

The Eternal “Subordination” of the Son of God?

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Abstract

The relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity can be described in terms of “eternal subordination,” but it is unhelpful to do so. The New Testament uses the language of subordination with respect to this relationship only in 1 Corinthians 15:28, and then with a very specific act in mind. The word also has Arian connotations that are best avoided. The submission of the Son to the Father is a voluntary act of mutual love, not something imposed or made inevitable by their personal identities. The divine analogy for the marital bond is that of Christ and the church, not of the Father and the Son.

I. *The Problem of Subordination and Arianism*

How to define the relationship of the persons of the Trinity one to another, and in particular the relationship of the Son to the Father, is one of the most fundamental questions of Christian theology. Since ancient times the individual persons have been identified by what are called their “relations of causality.” The Father is “unbegotten” because his identity is not derived from either of the other persons. The Son is “begotten” because he is related to the Father by “eternal generation,” and the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father, the use of the present tense indicating that this procession is

eternal.¹ These terms are derived from the New Testament and are based to some extent on human analogies.² To speak of the first two persons of the Godhead as Father and Son is to presuppose an act of generation in which the former takes precedence, but although that has been the standard Christian view from the beginning, what it precisely means was the subject of bitter dispute in the fourth and fifth centuries.

At the heart of the classical argument was the nature of the relationship between the eternal and the temporal. All those involved in the dispute believed that God is eternal and that this definition applies to the Father without qualification. The problem was to decide whether the Son was also God in the fullest, eternal sense of the word, or whether he was something less than that. For the sake of simplicity, those who believed that the Son must be inferior to the Father because he was begotten from him are known today as Arians, taking their name from Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria (256–336). Arius was condemned at the first council of Nicaea in 325 for denying that the Son was “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) with the Father and therefore not fully God in his own right. Modern research has shown that what we call Arianism is a term that covers a range of different beliefs and that relatively little of what goes under that name can be traced back to Arius himself. Nevertheless, it seems that all “Arians” believed that the generation of the Son made him ontologically inferior to the Father, even though many of them were not disciples of Arius in any meaningful sense.³

All Arians rejected the term *homoousios* because to them it sounded as though it was making the Father and the Son indistinguishable from each other—the heresy known as modalism. They therefore sought to reinterpret it as *homoios* (“similar”), a word that would allow them to retain the belief that there is a special relationship between the Son and the Father without making them ontologically the same.⁴ The logic behind this approach is easy to appreciate. If there is only one eternal, uncreated, and unbegotten God, and that God is the Father, then the Son cannot be God in the same sense or to the same degree as the Father is. The Arians argued, however,

¹ In the Western tradition, he is defined as proceeding from the Son as well, but this has always been controversial and remains a barrier to full communion between the Eastern (Orthodox) and Western (Roman Catholic and Protestant) churches.

² The key texts are John 1:14 for the Son and John 15:26 for the Holy Spirit.

³ For a survey of the different kinds of Arianism, see Gerald L. Bray, *God Has Spoken* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 232–46.

⁴ The word *homoiousios* (“of like substance”), was also proposed as a compromise, but only much later, and perceptive supporters of Nicaea realized that it was really no different from *homoousios*. See Richard P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 348–57.

that the Son could still be “divine,” sharing many of the attributes of the Father and having special authority to act as the Father’s agent in the work of salvation, without being “God-in-himself” (*autotheos*).⁵ From the Arian point of view, the Son’s ontological inferiority to the Father had its advantages. For example, it made it possible for him to become incarnate as a man and to suffer and die on the cross, something which the purely divine Father could not have done.⁶ For the Arians, the Son was a being intermediate between the divine and the human, sharing elements of both without being defined by one or the other. Like human beings, the Son was a creature, but unlike us, his nature partook of the divine. They understood Christ’s role as Mediator as being the divine man who brought God down to earth and made it possible for us to know him to some degree.

In the Arian scheme, the subordination of the Son to the Father was axiomatic, because there was a time when he had not existed. His generation was not (and could not be) eternal—there had to be a “before” and an “after,” even if it took place before the foundation of the world. The main objection to this was that it is not possible to be divine without being God. There is only one God, who is the Creator of all things and who is not bound by time and space. To be a creature, as the Arians claimed that the Son was, was to be something less than God, and therefore not “divine” at all. Some creatures are naturally “higher” than others, but even the angels are not divine, even though they are spiritual beings. The New Testament itself tells us that the Son is far superior to any angel and is himself the Creator, not a creature.⁷ The Nicene insistence that the Son is consubstantial with the Father was therefore merely doing justice to this New Testament witness. The Nicaeans agreed with the Arians that a distinction had to be maintained between the Father and the Son, but they also argued, against the Arians, that the distinction between them could not be ontological. They were therefore forced to reinterpret the biblical language of causation in relational terms, a shift in theological thinking that made Arianism redundant.

In Nicene thinking, the persons of the Godhead relate to one another because they are alike, something that is also true of human parents and children. This likeness makes it appropriate to use a human analogy to describe the relationship between the first two persons of the Trinity, but it cannot be pressed too far. The Holy Spirit is also a person of the Godhead,

⁵ This term appears to have been invented by Origen (185?–254?), who used it of the Father alone.

⁶ It is not certain that Arius himself taught this, but his followers did, and it was central to their Christology.

⁷ Heb 1:5–14; John 1:1–3; and Col 1:15–17.

but he does not fit into the “family” picture conjured up by the language of generation. Nor is there a female principle in the Trinity—the Son has a father but not a mother.⁸

The transposition of the language of causality from the temporal to the eternal realm is clearly visible in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan (“Nicene”) Creed, where the Son is described as “eternally begotten of the Father,” an expression that is a logical contradiction.⁹ Giving birth is a process in time, which excludes an eternal generation in the literal sense. It must, therefore, be the description of a relationship that has always existed, but what kind of relationship is that? In particular, is the Son eternally subordinate to the Father, or is that subordination merely a temporary arrangement assumed for the sake of the Son’s incarnation and not intrinsic to the Trinitarian being of God? The proper definition of subordination was the theological problem that the Nicene party in the church had to address, and it continues to shape the debate about the “eternal subordination” of the Son today.

II. *The Eternal Son and the Incarnate Christ*

The only way that questions about the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father can be answered is by looking at how that relationship is revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul tells us that although the Son was in the form of God and saw nothing wrong in thinking of himself as equal to the Father, he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant and becoming a man.¹⁰ In his human life, the Son saw himself as doing the will of his Father, and he even told his disciples that the Father was greater than he was.¹¹ When the rich young ruler called him “good,” Jesus rebuked him, saying that only God is good, whatever he meant by that.¹² In his famous “high priestly” prayer, Jesus asks the Father to restore to him the glory that he shared with him before the beginning of the world, a clear statement both

⁸ There were a few Syriac theologians who claimed that the Holy Spirit is the “female” principle in God, mainly on the ground that the Semitic word for “Spirit” (*ruach* in Hebrew) is feminine, but they did not get very far with this idea, which has never been suggested anywhere else.

⁹ The date and provenance of this creed are both controversial. The first evidence we have of it comes from the council of Chalcedon in 451, when it was introduced as the creed of the first council of Nicaea in 325. That is certainly not the case, but it may have been composed at (or shortly after) the first council of Constantinople in 381. This, at least, is the most widely accepted, and in some sense the “official” view today. See John N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1972), 296–367 for a full discussion of the subject.

¹⁰ Phil 2:6–8.

¹¹ John 14:28.

¹² Matt 19:17.

of his eternal status in the Godhead and of his temporary self-humiliation on earth that corresponds to what Paul wrote to the Philippians.¹³

The “high priestly” prayer¹⁴ is particularly revealing because it shows us how the relationship between the Father and the Son worked in the context of the latter’s incarnation and the divine plan of redemption. Its understanding of these things may be analyzed as follows:

1. The Father sent the Son into the world with a specific task for him to perform.
2. The Father empowered the Son to give eternal life to those whom he had chosen for salvation.
3. The Father had chosen certain human beings and ordained that the Son would reveal him to them.
4. By glorifying the Son, the Father would validate the Son’s glorification of the Father. Their glory is mutual and eternal, even if it was hidden in the Son during the time of his incarnation on earth.

It is therefore apparent that the Father was somehow the person “in charge” of the Son’s incarnation, if we can put it like that. He ordained what the Son would do, empowered him to do it, and validated his work when it was done. In all these ways, the Son’s commission was grounded in the Father’s will. At the same time, however, this went far beyond anything that God had ever given to an angel or another human being. The Father gave his chosen people to the Son as his own possession, because to belong to the Son is to belong to the Father also. The Son was empowered to give them eternal life, which is a gift of God. Jesus could not have given anyone something that he did not possess himself, but there is no suggestion that he owed his eternal life to the Father. On the contrary, eternal life is defined as knowing both God the Father and Jesus Christ, something that might be a new experience for believers but that has always been true of the Son. To put it differently, the Son was not acting as an intermediary between God and man without being fully divine, but sharing his life as God with the men and women whom the Father had chosen and whom he had drawn to himself.

The conclusion that we must draw is that the commission given by the Father to the Son was not a command from a superior to an inferior, but a mutually agreed-upon plan of action that required complete equality between them for it to operate in the way that it was meant to. Why did the plan for the redemption of the world take this particular form? Is there

¹³ John 17:5.

¹⁴ John 17:1–26.

something intrinsic to the Father that makes him the overseer, or something in the Son that predisposes him to take the part of the suffering servant? Here we come back to the question with which we began. Is the subordination of the Son seen in his incarnation a temporal expression of his eternal relationship with the Father, or is it limited to his work on earth but inapplicable apart from that?

Here we are peering into a mystery that is beyond our understanding. That there are three persons in the Godhead is clear from the testimony of Scripture, and from the evidence we have of how they are identified, we can safely say that their individual identities go beyond mere role play. The Son would be begotten of the Father even if he had never come into the world, and so it would seem that the task he was called to perform on earth would have been appropriate for him whether it was needed or not. If we accept this way of thinking, when the human race fell into sin, the divine rescue operation took place in the way that it did because the relational structure within the Trinity was already in place—it was not invented for the occasion. But if we think of the persons as fundamentally equal, it is not immediately clear why they should have assumed the particular identities that they have. They come to us with their identities already determined, but whether this was a mutual decision on their part or intrinsic to their persons is impossible to say. Perhaps in some hypothetical eternity, they could have worked out their relationship differently, but that is beyond our understanding. We should not be surprised or disconcerted by this. After all, we know our parents as they appear to us and cannot imagine them otherwise, even though we are also aware that there was a time before they knew each other when their lives could have worked out differently. It is a possibility but irrelevant to our experience and virtually unimaginable to us. So it is with our understanding of God—what might have been possible is rendered meaningless by what has already occurred.

We can say that as far as we know, the pattern of relationships within the Godhead was a voluntary and mutually agreed-upon choice, made in eternity and appearing in time as permanently fixed. The best evidence for this is Philippians 2:7, where Paul tells us that the Son humbled himself. He was not forced into self-humiliation by the Father, nor was it the inevitable consequence of his Sonship. What the Son did he did of his own volition, surrendering to the Father's will, not because he had to, but because it was his will to do so. Our salvation is not enslavement to a divine will that we neither understand nor desire, but a joyous liberation into the freedom of the children of God, a freedom that we can enjoy because the Son and the Holy Spirit, in whom we are united with Christ, enjoy it already.

III. *The Language of Subordination*

Back to the question of what the subordination of the Son to the Father may possibly mean. If the Son is truly God, his relationship to the Father cannot be the result of some ontological inferiority that obliges him to defer to the Father’s will. The Son’s obedience has to be a voluntary act grounded in his eternal equality with the Father, which means that “subordination” is a choice that he has made, not an imposition that he has been forced to accept. But is “subordination” the right word for describing this relationship? Here we are faced with a linguistic question that requires careful analysis. Human language is never adequate to convey the reality of God; it always needs to be refined and reinterpreted if it is to do justice to something that transcends the created order, and for that reason it is never definitive. Theologians have always recognized that the language we use to talk about God is analogical and imperfect and that our task is to make the analogy as close to the reality as we can.

The Greek words used in the New Testament and in the early church to convey the concept of “order” derive from the root *tag-*. The simple verb form is *tassō*, and there are three nouns formed from it. One of these is the “active” noun *taxis*, and another is the “passive” noun *tagma*, both of which are used to mean “ordering,” often in a military context, where they are equivalent to “formation” or “regiment.”¹⁵ *Tagma* occurs only once in the New Testament, when Paul describes the resurrection as occurring “each in his own order [*tagma*]: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”¹⁶ There is obviously a logical priority in Christ’s resurrection, but although ours is dependent on it, there is no suggestion that it is inferior to his. *Taxis* occurs more often, but always in the context of worship. Paul uses it to refer to the order that he expects to prevail in Christian assemblies, but there is no notion of hierarchy implied by it.¹⁷ It is a somewhat different story when the word is applied to the priesthood, as it is on two separate occasions. Luke uses it to describe the temple service of Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, who was ministering according to the established order or *rota*, as we might say.¹⁸ But the word occurs most often in Hebrews 5–7, where it is used to define and contrast the priesthood of Melchizedek with that of Aaron. Jesus Christ is described as “a priest

¹⁵ For an analysis of this, see Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 2:1454–55, under the entry *tassō*.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 15:23.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 14:40; Col 2:5.

¹⁸ Luke 1:8.

forever, after the order [*taxis*] of Melchizedek,”¹⁹ but it is clear that he is in no way subordinate to the ancient Canaanite king. The word can only mean something like “category” or “type,” and not order in a hierarchical sense.

Tassō, compounded with *syn* (“with”) as the verb *syntassō*, appears three times in Matthew, where it is used when Jesus gave his disciples instructions to do something.²⁰ No doubt Jesus had the authority to do that, but the emphasis in the text is on following the detailed directions that he gave his disciples rather than on any power that he might have exercised over them.

When the meaning of “command” is meant, the construction with *tag-* is somewhat different. The noun used in that way is not *taxis* or *tagma* but a third form, *tagē*, which is comparatively rare and does not occur in the New Testament. More common are compounds like *epitagē* (“mandate”), which is used no fewer than seven times in the New Testament, all of them with reference to a divine command given to the Apostle Paul.²¹ There is also *hypotagē*, which means “subjection” and occurs four times in the New Testament, though always in connection with human relationships within the family and the church and not in connection with submission to God, except perhaps indirectly.²² However, the verb *hypotassō* is found no fewer than thirty-three times in the New Testament, always with the meaning of “submission” or “subjection.” Most of these occurrences have little or nothing to do with Christ, though some refer to the subjection of spiritual powers (angels or demons) to the prophets and apostles.²³ Most of the time, the word implies submission to a higher authority, including that of the state over its citizens.²⁴

For our present purposes, the most important uses of the verb concern subjection to (or by) Christ and the subjection expected of women to their husbands, which some have claimed is analogous to that of the Son to the Father. We shall return to that in due course, but first, we must look at the way in which the word is used with respect to Christ. The verb is used three times in Luke. When Joseph and Mary found Jesus engaging in theological debate with the scholars in the temple, they insisted that he should return home with them, and we are told that he was “submissive” (*hypotassomenos*)

¹⁹ Heb 5:6.

²⁰ Matt 21:6; 26:19; 27:10.

²¹ See Rom 16:26; 1 Cor 7:6, 25; 2 Cor 8:8; 1 Tim 1:1; and Titus 1:3; 2:15.

²² 2 Cor 9:13; Gal 2:5; 1 Tim 2:11; 3:4. However, there are no recorded instances of either *hypotaxis* or *hypotagma*, though presumably both constructions are possible, and they may have existed, even if they were not often used.

²³ See for example, Luke 10:17; 1 Cor 14:32.

²⁴ Rom 13:1; Titus 2:9; 3:1.

to their authority, as we would expect any child to be.²⁵ The other two occurrences are both in the story of the seventy-two disciples whom Jesus sent out to preach and who returned exclaiming that even the demons were subject to them when they spoke with his authority.²⁶ Elsewhere, Paul uses the same verb when he says that God “put all things under his feet,” a quotation from Psalm 8:6 that is repeated at greater length in Hebrews.²⁷ In the second instance, the writer points out that although the Father has put everything in subjection to Christ and left nothing outside his control, the fulfillment of that mandate has not yet occurred, even though he has been crowned with glory and honor because of his sufferings.²⁸ The psalm is quoted yet again by Paul when speaking of the end of time and the final judgment:

For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him [Christ], then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.²⁹

The immediate context here, which is common with much early Christian literature, is that the created order is subject to the rule of Adam in the first instance and to the Son in the second. The understanding is that Adam, created in the image and likeness of God, was given dominion over the creatures, but because he disobeyed God, he was unable to fulfill his mandate. A new Adam, untainted by sin, was required and that new Adam was Jesus Christ, whose death brought an end to death and the power of sin. This process remains to be completed, but when it is, the Son will also be subjected to the Father, here designated simply as “God.”

What does this tell us about the relationship between the Father and the Son? First of all, we learn that the Father has put everything except himself under the Son’s rule and authority until the work of redemption is completed. When that happens, the Son will surrender his commission to the Father so that “God may be all in all.” What this precisely means is not clear, but it does not suggest that the Son is eternally subject to the Father, if only because it is a prophecy of something that is still to come and not the expression of a permanent state of affairs. Furthermore, the subjection

²⁵ Luke 2:51.

²⁶ Luke 10:17, 20.

²⁷ Eph 1:22; Heb 2:8.

²⁸ Heb 2:9.

²⁹ 1 Cor 15:27–28.

envisaged is the integration of the saving work of Christ into the eternal life of God. The end result of that is not a theocracy in which the Father rules as an unchallenged dictator over everything and everybody, including his own Son, but a world in which God is everywhere present and in whom every creature finds its proper place and function. In that world, the place of the Son will be to sit at the Father's right hand, not to be put under his feet as the creation will be.

IV. Defining the Father-Son Relationship

The use of the language of subordination with respect to the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father can be traced back no further than the fourth-century Arian controversy. Eunomius of Cyzicus (d. 393) used it to claim that the Son is subordinate to the Father both in essence (*ousia*) and in mind (*gnōmē*), which is typical of Arianism.³⁰ The difficulty with the fourth-century evidence for the Son's subordination to the Father is that most of it is neither Arian nor "Nicene" as it would later be understood. Instead, it tries to weave between two extremes, of which Arianism was one. In opposition to it, there was a strong and growing tendency to insist that the Son is ontologically, or by nature, identical to the Father. He was not a creature, and in that sense, he was in no way inferior to the Father's being. The equality of the Son with the Father was counterbalanced by an equally strong desire to resist modalism, also known as Monarchianism and as Sabellianism, which reduced the persons of the Godhead to nothing more than different masks or functions of the one Deity. Typical of this approach was the so-called Macrosthich creed of Antioch, which is distinguished from others of its kind by a lengthy theological explanation of its meaning.³¹ Composed in late 344 and taken to Milan, where it was read out at a council held the following year, the Macrosthich expounded its fourth anathema, directed against those who deny the divinity of Christ, by saying, "We acknowledge that, although he is subordinate to his Father and God, yet because he was begotten of God before all ages, he is perfect God according to nature."

Driven by the need to establish a viable distinction between the Father and the Son, the Macrosthich later adds in the commentary on its seventh

³⁰ Eunomius of Cyzicus, *Apologia* 26 (Patrologia Graeca, ed. J.-P. Migne [Paris, 1857–1886], 30:846B).

³¹ This creed was called "Macrosthich" because of the long lines in which it was written. It is preserved in Athanasius, *De synodis* 26 (cf. *NPNF*² 4:462–64).

anathema, directed against those who claim that the Son is unbegotten or that the Father generated him of necessity and not by free choice,

We confess in them not two gods, but one dignity of Godhead and one exact harmony of dominion, the Father alone being head over the whole universe wholly, and over the Son himself, and the Son subordinated to the Father, but ruling over all things (apart from the Father) [in second place] after him through whom they have come into existence.

This line of thinking established itself gradually as being typical of what would become the orthodox party following the first council of Constantinople in 381.³² It meant that the language of subordination was detached from the being of God and interpreted exclusively in terms of what we would now call the personal relationship between the Father and the Son. Hilary of Poitiers, who lived through this period and was well placed to understand both the Eastern (Greek) and Western (Latin) approaches to the subject, said as much when he expounded the meaning of the names “Father” and “Son”: “The Father is greater because He is Father, the Son is not the less because He is Son. The difference is one of the meaning of a name and not of a nature.”³³

For Hilary, it was essential to give substance to the names of the persons of the Trinity to avoid accusations of modalism, and in the process “subordination” acquired an entirely new meaning. In relational terms, the subordination of the Son to the Father was a voluntary act on the part of someone who knew that he was the equal of the one to whom he was submitting and who was recognized and honored (“glorified”) for that. It was emphatically not something imposed on the Son by virtue of his origin, either in ontological or in purely relational terms. To put it succinctly, the Son reveals who the Father is and does what the Father wants, but he is able to do this because he is ontologically equal to the Father and shares the Father’s will both in creation and in redemption. He is relationally submissive to the Father without being ontologically subordinate to him.

Moreover, it is only in this way that the Son is able to reveal the Father adequately. If he were no more than an inspired man, or an angel, he might have conveyed a message from God in the way that prophets and angels did, but he would not have been able to represent the Father to the degree that would allow his disciples to claim that they had met with God. That is

³² For a brief survey of the available evidence, see Michael J. Ovey, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (London: Latimer Trust, 2016), 30–74.

³³ Hilary of Poitiers, *De synodis* 64 (NPNF² 9:21).

precisely what the Christian gospel was all about: “The Word became flesh ... and we have seen his glory.”³⁴

It follows from this that Jesus revealed the will of his Father in his ministry and teaching because he was completely identified with the will of the Father. There is, however, one instance where a gap opens up between the will of Jesus and that will of the Father. In the garden of Gethsemane on the night before his suffering and death, Jesus prayed to the Father that he might be spared the ultimate agony. In one sense, that comes as a surprise, since he knew perfectly well that it was for this reason that he had come into the world. But the Son had become a man, and for that reason it would not have been natural for him to have a death wish. Had Jesus wanted to die, he would not have been a normal human being, and his resistance is not only understandable but appropriate. However, we must also note that he sweated blood in his agony and in the end surrendered his human will to the divine will that he shared with the Father—“not as I will, but as you will.”³⁵ Even in his human nature, the submission of the Son to the Father was a voluntary act and not the inevitable result of some kind of subordination, even though his humanity was obviously inferior to his divinity.

In what way does the submission of the Son to the Father in the context of his incarnation reflect their eternal relationship within the Trinity? We know that the Son was an agent of creation and that everything in heaven and on earth was made not only “*by him*” but “*for him*.”³⁶ This role in creation strongly suggests that the Son is fully the Father’s equal and says nothing about subordination. It is certainly true that the Son defers to the Father, a point that comes across with particular clarity in John’s Gospel, but there is a sense in which we can also say that the Father defers to the Son. For example, Jesus promises his disciples that if they serve him faithfully, the Father will honor them, evidently assuming that this would happen without question.³⁷ So certain is Jesus of this that he even promises to send them the Comforter (the Holy Spirit), who proceeds from the Father, apparently without having to ask the Father’s permission.³⁸ Here we are probing into the mysteries of a relationship that is beyond our understanding, and we must be extremely careful about drawing unwarranted inferences from the meager source material that we have. Suffice it to say that no evidence would oblige us to come to a different conclusion and suggest that the Son

³⁴ John 1:14.

³⁵ Matt 26:39.

³⁶ Col 1:16–17; John 1:1–3.

³⁷ John 12:26.

³⁸ John 15:26.

is eternally subordinate to the Father in a way that would make it natural for the Father to tell him what to do, whether he was willing to do it or not. The missing ingredient in discussions of this kind is any serious consideration of the love that shapes the relationships of the persons of the Godhead to one another. The Father and the Son relate to each other in a spirit of love and self-giving, not in one of power and domination. It was natural for the Son to accomplish his Father’s will, but it was equally natural for the Father to share that will with the Son, and not to impose it on him by virtue of some claimed superiority over him.

V. A Model for Other Relationships?

For most of Christian history, the relationship between the Father and the Son has been discussed quite apart from any implications it might have for other relationships, either within God himself or between God and his human creatures. It has always been agreed that it is not a model for understanding the relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit, though it must also be said that that relationship has seldom if ever been explored in any depth. The Holy Spirit comes into our hearts, making it possible for us to cry to God as “Abba! Father!” but does he himself address the first person of the Trinity in that way?³⁹ We do not know. What we can say is that the Holy Spirit is not a second Son, although he has come into the world to apply the Son’s teaching to us. To that extent, he picks up where the incarnate Son left off, as Jesus told his disciples he would.⁴⁰

Jesus taught his disciples to pray to God as Father, and after his resurrection, he commissioned Mary Magdalene to tell them that he was about to ascend “to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God,” drawing a parallel between his relationship to God the Father and theirs.⁴¹ But we also know that our relationship to God as Father is different from his because he is the Son by nature, whereas we are children by adoption, an adoption that has been made possible only because of what he has done for us. There may be a certain parallelism here, but as creatures and as redeemed sinners we are ontologically and morally subordinate to God in a way that does not apply to Jesus.

This fact has been understood and accepted for centuries, but in recent times the suggestion has been made that the relationship between male and

³⁹ Gal 4:6.

⁴⁰ John 16:4–15.

⁴¹ John 20:17.

female human beings, and in particular between husband and wife, is somehow a reflection of the Father-Son relationship in heaven. The question is of particular concern because at least some of those who posit a link between male-female relations in marriage and the Father-Son relationship within the Godhead do so in order to reinforce their belief that the wife is subordinate to her husband and so not really his equal. This approach seldom if ever mentions the fact that the headship attributed to Christ or the male is one that carries the obligation of sacrifice, which by most measurements is more demanding than mere submission. There may be a case for saying that the relationship of the Father and Son is similar in some ways to that between a husband and his wife, but if so, it is in the context of mutual submission based on fundamental equality and not on some super-imposed idea of innate subordination.

In truth, there is no genuine connection between these two different kinds of relationship, and it is best to keep them separate. Those who argue to the contrary point usually to 1 Corinthians 11:3, where Paul talks about the relationship between God (the Father), Christ, man and woman in terms of “headship,” but great caution is required here. The immediate context of Paul’s remarks was not the Trinity, but the dress code at worship services in Corinth. Apparently, women were leaving their heads uncovered, and this was causing some disquiet in the congregation. Paul treated the subject as follows:

1. Christ is the head of every man (male). A man who prays with his head covered dishonors it.
2. Man is the head of woman. A woman who prays with her head uncovered dishonors it.
3. God (presumably the Father) is the head of Christ.⁴²

It is on this basis that Paul goes on to explain his head-covering policy. A man is to leave his head uncovered because he is created in the image of God, which must not be hidden from view. A woman is to cover her head because she is created in the image of the male and must hide that so as not to detract from the glory that ought to be given to God. Head coverings are clearly of symbolic importance in testifying to the order of creation, but they are of limited practical significance. As Paul points out, men and women need each other, and both belong to God. There is no suggestion that men and women should behave in different ways—both prayed and

⁴² 1 Cor 11:3–15.

prophesied in the church. The difference between them was one of appearance, not of function, and Paul justified his position by an appeal to what most people thought was right. Others were expected to agree with him that men ought to have short hair and women longer hair, which was an ornament of beauty for them. Whether Paul’s argument ought to establish the norm for church practice today can be debated. However, any interpretation of these verses that suggests that there is a pattern of hierarchical subordination starting with God (the Father) at the top and working down through the Son to the man and then to the woman is reading more into the text than Paul intended.

The matter could probably be left there, but it has been complicated by claims about the “true” meaning of the Greek word *kephalē* (“head”). It has been noted, for example, that the Septuagint (LXX) usually translates the Hebrew word *rosh* (“head”) as *kephalē* when it is referring to the physical part of the body, but if it means “ruler” or “chief,” the Greek translators preferred the words *archē* or *archōn*. From this, some have concluded that the Greek word was not used in the sense of a hierarchical headship, even though the New Testament quite obviously states the contrary. Ephesians 1:22 is important here because, in addition to saying that the Father put everything under Christ’s feet, it adds that he made him “head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”⁴³ This idea is repeated elsewhere in Ephesians and Colossians, making it plain that the headship of Christ implies his rule over the church.⁴⁴ Of course, these references to Christ as Lord do not mean that every mention of the word *kephalē* has to be read in this way, and the complex construction of 1 Corinthians 11:3 suggests that in that verse it probably should not be. However, it should also be said that there is no support, either within or without Scripture, for the idea that *kephalē* in that verse means “source.” There is a perfectly good Greek word for “source” (*pēgē*), and it was used in theology, but not of the relationship between the Father and the Son or between man and woman.⁴⁵

Most likely, the word *kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11:3 means “principle” or “point of reference.” Woman was taken from man, and her humanity must, therefore, be understood as an extension of his, but she was taken from man’s side, not from his head, and cannot be regarded as his body in the

⁴³ Eph 1:22–23.

⁴⁴ See Eph 4:15; 5:23; and Col 1:18; 2:19.

⁴⁵ Fourth-century theologians spoke of the Father as the *pēgē* of the divine being, and later tradition claimed that the Virgin Mary was the *zōodochos pēgē* (“life-giving source”) because she was the mother of the incarnate Christ, but neither of these usages makes any sense in 1 Cor 11:3.

way that the church is the body of Christ. Similarly, the man was modeled on Christ, the “heavenly man,” but he is in no sense an extension of Christ’s being. As for the relationship between the Son and the Father, the word “head” can only be metaphorical in meaning, and probably ought to be understood as saying that whatever the Son is and does must be interpreted in the context of his relationship with his Father. There is a chain of relationships here but not a hierarchy of power or authority, so to use this verse as justification for male domination is quite simply wrong.

At the same time, the New Testament often uses the verb *hypotassō* when explaining how a woman should submit to her husband, and there is a clear parallel with the way in which children should submit to their parents, slaves to their masters and citizens to the state authorities.⁴⁶ But the New Testament insists that this submission ought to be voluntary, even in the case of slaves obeying their masters. True obedience is not something that can be imposed by force or authority; it must come from the heart. Secondly, in the most crucial passage dealing with husband-wife relations, it is clear that the submission must be mutual and offered in a spirit of love and self-sacrifice.⁴⁷ If Christ is a model for human behavior, it is because he sacrificed himself for the church, which is his bride—and husbands are called to do the same for their wives. Far from being a charter for male domination, the text is the exact opposite. The husband is called to love his wife as himself, and in return, the wife is asked to respect her husband, but not told that she must be his slave!⁴⁸

What is clear from this is that there is no comparison between the way a man relates to his wife and the way the Father relates to his Son. The two cases are entirely different, not least because there is never any suggestion that the Father ought to sacrifice himself for the sake of Christ. That anyone should have thought otherwise and sought to make the Father-Son relationship in the Trinity a model for human marriage can only be regarded as an aberration that detracts from the true nature of marital submission.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ On wives being submissive to their husbands, see Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; Titus 2:5; and 1 Pet 3:1, 5. For other types of purely human submission, see Rom 13:1; Eph 5:21; Titus 2:9; and 1 Pet 2:18; 5:5.

⁴⁷ Eph 5:21–33.

⁴⁸ Eph 5:33.

⁴⁹ To that extent we can agree with Kevin Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), though Giles’s polemical and journalistic style is distasteful and many of his arguments are wrongheaded.

We can, therefore, conclude the following:

1. The relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity can be described in terms of "eternal subordination," but it is unhelpful to do so. The New Testament uses the language of subordination with respect to this relationship only in 1 Corinthians 15:28, and then with a very specific act in mind that cannot be described as "eternal." The word "subordination" also has Arian connotations that are best avoided. It has also come to reflect the abuse of power by earthly authorities, which makes it unsuitable for current use, even if it can be defined in a technically correct manner.
2. The submission of the Son to the Father is a voluntary act of mutual love, not something imposed or made inevitable by their personal identities. It reflects a kind of relationship that is revealed in but not confined to, the incarnation of the Son.
3. There is no connection between the relationship of the Father to the Son on the one hand and of husband and wife on the other. The divine analogy for the marital bond is that of Christ and the church, not of the Father and the Son.
4. There is an order within the Godhead, between God and man, and within the human race. All relationships that reflect this order ought to be rooted and grounded in a spirit of love and self-sacrifice, not one of fear and domination.