C. Kroeger and C. C. Kroeger, “Subordinatioinism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1058.

⁸⁸ Peter Holmes, *Against Praxeas*, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. III: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ECF 1.3.1.17.0.9 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁸⁹ R. C. Kroeger and C. C. Kroeger, “Subordinatioinism,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Walter A. Elwell, ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1058.

refer to His eternal relationship with the Father. There is additionally no doubt that the Fathers of the Church Catholic, particularly in the fourth and fifth centuries, spoke of subordination of the Son to the Father, but they did so in three different ways. First, the Arians argued for the subordination of the Son to the Father in regards to the divine nature. The ante-Nicene, Nicene, and post-Nicene fathers rejected this perspective. This type of subordination was heresy, condemned at Nicaea I and other councils of the Church. However, a second use of subordination avers that the Logos in taking upon Himself humanity was willingly, and not necessarily, subordinate to the Father, as man to God. Last of all, and the main point of this paper, is that the eternal Logos, who was ὁμοούσια (*homoousia*) with the Father (sharing the same divine nature) and equal in every divine attribute to the Father, was nonetheless subordinate to Him in regards to authority and order within the Trinity. Attendant with this view is the necessary condition that the relationship that the Logos had with the Father, and the order established through His eternal generation from the Father, attaches only to the ὑποστάσις (*hypostasis*) of the Father and of the Son, and not to the essence that they equally share.⁹⁰ In his introductory essay on the Trinity, Shedd sets forth these distinctions:

There are three kinds of subordination: the filial or trinitarian; the theanthropic; and the Arian. The first is taught, and the second implied, in the Nicene creed. The last is denied and excluded. Accordingly, dogmatic historians like Petavius, Bull, Waterland, and Pearson, contend that the Nicene creed, in affirming the filial, but denying the Arian subordination; in teaching subordination as to person and relationship, but denying it as to essence; enunciates a revealed truth, and that this is endorsed by all the Trinitarian fathers, Eastern and Western. And there certainly can be no doubt that Augustin held this view. He maintains, over and over again, that Sonship as a relationship is second and subordinate to Fatherhood; that while a Divine Father and a Divine Son must necessarily be of the very same nature and grade of being, like a human father and a human son, yet the latter issues from the former, not the former from the latter.⁹¹

This latter form of subordination is not restricted to the entirety of the eastern church but is found in Tertullian, and later even Augustine, as Shedd indicates. In reality, though Augustine emphasizes the unity of the Godhead, he is in agreement with the eastern church in its belief on the divine persons as reflected in the Nicene creed and the writings of the eastern fathers. Additionally, he did not differ regarding the matter of

⁹⁰ See for example, the statement of Basil, "Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give a variant definition of existence but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception of Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear. If we have no distinct perception of the separate characteristics, namely, fatherhood, sonship, and sanctification, but form our conception of God from the general idea of existence, we cannot possibly give a sound account of our faith." (Letter 236.6, *NPNF* 2.8.278) (Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series Vol. VIII (Basil: Letters and Select Works.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 278.

⁹¹ William G. T. Shedd, "Introductory Essay," Philip. Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. III, ECF 2.3.0.0.2.0 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

intratrinitarian subordination of the person of the Son to the Father.⁹² Shedd elucidates his contention regarding Augustine:

Augustin's phraseology on this point is as positive as that of Athanasius, and in some respects even more bold and capable of misinterpretation. He denominates the Father the "beginning" (*principium*) of the Son, and the Father and Son the "beginning" (*principium*) of the Holy Spirit. "The Father is the beginning of the whole divinity, or if it is better so expressed, deity." IV. xx. 29. "In their mutual relation to one another in the Trinity itself, if the begetter is a beginning (*principium*) in relation to that which he begets, the Father is a beginning in relation to the Son, because he begets Him." V. xiv. 15. Since the Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son, "the Father and Son are a beginning (*principium*) of the Holy Spirit, not two beginnings." V. xiv. 15. Compare also V xiii.; X. iv.; and annotations pp. Augustin employs this term "beginning" only in relation to the person, not to the essence. There is no "beginning," or source, when the essence itself is spoken of. Consequently, the "subordination" (implied in a "beginning" by generation and spiration) is not the Arian subordination, as to essence, but the trinitarian subordination, as to person and relation.⁹³

V. EARLY PATRISTIC EXEGESIS REGARDING THE SUBORDINATION OF THE FATHER TO THE SON

It is my contention that the fathers of the patristic era (2-8th century A.D.), essentially espouse the same perspective as I have given in the preceding paragraph. They believed in the eternal Sonship that flows from the Father, begotten from unbegotten, and in the subordination of the Son to the Father within the divine Trinity. Building on the earliest teaching of apologists and theologians such as Justin, Origen, and Irenaeus, though taking advantage of the theological development of the third and fourth centuries, with their more precise terminology, they believed that the person of the Son came eternally from God the Father, sharing equally with Him the entirety of the divine nature indivisibly from all eternity, yet that He was distinguished in the manner in which He related to the Spirit and the Father. Though He shares the common Godhead of attributes, in His personal relationship with the Father He is second in order and under the Father, a property unique to Him.⁹⁴ Hodge clarifies how the property of each trinal person is distinguished from the common essence:

The several persons of the Trinity are distinguished by a certain "property," as it is called, or characteristic. That characteristic is expressed by their distinctive appellations. The first person is

⁹² "In his general position, Augustin agrees with the Nicene creed; but laying more emphasis upon the consubstantiality of the persons, and definitely asserting the procession of the Spirit from the Father and Son. Some dogmatic historians seem to imply that he differed materially from the Nicene doctrine on the point of *subordination*. Hagenbach . . . asserts that 'Augustin completely purified the dogma of the Trinity from the older vestiges of subordination,' and adds that 'such vestiges are unquestionably to be found in the most orthodox Fathers, not only in the East but also in the West.' He cites Hilary and Athanasius as examples, and quotes the remark of Gieseler, that 'the idea of a subordination lies at the basis of such declarations.' Neander . . . says that Augustin 'kept at a distance everything that bordered on subordinationism.' These statements are certainly too sweeping and unqualified." William G. T. Shedd, "Introductory Essay," Philip. Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. III, ECF 2.3.0.0.2.0 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁹³ William G. T. Shedd, "Introductory Essay," Philip. Schaff, ed. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* Vol. III, ECF 2.3.0.0.2.0 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

⁹⁴ "If each of the Persons of the Trinity is God, then each necessarily possesses the attributes of deity, such as eternity, immutability, and infinity. In what sense, then, can the Persons be said to be distinct from one another, if the attributes they possess are identical? To explain this, theologians coined the term 'property,' derived from the Latin *proprius* ('proper,' i.e. 'pertaining to the person or individual'). In theology, a property pertains to one Person alone. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1984), 131.

characterized as Father, in his relation to the second person; the second is characterized as Son, in relation to the first person; and the third as Spirit, in relation to the first and second persons. Paternity, therefore, is the distinguishing property of the Father; filiation of the Son; and procession of the Spirit. It will be observed that no attempt at explanation of these relations is given in these ecumenical creeds, namely, the Nicene, that of Constantinople, and the Athanasian. The mere facts as revealed in Scripture are affirmed.⁹⁵

When speaking of the triune God, language is inadequate to the task, but the fathers and creeds did the best they could in maintaining a distinction of three persons who are not each other and yet are one indivisible essence. They are the same deity but they each have a uniqueness (properties) that make them not the others. In reference to the Son, the fathers considered Him the same God as the Father, but related to the Father as true Son.

Several passages were adduced by the Fathers for this conclusion, the most prominent being John 14:28, John 5:26, 1 Corinthians 8:6, and 1 Corinthians 15:58. We will focus our attention on John 14:28, with just a brief sampling on 1 Corinthians 15:58.

A. *John 14:28 (My Father is greater than I)*

You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I.

Does John 14:28 teach that the Father was greater than in the Son in the Son’s incarnation and humiliation, or does it instead speak of the immanent, eternal Trinity, based on the eternal priority of the Father over the Son, begotten from unbegotten? This particular text received considerable attention from the fathers. The consensus of the church fathers appears to be that if the subordination spoken of in John 14:28 is only of the Incarnated Logos, the statement is meaningless, since the acknowledgement would be true of every human being.⁹⁶ Moreover, the statement is not saying that the Father is *better* (κρείσσων)⁹⁷ than the Son, emphasizing quality of being, since this too is true of any human and not only the Incarnated Logos, a point recognized by Athanasius.⁹⁸ Rather the Father is “greater” (μείζων), speaking of *position* and of that position as the Logos of God. Mark Bird explains the problems inherent in taking the passage as referring only to the incarnation, a trap that most of the fathers avoided:

How is the Father greater than the Son? Not in essence, for the Son is both God and man. The Father is greater in the sense that He has authority over the Son. This does not make the Son inferior to the Father, any more than my administrative assistant is inferior to me simply because she is under my authority.

Some will apply the statement “My Father is greater than I” to the incarnation itself. With this

⁹⁵ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:460.

⁹⁶ “Likewise most church fathers saw a difference between two Persons of the immanent Trinity in the saying, ‘The Father is greater than I’ (John 14:28). Their Arian opponents had used the verse to prove the Son’s essential subordination to God. Against this faulty exegesis a few (Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Ambrose) insisted that the Son was speaking of his manhood; but the Greek Nicenes, almost to a man, drew out of the verse the generation of the Son in eternity past.” Paul Rainbow, 5

⁹⁷ Κρείττον is an alternative spelling, with ττ and σσ being used in the manuscripts.

⁹⁸ See Athanasius' *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 1.13.58 (NPNF 2.4.340): “And hence it is that the Son too says not, ‘My Father is better than I,’ lest we should conceive Him to be foreign to His Nature, but ‘greater,’ not indeed in greatness, nor in time, but because of His generation from the Father Himself, nay, in saying ‘greater’ He again shows that He is proper to His essence.”

interpretation, one is saying that because Jesus is human and humanity is less than deity, then in that sense the Father is greater than Jesus. I think this is a dangerous interpretation, because accordingly, you must look at Jesus as a lesser being than the Father—as a personal pronoun, “I” refers to Jesus the person, not simply to his humanity.⁹⁹

Let us briefly examine the words of a few of the fathers on their understanding of the statement by Jesus, “My father is greater than I,” with most references to those from the time of the Nicean council and afterwards.¹⁰⁰

1. Alexander of Alexandria (late second century)

We must guard for the Unbegotten Father His proper dignity (οἰκεῖον ἀξίωμα), affirming that He has no author of His Being; and we must assign the fitting honor to the Son, according to him *the generation from the Father without beginning* (τὴν ἀναρχον παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς γέννησιν) . . . Holding that the being unbegotten is the sole property (ιδίωμα) of the Father, seeing that the Saviour Himself said, ‘My Father is greater than I’ (emphasis mine)¹⁰¹

2. Tertullian (early third century)

For the Father is the whole substance (*tota substantia*), while the Son is an outflow and assignment of the whole (*derivatio totius et portio*), as he himself professes, *Because my Father is greater than I . . .* So also the Father is other than the Son as being greater than the Son, as he who begets is other than he who is begotten (*dum alias qui generat alius qui generator*), as he who sends is other than he who is sent, as he who makes is other than he through whom a thing is made. It suits my case also that when our Lord used this word regarding the person of the Paraclete, he signified not division but ordinance (*non divisionem significavit sed dispositionem*): for he says, *I will pray the Father and he will send you another advocate, the Spirit of truth*. Thus he calls the Paraclete other than himself, as we say . . . the Son is other than the Father, so as to display the third sequence in the Paraclete as we the second in the Son, and so to preserve the economy (*propter oeconomiae observationem*). Is not the very fact that they are spoken of as Father and Son <a statement that they are> one thing beside another? Surely all facts will correspond with their designations, and diversity of designation can by no means be confused, since neither can <the diversity> of the things of which they are the designations.¹⁰²

3. Athanasius (early fourth century)

⁹⁹ Mark Bird, Is “Only-Begottenness” the Proper Basis for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father?, (unpublished paper), 11.

¹⁰⁰ For discussion of these passages and the matter of subordination see, B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 211-216.

¹⁰¹ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 213. Therefore to the unbegotten Father, indeed, we ought to preserve His proper dignity, in confessing that no one is the cause of His being; but to the Son must be allotted His fitting honour, in assigning to Him, as we have said, a generation from the Father without beginning, and allotting adoration to Him, so as only piously and properly to use the words, “He was,” and “always,” and “before all worlds,” with respect to Him; by no means rejecting His Godhead, but ascribing to Him a similitude which exactly answers in every respect to the Image and Exemplar of the Father. But we must say that to the Father alone belongs the property of being unbegotten, for the Saviour Himself said, My Father is greater than I.” Alexander of Alexandria, *Epistles on the Arian Heresy* 1.12 (Alexander Roberts et al., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. VI: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325* (Fathers of the Third Century: Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius The Great, Julius Africanus, Anatolius and Minor Writers, Methodius, Arnobius; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 295-296.

¹⁰² Tertullian, *Adversus Praxean Liber*, 9.2-3 (E. Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise Against Praxeas*, 9, 140-141, http://www.ter tullian.org/articles/evans_praxeas_eng.htm (last visited July 15, 2011); Latin in parenthesis is mine). TERTULLIANI ADVERSUS PRAXEAN LIBER, http://www.ter tullian.org/latin/adversus_praxeian.htm (last visited July 15, 2011), 97-98. See also ANF 3.603 (Against Praxeas 9), Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. III: *Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ECF 1.3.1.17.0.9 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

Therefore the Son is also of another kind (ἑτερογενής) and another essence (ἑτερούσιός) from those things created, and very much is in possession of the essence (οὐσίας) and same nature (ὁμοφυής) of the Father. Because of this He himself has not said, ‘My Father is better (κρείττων) than I,’ so that anyone should understand Him to be foreign to that nature but He said “greater” (μείζων),’ not indeed in greatness (μεγέθει), nor in time, but because of His generation (τὴν . . . γέννησιν) from the Father Himself, except that also when He says “He is greater,” He manifests again He is proper to His essence (τὴν τῆς οὐσίας ιδιότητα).¹⁰³

4. Council of Sardica (A.D. 344)

We confess that God is; we confess the divinity of the Father and of the Son to be one. No one denies that the Father is greater than the Son: not on account of another essence (οὐ δι’ ἄλλην ὑπόστασιν), nor yet on account of their difference, but simply from the very name of the Father being greater than that of the Son.¹⁰⁴

5. Basil (late fourth century)

Since the Son’s origin (ἀρχή) is from (ἀπό) the Father, in this respect the Father is greater, as cause and origin (ὡς αἴτιος καὶ ἀρχή). Wherefore also the Lord said thus, My Father is greater than I, clearly inasmuch as He is Father (καθὸ πατήρ). And what other does “Father” signify except He is the cause and origin (τὸ αἰτία εἶναι καὶ ἀρχή) of the one who was begotten out of Him (τοῦ ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεννηθέντος)? Speaking generally, a substance is not said to be greater or lesser than a substance, even according to your wisdom. So that also according to these people, and according to truth itself, the word set forth would not be in a manner that would be preeminent according to substance.¹⁰⁵

The Son is second to the Father in rank (τάξει) because He is from (ἀπό) him. He is second to the Father in dignity (ἀξιωματι) because the Father is the principle and cause (ἀρχή καὶ αἰτία) by virtue of which he is the son’s Father (τῷ εἶναι αὐτοῦ πατέρα) and because we approach and access the God and Father through the Son (δι’ αὐτοῦ ἢ πρόσσδος καὶ προσαγωγή πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν καὶ Πατέρα). Even so, the Son is not second in nature, since there is one divinity in both of them (ἡ θεότης ἐν ἑκατέρω μία).¹⁰⁶

6. Gregory of Nazianzus (late fourth century)¹⁰⁷

As your third point you count the Word Greater (τό· μείζων); and as your fourth, To My God and your God. And indeed, if He had been called greater (μείζων μὲν ἐλέγετο), and the word equal had not occurred (μὴ ἴσος δέ), this might perhaps have been a point in their favour. But if we find both words clearly used what will these gentlemen have to say? How will it strengthen their argument? How will they reconcile the irreconcilable? For that the same thing should be at once

¹⁰³ *Orat. c. Ar.* 1:58; NPNF 2.4.340 Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians* 1.58 (emphasis mine): NPNF 2.4.340. Greek and brackets added by me. “ἑτερογενής ἄρα καὶ ἑτερούσιός ἐστιν ὁ Υἱὸς τῶν γεννητῶν, καὶ μᾶλλον τῆς τοῦ Πατρὸς οὐσίας ἴδιος καὶ ὁμοφυῆς τυγχάνει. Διὰ τοῦτο γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Υἱὸς οὐκ εἶρηκεν, Ὁ Πατήρ μου κρείττων μου ἐστίν, ἵνα μὴ ξένον τις τῆς ἐκείνου φύσεως αὐτὸν ὑπολάβοι: (30) ἀλλὰ μείζων εἶπεν, οὐ μεγέθει τινὶ, οὐδὲ χρόνῳ, ἀλλὰ διὰ τὴν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ Πατρὸς γέννησιν· πλὴν ὅτι καὶ ἐν τῷ εἰπεῖν, μείζων ἐστίν, ἔδειξε πάλιν τὴν τῆς οὐσίας ιδιότητα.” Athanasius, *Orationes tres contra Arianos*. {TLG 2035.042}

¹⁰⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. III* (Theodoret, Jerome, Gennadius, Rufinus: Historical Writings, etc.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 71.

¹⁰⁵ Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* 1.25 (TLG (libri 5). {2040.019}): “Ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἀπὸ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἢ ἀρχῇ τῷ Υἱῷ, κατὰ τοῦτο μείζων ὁ Πατήρ, ὡς αἴτιος καὶ ἀρχή. Διὸ καὶ ὁ Κύριος οὕτως εἶπεν· Ὁ Πατήρ μου μείζων μου ἐστίν, καθὸ Πατὴρ δηλονότι. Τὸ δὲ, Πατήρ, τί ἄλλο σημαίνει ἢ οὐχὶ τὸ αἰτία εἶναι καὶ ἀρχή τοῦ ἐξ αὐτοῦ γεννηθέντος; Ὅλων δὲ οὐσία οὐσίας, καὶ κατὰ τὴν ὑμετέραν σοφίαν, μείζων καὶ ἐλάττων οὐ λέγεται. Ὡστε καὶ κατὰ τούτους, καὶ κατ’ αὐτὴν τὴν ἀλήθειαν, οὐδενὶ ἂν τρόπῳ τὴν κατ’ οὐσίαν ὑπεροχὴν ὁ προκείμενος λόγος τοῦ μείζονος ἐμφαίνῃ.”

¹⁰⁶ Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* 3.1 (TLG Ὁς γὰρ ὁ Υἱὸς τάξει μὲν, δεύτερος τοῦ Πατρὸς, ὅτι ἀπ’ ἐκείνου· καὶ ἀξιωματι, ὅτι ἀρχή καὶ αἰτία, τῷ εἶναι αὐτοῦ πατέρα, καὶ ὅτι δι’ αὐτοῦ ἢ πρόσσδος καὶ προσαγωγή πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν καὶ Πατέρα· φύσει δὲ οὐκέτι (10) δεύτερος, διότι ἡ θεότης ἐν ἑκατέρω μία·

¹⁰⁷ I include material from Gregory that are not direct references to John 14:28 but discuss the same question.

greater than and equal to the same thing is an impossibility; and the evident solution is that the Greater refers to origination (τὸ μείζον μὲν ἐστὶ τῆς αἰτίας), while the Equal belongs to the Nature (τὸ δὲ ἴσον τῆς φύσεως); and this we acknowledge with much good will. But perhaps some one else will back up our attack on your argument, and assert, that That which is from such a Cause is not inferior to that which has no Cause (μὴ ἔλαττον εἶναι τὸ ἐκ τοιαύτης αἰτίας εἶναι τοῦ ἀναίτιου); for it would share the glory of the Unoriginate (τοῦ ἀνάρχου δόξης μετέχει ἄν), because it is from the Unoriginate (ἐκ τοῦ ἀνάρχου). And there is, besides, the Generation (πρόσεστιν ἢ γέννησις), which is to all men a matter so marvellous and of such Majesty. For to say that he is greater than the Son considered as man (τοῦ κατὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον νοουμένου μείζων), is true indeed, but is no great thing (ἀληθὲς μὲν, οὐ μέγα δέ). For what marvel is it if God is greater than man (εἰ μείζων ἀνθρώπου θεός)?¹⁰⁸ NPNF 2.7.312 (*De filio*)

XLIII. I should like to call the Father the greater, because from him flows both the Equality and the Being of the Equals (ἐξ οὗ καὶ τὸ ἴσοις εἶναι, τοῖς ἴσοις ἐστὶ, καὶ τὸ εἶναι) (this will be granted on all hands), but I am afraid to use the word Origin (δέδοικα τὴν ἀρχὴν), lest I should make Him the Origin of Inferiors (μὴ ἐλαττόνων ἀρχὴν ποιήσω), and thus insult Him by precedencies of honour. For the lowering of those Who are from Him is no glory to the Source. Moreover, I look with suspicion at your insatiate desire, for fear you should take hold of this word Greater, and divide the Nature (μὴ τὸ μείζον λαβὼν διχοτομήσης τὴν φύσιν), using the word Greater in *all* senses, whereas it does not apply to the Nature (Οὐ γὰρ κατὰ τὴν φύσιν τὸ μείζον), but only to Origination (τὴν αἰτίαν δέ). For in the Consubstantial Persons (Οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν ὁμοουσίων τῆ οὐσίᾳ) there is nothing greater or less in point of Substance (τῆ οὐσίᾳ μείζον ἢ ἔλαττον).¹⁰⁹

7. Hilary (middle of fourth century)

Accordingly, the Father is greater than the Son (*Major itaque Pater Filio est*): and clearly greater (*et plane major*), to whom He gives so much He is Himself (*quantus ipse est*); to whom He imparts by the mystery of birth His image that cannot be born (*cui innascibilitatis esse imaginem sacramento nativitatis impertit*), whom he begets of His own form out of Himself (*quem ex se in formam suam generat*), of whom He renews Him again from the form of a servant to the form of God (*forma servi in formam Dei renovat*), of whom Christ is born God according to the Spirit in His glory (*Christum Deum natum*), He gives Jesus Christ dead in the flesh to again be God in His glory. He shows the reason why you should rejoice, if you should love Him because He goes to the Father,

¹⁰⁸Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. VII* (Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 312. Τρίτον ἀριθμῆι τὸ μείζον· τέταρτον τὸ θεὸν μου καὶ θεὸν ὑμῶν. εἰ μὲν οὖν μείζων μὲν ἐλέγετο, μὴ ἴσος δέ, τάχα ἂν ἦν τι τοῦτο αὐτοῖς· εἰ δὲ ἀμφοτέρω σαφῶς εὐρίσκομεν, τί φήσουσιν οἱ γεννάδαι; τί τὸ ἰσχυρὸν αὐτοῖς; πῶς συμβήσεται τὰ ἀσύμβατα; τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ὁμοίως μείζων καὶ ἴσον εἶναι τῶν ἀδυνάτων· ἢ δῆλον ὅτι τὸ μείζον μὲν ἐστὶ τῆς αἰτίας, τὸ δὲ ἴσον τῆς φύσεως; καὶ τοῦτο ὑπὸ πολλῆς εὐγνώμοσύνης ὁμολογοῦμεν ἡμεῖς. τάχα δ' ἂν εἴποι τις ἄλλος τῷ ἡμετέρῳ λόγῳ προσφιλονεικῶν, μὴ ἔλαττον εἶναι τὸ ἐκ τοιαύτης αἰτίας εἶναι τοῦ ἀναίτιου. τῆς τε γὰρ τοῦ ἀνάρχου δόξης μετέχει ἄν, ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ ἀνάρχου· καὶ πρόσεστιν ἢ γέννησις, πρᾶγμα τοσοῦτον, τοῖς γε νοῦν ἔχουσι, καὶ οὕτω σεβάσιμον. τὸ γὰρ διὰ λέγειν, ὅτι τοῦ κατὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον νοουμένου μείζων, ἀληθὲς μὲν, οὐ μέγα δέ. τί γὰρ τὸ θαυμαστόν, εἰ μείζων ἀνθρώπου θεός; ταῦτα μὲν οὖν ἡμῖν εἰρήσθω πρὸς τοὺς τὸ μείζον κομπάζοντας. Gregory Nazianzenus, *De filio* (TLG, (orat. 30). {2022.010} Section 7 line 6).

¹⁰⁹Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. VII* (Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 376. Θέλω τὸν Πατέρα μείζω εἰπεῖν, ἐξ οὗ καὶ τὸ ἴσοις εἶναι, τοῖς ἴσοις ἐστὶ, καὶ τὸ εἶναι. Τοῦτο γὰρ παρὰ πάντων δοθήσεται. Καὶ δέδοικα τὴν ἀρχὴν, μὴ ἐλαττόνων ἀρχὴν ποιήσω, καὶ καθυβρίσω διὰ τῆς προτιμήσεως· οὐ γὰρ δόξα τῷ ἐξ οὗ ἢ τῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ ταπεινώσις. Πρὸς δὲ καὶ ὑφορώμαι τὴν σὴν ἀπληστίαν, μὴ τὸ μείζον λαβὼν διχοτομήσης τὴν φύσιν, κατὰ πάντα τῷ μείζονι χρώμενος. Οὐ γὰρ κατὰ τὴν φύσιν τὸ μείζον, τὴν αἰτίαν δέ. Οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν ὁμοουσίων τῆ οὐσίᾳ μείζον ἢ ἔλαττον. Gregorius Nazianzenus, *In sanctum baptisma* (orat. 40). {2022.048}.

because the Father is greater than He is (*quia Pater major esset*).¹¹⁰

Who, indeed, would deny that the Father is the greater (*potiorem*); the Unbegotten greater than the Begotten (*ingenitum a genito*), the Father than the Son, the Sender than the Sent, He that wills than He that obeys (*ut volentem ab eo qui obediat*)? He Himself shall be His own witness:—*The Father is greater than I*.¹¹¹

8. Chrysostom (early fifth century)

If any one say that the Father is greater, inasmuch as He is the cause of the Son, we will not contradict this. But this doth not by any means make the Son to be of a different Essence.¹¹²

9. Cyril of Alexandria (mid-fifth century)

“While the Son is equal to the Father on the ground of essence (ἴσος κατὰ τὸν τῆς οὐσίας λόγον ὑπάρχων) and like in all things, He says that the Father is greater as being without beginning (ὡς ἀναρχον), having beginning Himself in respect of source only (κατὰ μόνον τὸ ἐξ οὗ, and not, that is, of time also, even while He has this subsistence (ὑπαρξιν) coincident with Him (the Father).”¹¹³

“For He shall be subjected, not because He shall then begin to do the Father’s will (for *from eternity He “doth” always “those things that please him [John 8:29]* but because, *then as before, He obeys the Father*, yielding, not a forced obedience, but a self-chosen accordance; for He is not a servant, that He should be subjected by force, but a Son, that He should comply of His free choice and natural love (*Catechetical Lecture 15.30; emphasis mine*).¹¹⁴

10. Augustine (early fifth century)

[The words are written] “partly on account of the Incarnation (*administratio suscepti hominis*) ... partly because the Son owes to the Father that He is; as He even owes to the Father that He is equal (*æqualis aut par*) to the Father, while the Father owes to no one whatever He is.”¹¹⁵

11. John of Damascus (middle eighth century)

¹¹⁰ “The Father is, therefore, greater than the Son: for manifestly the is greater, Who makes another to be all that He Himself is, Who imparts to the Son by the mystery of the birth the image of His own unbegotten nature, Who begets Him from Himself into His own form, and restores Him again from the form of a servant to the form of God, Whose work it is that Christ, born God according to the Spirit in the glory of the Father, but now Jesus Christ dead in the flesh, should be once more God in the glory of the Father. When, therefore, Christ says that He is going to the Father, He reveals the reason why they should rejoice if they loved Him, because the Father is greater than He.” Philip. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. IX, ECF 3.9.1.2.9.0* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997). Major itaque Pater Filio est: et plane major, qui tantum donat esse, quantus ipse est; cui innascibilitatis esse imaginem sacramento nativitatis impertit, quem ex se in formam suam generat, quem rursus de forma servi in formam Dei renovat; quem in gloria sua secundum Spiritum Christum Deum natum, donat rursus esse in gloria sua secundum carnem Jesum Christum Deum mortuum. Causam igitur ostendit, cur si eum diligenter, gauderent quod ad Patrem vadit, quia Pater major esset. Hilarium, *De Trinitate Liber Duodecim IX.54* (MLP between 301-302).

¹¹¹ Philip. Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. IX, ECF 3.9.1.2.3.0* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997). Et quis non Patrem potiorem confitebitur, ut ingenitum a genito, ut patrem a filio, ut eum qui miserit ab eo qui missus sit, ut volentem ab eo qui obediat? Et ipse nobis erit testis: *Pater major me est* (*Joan. Xiv, 28*) Hilarium, *De Trinitate Liber Duodecim III.12* (between 52-57)

¹¹² Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. XIV* (Chrysostom: Homilies on the Gospel of Saint John and Epistle to the Hebrews.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 277.

¹¹³ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 215. Ἴσος τοιγαροῦν κατὰ τὸν τῆς οὐσίας λόγον ὑπάρχων ὁ Υἱὸς τῷ Πατρὶ καὶ ὁμοιος κατὰ πάντα, μείζονα αὐτὸν φησιν ὡς ἀναρχον, ἔχων ἀρχὴν κατὰ μόνον τὸ ἐξ οὗ, εἰ καὶ σύνδρομον αὐτῷ τὴν ὑπαρξιν. ἔχει. Cyril of Alexandria *Thesaurus de sancta consubstantiali trinitate*. {4090.109}

¹¹⁴ Rainbow, 7.

¹¹⁵ B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John Introduction and Notes on the Authorized Version* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), 215

If we say that the Father is the origin of the Son and greater, we do not indicate that He is before the Son (προτερεύειν) in time or nature, nor in any other point, except as being the cause (κατὰ τὸ αἴτιον); that is that the Son was begotten of the Father, and not the Father of the Son, and that the Father is the cause of the Son naturally (αἴτιος φυσικῶς), as we say that the fire does not come from the light, but rather the light from the fire. When therefore we hear that the Father is the origin of and greater than the Son, we must understand it in regard of the cause (τῷ αἰτίῳ νοήσωμεν).¹¹⁶

And this also it behoves us to know, that the names Fatherhood, Sonship and Procession, were not applied to the Holy Godhead by us: on the contrary, they were communicated to us by the Godhead, as the divine apostle says, *Wherefore I bow the knee to the Father, from Whom is every family in heaven and on earth.* But if we say that the Father is the origin of the Son and greater than the Son, we do not suggest any precedence in time or superiority in nature of the Father over the Son (for through His agency He made the ages), or superiority in any other respect save causation. And we mean by this, that the Son is begotten of the Father and not the Father of the Son, and that the Father naturally is the cause of the Son: just as we say in the same way not that fire proceedeth from light, but rather light from fire. So then, whenever we hear it said that the Father is the origin of the Son and greater than the Son, let us understand it to mean in respect of causation.¹¹⁷

B. 1 Cor 15:58

1. Cyril of Jerusalem

"For He shall be subjected, not because He shall then begin to do the Father's will (for from eternity He 'doth' always 'those things that please him [Jn 8:29] but because, then as before, He obeys the Father, yielding, not a forced obedience, but a self-chosen accordance; for He is not a servant, that He should be subjected by force, but a Son, that He should comply of His free choice and natural love."¹¹⁸

2. Gregory of Nazianzus

As the Son subjects all to the Father, so does the Father to the Son, the one by his work, the other by his good pleasure.¹¹⁹

3. Augustine

The vision itself is face to face, which is promised to the just as their supreme reward. This will come to pass when he shall deliver the kingdom to God the Father. There, he wants it understood, will also be the vision of his own form, when the whole creation, together with that form in which the Son of God has been made the Son of Man, has been made subject to God. According to this form, the Son himself will be made subject to him who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all.¹²⁰

V. SUMMATION OF ARGUMENTS AS TO WHY THE ETERNAL SON IS RELATIONAL

¹¹⁶ John of Damascus Expositio fidei. {2934.004} Εἰ δὲ λέγομεν τὸν πατέρα ἀρχὴν εἶναι τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ μείζονα, οὐ προτερεύειν αὐτὸν τοῦ υἱοῦ χρόνῳ ἢ φύσει ὑποφαίνομεν, «δι' αὐτοῦ γὰρ τοὺς αἰῶνας ἐποίησεν», οὐδὲ καθ' ἕτερόν τι, εἰ μὴ κατὰ τὸ αἴτιον, τουτέστιν ὅτι ὁ υἱὸς ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐγεννήθη καὶ οὐχ ὁ πατὴρ ἐκ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ ὅτι ὁ πατὴρ αἰτίος ἐστὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ φυσικῶς, ὥσπερ οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ φωτός τὸ πῦρ φαμεν προέρχεσθαι, ἀλλὰ τὸ φῶς μᾶλλον ἐκ τοῦ πυρός. Ὅτε οὖν ἀκούσωμεν ἀρχὴν καὶ μείζονα τοῦ υἱοῦ τὸν πατέρα, τῷ αἰτίῳ νοήσωμεν.

¹¹⁷ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series* Vol. IX, ECF 3.9.2.1.1.8 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

¹¹⁸ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. VII* (Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 113.

¹¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Second Series Vol. VII* (Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory Nazianzen.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 311.

¹²⁰ Augustine, On the Trinity 1.13.28 (Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. III* (St. Augustin on the Holy Trinity, Doctinal Treatiseses, Moral Treatiseses.; Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 33.

SUBORDINATE TO THE FATHER

Apart from a few early exceptions in the second century as the nature of the Trinity was being developed, the witness of the early church on the issue of role subordination is not fragmented or ambiguous. Rather, there is a centuries-long chorus in both east and west that the Son and Father are the same essence. At the same time, however, the orthodox fathers believed that this did not prevent divine persons from being distinguished as to the relationship of God the Father, the unbegotten from all eternity and that of the eternally begotten Son, God of very God. The evidence is convincing that the early church never had any difficulty with knowing the difference between a heretical subordination of the Son to the Father in which they shared unequally the same divine nature from the view that the Son is subordinate, of second order, in eternity with the Father as to their personal association based on the innate properties of Father and Son. The confusion seen today, in which belief in the Son's subordination to the Father within the immanent Godhead is deemed erroneous, if not heresy, by some, is not reflective of the history of the church, both in the orthodox fathers and those orthodox theologians who have shared the teaching of the fathers regarding the Trinity.

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