

Evangelical Review of Theology

EDITOR: DAVID PARKER

Volume 28 · Number 3 · July 2004

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

The Doctrine of the Trinity and Subordinationism

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KEYWORDS: *Modalism, tritheism, headship, hermeneutics, revelation, economic, Arianism, differentiation*

IN the latter part of the twentieth century the doctrine of the Trinity captured the attention of theologians more than any other doctrine.¹ At no time in history since the theologically stormy days of the fourth century has there been so much discussion on this topic, and the discussion does not seem to be ending! Books on the Trinity by Protestant, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians continue to be published as I write. No longer is it thought that the Trinity is an obtuse, secondary and impractical dogma. Today theologians are generally agreed that this doctrine

is foundational to the Christian faith because it articulates what is most distinctive in the biblical revelation of God—he is triune.

The discussion in the last thirty years has ranged far and wide but it may be said with some confidence that conceptualising the Trinity as a *perichoretic* (interpenetrating) community of three ‘persons’² who work in perfect unity and harmony has been to the fore. This ‘model’ of the Trinity highlights the profound unity and the personal distinction within the Trinity without using abstract philosophical terms. It also excludes tritheism, modalism and subordinationism, the three great trinitarian heresies. The last of these, subordinationism, has been particularly under assault. Ted Peters says that if any-

1 This essay draws on the first part of my book, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), but exhibits some development in my thinking as I continue to read the Bible and the historical sources.

2 I put the word ‘person’ in inverted commas because there has been much debate as to what is the best word to designate the divine three. ‘Person’ when used in a trinitarian sense is acceptable if it is not taken as an exact synonym of what the word person means when used of humans.

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thing, contemporary mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic trinitarian thinking is 'antisubordinationist'.³

Paradoxically in this same period many evangelical theologians have been moving in the opposite direction. Since the 1980s, evangelicals wishing to uphold the male headship (understood as authoritative leadership) in the church and the home have been arguing that the Son is *eternally* subordinated to the Father as women are to men. Most speak only of an *eternal* subordination in *role/function* for the Son. However some evangelicals honestly admit that *eternal* role subordination by necessity implies subordination in person or being.⁴ Conservative evangeli-

cals who speak of the *eternal* subordination of the Son quote in support Paul's assertion that God the Father is the 'head of Christ' just as 'man is the head of woman' (1 Cor. 11:30), and the texts that speak of the Son being 'sent' by the Father (Jn. 4:34, 5:30 etc), and obeying the Father (Rom. 5:18-19, Heb. 5:8). In addition they claim that the eternal subordination of the Son is historic orthodoxy. We are told that this is the teaching of Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin and various other theologians, as well as the creeds.

What should we believe?

For all evangelicals the Bible is the ultimate authority in matters of doctrine and practice. However, in the ongoing debate concerning how the doctrine of the Trinity should best be formulated, *how to interpret the scriptures* on this matter has been the foundational issue.

Subordinationists (those who insist on the eternal and personal subordination of the Son and the Spirit in being and/or function)⁵ appeal to the texts that seem to subordinate the Son to the Father while non-subordinationists appeal to the texts that would seem to affirm the equality of the Father and the Son along with the Holy Spirit. If

3 Ted Peters, *God as Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster, 1993), p. 45.

4 The eternal role subordination of the Son apart from subordination in being is given classic expression in W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 454-70. I list numerous articles and books outlining this position in my, *The Trinity*, p. 23, n. 8. To this list should be added W. Grudem (ed.), *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, Crossway, 2002). See especially pp. 37, 47-52, 233-253. This position is entirely novel. It has no historical antecedents. Previously the argument has been that eternal subordination in being/nature/essence and work/operation/function are two sides of one coin. The classic expression of the contemporary case for the eternal subordination of the Son in being and role is found in the 1999 *Sydney Anglican Doctrine Commission Report*, 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and its Bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women', quoted in full in my *The Trinity*, pp. 122-137. Other examples of this position are also given in my book. In the Sydney report at one point the subordination of women is explicitly grounded in the 'differences in being' within the Godhead (par. 25).

5 All accept that the Son was for a limited period (*temporally*) subordinated in the incarnation. What is in dispute is whether or not the Son is subordinated in the *eternal* or immanent Trinity in his being/nature/person and/or work/operation/function. I will argue that orthodoxy has always held that it is a grave error to *eternally* subordinate the Son in his being *or* work for one implies the other.

there were no way to settle this debate over the interpretation of the Bible we would have a stalemate. Each side could simply go on quoting their proof texts and no resolution would be possible.

But this is not the case. Evangelicals both in support of the eternal subordination of the Son and those vehemently opposed to the eternal subordination of the Son are in complete agreement that 'tradition'—understood as how the scriptures have been understood by the best of theologians across the centuries—is a good guide to the proper interpretation of scripture—it is a secondary authority. So both sides claim the theological luminaries of the past and the creeds are on their side. The resolution of the debate therefore lies in determining whose reading of the scriptures is most faithful to the tradition.

The New Testament.

The first Christians were forced to rethink the doctrine of God they had inherited from Judaism because of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection and the subsequent giving of the Holy Spirit. As Jews they were convinced that there is but one God, a truth Jesus himself affirmed (Mk. 12:29-32, cf. 1 Cor. 8:4; Eph. 4:6; James 2:19). This ruled out tritheism—three separate Gods. Nevertheless, they were also convinced that in some way Jesus and the Holy Spirit made the one God present. For this reason they frequently associated the Father, Son and Spirit together, implying their equality (cf. Mt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:13; Eph. 4:4-6 etc), and on occasions spoke of Jesus as *Theos* (Jn. 1:1; 20:28; Rom.

9:5; Heb. 1:8), calling him 'the Lord' (the title for Yahweh used in the Greek OT) some two hundred times. From these New Testament texts we see that the first Christians no longer thought of God as a simple mathematical unitary entity. He was in some way triune. Somehow these two seemingly opposing ideas had to be held: God is one and God is three. The New Testament writers agree on this but they give few insights as to how this might be so, or how it might be explained.

Modalism

One of the first suggestions as to how God might be three and one at the same time was that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were merely successive *modes of revelation* of the one God. This answer upheld the biblical truth that God is one, but it undermined the eternal distinct existence of the three divine persons, which the Bible also teaches. This error, which was called *modalism*, was rejected by the church Fathers, as it has been by subsequent orthodox theologians down to our day. It is believed that to be loyal to biblical revelation the doctrine of the Trinity must affirm without equivocation the unity of God and the eternal *and* personal coexistence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Subordinationism.

Another early suggestion made by many second and early third century theologians who were opposed to modalism was that God the Father, a Monad, is God in the fullest sense, the Son is the *Logos* or Word of God always in the Father who was brought forth for

creation and redemption.⁶ They stressed that the Son and the Spirit were fully divine persons, but this *Logos* 'model' of the Trinity, while safeguarding the unity of God and excluding modalism, implied that the Son and the Spirit were secondary and tertiary subordinates to the one true God.

To exclude the problems this reading of scripture raised, catholic theologians from the time of Athanasius, on the basis of a deeper reflection on scripture, began with the belief that God was not a solitary Monad who begat the Son and the Spirit in time, but was a Tri-unity of three equal divine persons from all eternity. This was a revolutionary breakthrough in theological method.

Early in the fourth century Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, went a step further and actually argued that God the Father alone was true God: the Son and the Spirit were lesser Gods, different in being/nature/essence from the one true God. In making this assertion Arius began a theological 'school', known as Arianism, which despite significant variations among its members, involved 'certain characteristic ideas'.⁷

The first and most important of these, says Hanson in his definitive study of fourth century Arianism, was ontological subordinationism—the subordination of the Son (and the Spirit) in his being/nature/essence.

This observation comes as no surprise, for most know that ontological subordinationism was of the essence of Arianism. What is of some surprise to many is that for the Arians this ontological subordinationism *always* had as its corollary the eternal functional subordination of the Son. The Arians believed that the human traits seen in the incarnate Son were proof that he was less than the Father—a creature—a 'sort of vulnerable God'.⁸ They made much of his ignorance of certain facts, tiredness, prayer life and suffering, and in particular they highlighted his sending by, and obedience to the Father. Hanson says the Arians consistently taught that the Son 'does the Father's will and exhibits obedience and subordination to the Father, and adores and praises the Father, not only in his earthly ministry but also in Heaven'.⁹

The Arians began with a Greek view of God who could have no contact with matter, let alone with human flesh, but their proof of the ontological subordination of the Son was based on many biblical texts that either seemed to subordinate the Son, or actually did subordinate him in some way. In other words they found proof of what they already believed by appeal to the Bible. Most of the texts quoted alluded to the Son's human characteristics and servant form seen in his incarnation. They argued that this biblical teaching spoke not only of the incarnate Son's relationship with his Father while on

⁶ In my *The Trinity*, pp. 60-62, I show that the Apologists, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Hippolytus, each in his own way adopts this approach.

⁷ *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 99.

⁸ *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 103.

⁹ *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 103.

earth, but also of his eternal relationship with his Father in heaven.

Although Arianism was basically a fourth century phenomenon, subordinationism is a perennial threat to the life of the church. It is the most common of the three classic trinitarian errors.¹⁰ In almost every century there have been those who have argued in one way or another that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father.¹¹ Calvin battled with such people in the 16th century; they flourished both on the continent and in England in the 17th century, and in the 18th century Charles Hodge, the staunchly reformed professor of theology at Princeton Seminary in the USA, taught, 'In the Holy Trinity there is a subordination of the Persons (of the Son and the Spirit) as to the mode of their subsistence (i.e. personal existence) and operation' (i.e. work/function/role).¹² And in the last thirty years, as was noted at the beginning of this article, subordinationism has become common among contemporary conservative evangelicals committed to the permanent subordination of women.

It has to be admitted that there are texts in the Bible that can be quoted, and Arius and his followers found every one of them, to support the *eternal* subordination of the Son. Jesus

himself once said, 'The Father is greater than I' (Jn. 14:28) and the scriptures speak of him being 'sent' (Jn. 4:34; 5:30 etc), and obeying the Father (Rom. 5:18-19; Heb. 4:8). What has to be asked is, how do these texts relate to the texts that speak of the Son as God (Jn. 1:1, 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:8), or as the Lord—the title used of *Yahweh* in the Greek Old Testament (Acts 2:21; Rom. 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:2—more than 200 times), or as equal with God (Philp. 2:6), or as 'head over all things' (Eph. 1:22; Col. 2:10)? This tension in the texts called for a hermeneutic that could make sense of the whole, without rejecting any of the parts.¹³

Athanasius' reply to the Arians

Arianism posed the greatest threat to Christianity that had arisen to this point of time. If Jesus the Son of God is not God in human form, then he did not perfectly reveal the Father, and he could not save, for only God can save. In this critical hour God raised up one of the greatest theologians of all times, St Athanasius (296-373).¹⁴ His grasp of the whole of scripture was profound and his theological acumen far exceeded that of his adversaries.

¹⁰ The other two are modalism and tritheism.

¹¹ In more detail see my *The Trinity*, 60-85.

¹² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson), 1, pp. 445, 460-62, 464-65, 467-68, 474. It is to be noted that Hodge gives no support to eternal role subordination apart from a subordination in person. He holds that the Son is eternally subordinated in his person and operations or functions.

¹³ Exactly the same approach is needed today in the debate over what the Bible teaches on the status and ministry of women where there is a parallel tension in the texts. See my *The Trinity*, 194-211.

¹⁴ For what follows I refer readers to, 'Four Discourses Against the Arians', in *Athanasius, Selected Works and Letters*, vol 4, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (henceforth *NPNF*), ed P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971).

In reply to the Arians' appeal to the Bible Athanasius argued that they had failed to grasp the whole 'scope' of scripture and failed to recognize that scripture gives a 'double account' of the Son of God—one of his temporal and voluntary subordination in the incarnation, the other of his eternal divine status.¹⁵ On this basis he argued that texts that spoke of the divinity of the Son and of his equality with the Father pointed to his *eternal* status and dignity, and texts that spoke of the subordination of the Son pointed to his *voluntary and temporal* subordination necessitated by his becoming man for our salvation. For Athanasius the Son is *eternally one in being* with the Father, *temporally and voluntarily* subordinate in his incarnate ministry. Athanasius had no problems with the many texts that spoke of the Son's frailty, prayer life, obedience, or death on the cross. For him these texts affirmed unambiguously the Son's full human nature temporally and voluntarily assumed for our salvation. Such human traits, he argued, were not to be read back into the eternal Trinity.

As part of their case the Arians claimed that if the Son is 'begotten' (they took this to mean created) by the Father, then he must be less than the Father because all human sons are less than their father. In reply to this reasoning Athanasius first argued that the biblical metaphor of 'begetting' when applied to the Son of God did not imply creation. The Bible did not teach that the Son was one of God the Creator's works but rather God himself differentiated from the Father by origination.

For Athanasius the Son was 'begotten' of the Father not created by the Father. The terminology of begetting *differentiated* the persons, but did not subordinate the persons. In regard to the Arians' claim that all sons were less than their human fathers, Athanasius next argued that in fact all sons are *one in being* with their father.

A third incredibly important insight into what the scriptures taught about the persons of the Trinity was made when Athanasius pointed out that in the Bible what God *does* reveals *who God is*—the being of God is made manifest in the works of God. He thus argued that it is because Jesus does what only God can do (raise the dead, heal the sick, forgive sins, offer salvation, reign as Lord and head over all, etc) that we are to know he is God (cf. Jn. 5:19). So, for Athanasius, in contrast to Arius and his followers, the being/nature/essence and the works/operations/functions of the Father and the Son are one. The three divine persons are one in being and one in action. *Who they are* and *what they do* cannot be separated.

In enunciating this principle, Athanasius perfectly captured biblical thinking. This unity of being and action between the Father, Son and Spirit, first spelt out by Athanasius, is a constant theme from this point on in the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. On this basis it is held that to *eternally* subordinate the Son or the Spirit in work/operation/function by necessity implies their ontological subordination. If one person on the basis of personal identity alone must always take the subordinate role, then they must be a subordinated person, less than their superior in some way.

15 Athanasius, 3.29 (p. 409).

Athanasius believed that in the incarnate Son, God was truly present in the world in human form. The texts he quotes most of all are, 'The Father and I are one' (Jn. 10:30), and, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn. 14:9). So emphatic was he that the Son was fully God, he repeatedly says, 'The same things are said of the Son which are said of the Father, except for calling him Father.'¹⁶

The Cappadocian Fathers

In the later part of Athanasius' life his closest and most gifted theological allies were 'The Cappadocian fathers' (three learned theologians who were all born in Cappadocia in Asia Minor) who likewise were totally opposed to subordinating the Son in the *eternal* Trinity in any way. In thinking about the God revealed in scripture they begin not with God the Creator but with the eternally triune Godhead (*Theotes*).¹⁷ For them the divine three share at an inter-trinitarian level one being (*ousios*) yet they are eternally three *hypostases*. The *hypostases* could be distinguished but not separated, differentiated but not divided. For them their unity is that of three persons in communion (*koinonia*) and it is so profound that each person interpenetrates the other.¹⁸

Like Athanasius, the Cappadocians not only insisted that all three persons were one in being (*homoousios*) but also that they worked/functioned/operated as one. Oneness in being necessitated oneness in action and vice versa. So Basil wrote:

We perceive the operation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to be one and the same, in no respect showing differences or variation; from this identity of operation we necessarily infer the unity of nature.¹⁹

For the Cappadocians the idea that the Son is eternally obedient, always a servant under the Father, as their chief Arian opponent Eunomius emphatically and repeatedly argued,²⁰ was a gross error. They take up this matter time and time again. In reply they insist that in the New Testament the Son's servanthood and obedience is limited to the incarnation. Gregory of Nyssa says, 'By his partaking of creation he also partook of servitude.'²¹ Furthermore they argued that in the incarnation the Son was representative man.²² His obedience countered the disobedience of Adam that had brought ruin to the human race. Again I quote Gregory of Nyssa who in

¹⁶ 'Four Discourses', 3.4 (p. 395), 3.5 (p. 395), 3.6 (p. 396), 'The Councils', 3.49 twice (p. 476).

¹⁷ I refer readers to the writings of the Cappadocians in *NPNF*, vols 5, 7, and 8 rather than secondary sources.

¹⁸ This insight first found in Athanasius was later called in Greek, the doctrine of *perichoresis*.

¹⁹ Basil 'Letters', *NPNF*, 8, 189.7 (p. 32).

²⁰ For details on this see Eunomius' 'Confession of Faith' as given by Hanson, *The Search*, pp. 619-621, particularly towards the bottom of p. 620.

²¹ *NPNF*, 5, 6.4, (p. 187) For similar comments by Basil see *NPNF*, 8, 'Basil Letters', 261.2 (p. 300).

²² As Gregory of Nazianzus says explicitly. See *NPNF*, 7, 'Theological Orations', 4.5 (p. 311).

answering Eunomius points out that 'the mighty Paul' says 'he became obedient' (Philp, 2:8) to accomplish the mystery of redemption by the cross, who had emptied himself by assuming the likeness and fashion of a man ... healing the disobedience of men by his own obedience'.²³ For the Cappadocians, the Son's obedience was not compulsory submission to another's will, the will of the Father, but rather a coincidence of willing. What the Father wills and what the Son wills are always one. Basil holds that the Son's

will is connected in indissoluble union with the Father. Do not let us then understand by what is called a 'commandment' a peremptory mandate delivered by organs of speech, and giving orders to the Son, as to a subordinate, concerning what he ought to do. Let us rather in a sense befitting the Godhead, perceive the transmission of will, like the reflection of an object in a mirror, passing without note between the Father and the Son.²⁴

On this basis the Cappadocians argued the divine three have but one will. They always work in perfect harmony and unison.

For the Cappadocians the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are differentiated by their differing origins and thus differing relations and nothing else. The Father is 'unbegotten,' the Son 'begotten' and the Spirit 'proceeding'. For them differentiating the persons in this way did not in any way suggest the sub-

ordination of the Son or the Spirit. To ensure the unity of the Godhead they spoke of the Father as the 'sole source' or 'sole origin' (Greek *monarche*) of the being of the Son and the Spirit. In their thinking this too did not imply any subordination whatsoever for the three *hypostases* shared in the one being of the Godhead and each interpenetrated the other. In other words for them, derivation of being did not imply diminution of being, or demotion in authority.

However, in making the Father the *arche*/origin of the being of the Son and the Spirit, many western theologians think a conceptual weakness was introduced. A certain priority was given to the Father. To simply deny that the *monarche* of the Father envisages the Son and the Spirit standing 'below' the Father does not solve the problem. Eastern Orthodox theologians generally endorse the *monarche* of the Father, denying it implies any hint of subordinationism. Nevertheless in recent times, as an outcome of ecumenical dialogue, some of them have begun speaking, as Athanasius did, of the divine Trinity as the *arche*.²⁵ Like most contemporary theologians they want to exclude completely subordinationism.

First at the council of Nicea in 325, and then at the council of Constantinople in 381 the idea that the Son was subordinated in his being to the Father was totally rejected. In the Nicene creed, as finally worded at the council of Constantinople, the Son is confessed as one in being (*homoousios*) with the

²³ *NPNF*, 5, 'Against Eunomius', 2.11 (p. 121). See also 'Basil Letters', 261.2 (p. 300).

²⁴ *NPNF*, 8, 'On the Spirit', 8.20 (p. 14)

²⁵ See further my *The Trinity*, p. 100.

Father.²⁶ In making this theological pronouncement this creed also pronounced on how the scriptures should be read. To read back into the eternal Trinity the subordination of the Son seen in the incarnation, the creed rules, is a hermeneutical error.

Augustine and his heirs.

Early in the fifth century, in the western side of the Roman Empire another great theologian, Augustine of Hippo (a city in North Africa), gave his mind to restating the doctrine of the Trinity. In his presentation of this doctrine he begins with the unity of the triune God and then explains how the divine three are distinct 'persons'.²⁷ Like Athanasius, he is particularly keen to first establish how the scriptures are to be read correctly—canonically is his word. For him the unequivocal divinity and unity of the three 'persons' is the foundational premise. Then, making Philippians 2:4-6 the key to a right reading of scripture, he insists that all texts that refer to the equality in divinity, majesty and authority of the Son speak of his eternal status, and all texts that refer to some subordination or frailty speak of his temporal and voluntary subordination in the incarnation for our salvation.

In Augustine the emphasis falls on the one substance or being of God.

With this starting point there can be no subordination whatsoever in the Trinity since all three persons 'share the inseparable equality of one substance present in divine unity'.²⁸ Because the three persons are one in their inner life, this means that for Augustine their works in the world are one. Particular works could be 'appropriated' to each person (e.g. creation to the Father, redemption to the Son and sanctification to the Spirit) but always the divine three act as one. They work in perfect unison and harmony. Thus he spoke of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as having 'one will'. For this reason it is an impossibility for Augustine to speak of the Father commanding and the Son obeying as if there could be a conflict of wills within the eternal Trinity.

With his stress on the unity and equality of the three divine persons, Augustine also had to carefully and unambiguously distinguish them to avoid any hint of modalism. He argued that the names 'Father', 'Son' and 'Holy Spirit' are designations given to three unchanging and unchangeable relations²⁹ within the Godhead, predicated on differing origination. The Father is distinguished as Father because he 'begets' the Son; the Son is distinguished because as the Son he is 'begotten'; the Spirit is distinguished from the Father and the Son because he is 'bestowed' by them.³⁰ For Augustine, just as with Athanasius and the

²⁶ It is to be noted, however, that from the eleventh century there have been Eastern and Western versions of this creed that differ as to whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or the Father and the Son. I explain this debate below.

²⁷ See the translation of *De Trinitate* by E. Hill, *The Trinity*, (Brooklyn: New City, 1991).

²⁸ *De Trinitate*, 2.15.

²⁹ i.e. the Father is always the Father of the Son, the Son is always the Son of the Father etc.

³⁰ *De Trinitate*, 5.1ff.

Cappadocians, differentiating the persons does not imply the subordination of any of the persons. Equality and difference are both fully embraced without reserve.

Augustine thought of the Holy Spirit as the mutual love of the Father and the Son and as the communal bond that unites them. This meant that for him the Holy Spirit could not be the Spirit of just one of them but rather of the two in relationship. This theological insight he found taught in scripture. He noted that the Bible spoke of the Holy Spirit as both the Spirit of the Son and the Spirit of the Father. The Father *and* the Son must therefore be 'the origin', or 'principlum' of the Holy Spirit.

It is thus of no surprise to find that at the third council of Toledo in 589 the words 'and the Son' (these three English words translate one Latin word, *Filioque*) were added to the Nicene Creed which had until that time spoken of the Spirit as proceeding solely 'from the Father'. This led to a growing divide between Eastern and Western theologians. The latter generally believe this addition safeguarded the vital truth established in the Nicene creed that the Father and the Son are one in being/substance; it also disallows any disjunction between the Son and the Spirit that would be contrary to scripture where the Spirit can be called either 'the Spirit of God' or 'the Spirit of Jesus' (Acts 16:7, cf. Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6). This addition was not intended to subordinate the Spirit to the Father and the Son, but it must be admitted that the Eastern Orthodox objection that it does just this, at least conceptually, cannot be ignored.

After Augustine's death his 'model' of the Trinity was encapsulated in the

so-called, Athanasian Creed. (Athanasius was long dead when it was compiled.) This creed stresses the unity of the Trinity and the equality of the persons. It ascribes equal divinity, majesty and authority to all three persons. 'Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Spirit.' All three are said to be 'almighty' and 'Lord' (no subordination in authority); 'none is before or after another (no hierarchical ordering); none is greater, or less than another (no subordination in being or nature) ... all three are co-equal'. The Son is only 'inferior to the Father as touching his manhood'. A more explicit rejection of the *eternal* subordination of the Son in being, function, or authority is hard to imagine. Those who confess this creed are affirming that this is what they believe and that this is what the Bible teaches when read correctly.

The great Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century restated and developed Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity. Like Augustine he began with and emphasised the unity of God before he discussed the distinction of the persons. With his stress on the divine unity of the Godhead there can be no subordinationism whatsoever within the eternal or immanent Trinity. Roman Catholic theologians have consistently followed him on this principle. There is not time in this essay to say more on Aquinas but more must be said about Calvin's teaching on the Trinity because for many evangelicals he is the theologian *par excellence*.

John Calvin.

Calvin made several important contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity.

Foreshadowing modern developments he eclectically drew on the best of Eastern and Western trinitarian thinking, yet seeking always to be faithful to the formulations of this doctrine as it had been passed on. However, as the Bible was his primary authority, he was not adverse to modifying terminology or explanations found in the tradition so that the scriptures determined the theology he enunciated. But he soon saw that appealing to the Bible did not silence his subordinationist opponents who also appealed to scripture, quoting texts that seemed to support their position. Like Athanasius and Augustine before him he concluded that Philippians 2:4-11 prescribed how scripture was to be read correctly. He returns to this text time and time again. Here he sees the scriptures teaching that in becoming man the Son willingly and freely chose to subordinate himself for our salvation. He took 'the form of a slave ... and became obedient to the point of death'. On this basis Calvin insists, like Athanasius and Augustine, that all texts that speak of the frailty, subordination, or obedience of the Son refer only to his incarnate existence. Eternally the Son is equal in divinity, majesty, and authority with the Father and the Spirit.

For Calvin the Son perfectly reveals the Father. He is 'God with us'. Like Athanasius, he loves to quote Jesus' words in John 14:9, 'whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. Boldly he argues the Son's divine status is not bestowed by the Father. He is God in his own right (*autotheos*). Nevertheless, this revelation of God's self is in the flesh and as such is 'veiled' and 'concealed', rec-

ognized only by faith.³¹ In response, his opponents argued that the Son's servant status and obedience, so clearly attested to in scripture, indicates rather an ongoing subordinate status for the Son. The great Reformer goes to great pains to refute his critics. He notes that Paul quite specifically in Philippians 2:8 speaks of the Son's 'obedience' as one of the human traits that his 'voluntary' emptying of himself involved. He writes,

Laying aside the splendor of majesty, he showed himself obedient to his Father (cf. Phil. 2:8). Having completed his subjection, he was at last crowned with glory and honour (Heb. 2:9) and exalted to the highest Lordship that before him every knee should bow ... (Phil. 2:10).³²

Then in the next sub-section in his *Institutes*, in speaking of the soteriological work of the Son, he returns to the matter of his obedience. Now he points out that the Son had to be obedient if he were to be the second Adam. To make his point he asks,

How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God and acquired righteousness to render God favourable and kindly towards us? To this we in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience. This is proved by Paul's testimony: 'As by one man's disobedience many were made sin-

31 *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed J. Neil, trans. F. L. Battles (London: SCM, 1960), 2.13.2.

32 *Institutes*, 2.14.3.

ners, so by one man's obedience we are made righteous' (Rom. 5:19).³³

He then adds, 'His willing obedience is the important thing because a sacrifice not offered voluntarily would not have furthered righteousness.' The voluntary nature of the Son's obedience is a recurring motif in Calvin's writings.

What Calvin says on this matter is unambiguous. For him the Son's obedience is limited to the incarnation. It is indicative of his true humanity assumed for our salvation.³⁴ The Son's last act of obedience was the cross (Philp. 2:8). From them on he rules as Lord and head over all. In this whole discussion on the person and work of Christ in the *Institutes* we see Calvin contrasting what he calls, 'the time of his humiliation'³⁵ of his earthly ministry with his subsequent majesty and authority in heaven.³⁶ Thus for Calvin, to read back into the exalted status what scripture explicitly limits to the Son's humbled status is a grave error. This he saw was the root cause of sub-

ordinationism of his day.

B. B. Warfield in his lengthy and detailed essay on Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity concludes that Calvin's aim was 'to eliminate the last remnants of subordinationism',³⁷ being in 'inexpugnable opposition to subordinationists of all types'.³⁸

The twentieth century

Sadly from the time of Calvin until late in the twentieth century, most Protestant theologians lost interest in the doctrine of the Trinity, as did most Roman Catholic theologians. The tendency was to treat the Trinity as a formal doctrine that needed to be outlined and then left to one side. Not surprisingly, many of the discussions of the *Trinity* in theological textbooks from this period are sadly inadequate and sometimes historically and theologically in error. Theologians who purport to be teaching historical orthodoxy all too often endorse modalism or subordinationism.

Two exceptions to this general rule among Reformed and evangelical theologians should be noted. First we mention B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), the great defender of biblical authority. In opposition to the subordinationism espoused by Charles Hodge he wrote to 'vigorously reassert the principle of equalisation' in the Trinity.³⁹ Mainly by appeal to the Bible he refuted argu-

33 *Institutes*, 2.16.5.

34 P. van Buren, *Christ in Our Place*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), p. 38, says, 'We cannot speak of the obedience of Christ in Calvin's theology without speaking of the strong emphasis he puts on the idea that this obedience was performed in Christ's human nature only.' See pp. 23-40 where he develops this theme. For a virtually identical conclusion see also R. A. Peterson, *Calvin and the Atonement* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 1999), pp. 61-68.

35 *Institutes*, 2.11.12

36 On this basis Reformed theologians developed their Christology, speaking of the two states of Christ, his humiliated state in the incarnation and his exalted state after the resurrection.

37 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity' in *Calvin and Augustine*, (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1956), p. 230.

38 'Calvin's Doctrine of the Trinity', p. 251.

39 B.B. Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity', in *Biblical Foundations* (London: Tyndale, 1958), p. 116.

ments used to suggest that the Son and the Spirit are *eternally* subordinated in their 'subsistence' (personal being) and/or in their 'operations' (work or function). Warfield does speak of the subordination of the Son in 'function' in the work of redemption.⁴⁰ This subordination he says was voluntarily, 'due to a convention, an agreement between the persons of the Trinity', and he insists it is not eternal. This means that although the terminology differs, Warfield in speaking of the functional subordination of the Son is referring basically to what I call the temporal and voluntary subordination of the Son in the incarnation.

In even more detail Herman Bavinck (1854-1921) in the Netherlands masterfully restated the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity in the second volume of his *Dogmatics*, later translated into English in abbreviated form as, *The Doctrine of God*.⁴¹ In this work Bavinck not only gives an excellent account of the doctrine of the Trinity as it had been historically developed but also sets out to repudiate modalism and all forms of subordinationism, two errors he sees as a perennial threats to the life and well-being of the church.

However, most attribute the awakened contemporary interest in the doctrine of the Trinity to Karl Barth among Protestants and Karl Rahner among Roman Catholics. More has been written on this doctrine in the last thirty

years than any other doctrine. This has involved a return to the historic sources and the development of the best insights from the Eastern and Western models of the Trinity. In this process, many have found the contribution of Athanasius particularly instructive.

Some discussions have sought to break new ground, but the predominant trend has been to utilise the best insights from the past, depicting the Trinity as the three divine persons bound together in a unity of being and action, mutually indwelling one another. The evangelical theologian Millard Erickson in his 1995 book, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* eloquently sums up how the doctrine is understood by most contemporary theologians.

The Trinity is a communion of three persons, three centers of consciousness, who exist and always have existed in union with one another and in dependence on one another ...Each is essential to the life of the others, and to the life of the Trinity. They are bound to one another in love, *agape* love, which therefore unites them in the closest and most intimate of relationships. This unselfish, *agape* love makes each more concerned for the other than for himself. There is therefore a mutual submission of each to each of the others and a mutual glorifying of one another. There is complete equality of the three.⁴²

40 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity', p. 110.

41 Herman Bavinck (translated and edited, by William Hendriksen). *The Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951).

42 Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), p. 331.

Practical outcomes

Because virtually all theologians agree that the doctrine of the Trinity should inform human relationships correctly, enunciating the historically developed doctrine of the Trinity is of great practical consequence. If in the Trinity all have the same authority, 'none are before or after', all are 'co-equal' (the Athanasian Creed), then the doctrine of the Trinity calls into question all forms of human domination. It reminds us that totalitarian regimes that ride roughshod over people, hierarchical ordering that presupposes that some are born to rule and others to obey cannot and never will reflect the divine ideal seen in the Trinity. And to be quite specific, rather than supporting the permanent subordination of women in the church and the home, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity suggests exactly the opposite.

Postscript: The difficult texts

In answer to what I have written some will reply that I have not explained those few often quoted texts that do suggest the Son is subordinate to the Father. I have dealt with the obedience theme but what about John 14:28, 1 Corinthians 11:3, 15:28 and the fact that the Father sends the Son? Let me very briefly comment on these few texts subordinationists love to quote so as not to leave any loose ends.

John 14:28: 'The Father is greater than I.' This is a difficult text to be sure because it stands in stark contrast to John's teaching that the Son reveals the Father and the Father and the Son are one. The best solution would seem to be that given by Ambrose, Augus-

tine, Calvin and many others that Jesus here speaks as the incarnate Son in his state of humiliation.

John 4:34 etc.: In John's Gospel Jesus is he who is 'sent' by the Father. In that the Son is sent, some see eternal subordination implied. He always does as he is commanded. However, in John the sending of the Son is best explained in terms of the Jewish *shaliach* principle, the one sent has the same authority of the one who sends. If this is the case, sending does not indicate subordination but equal authority.

1 Corinthians 11:3: 'God is the head of Christ.' Many evangelicals today think that here Paul speaks of a fourfold hierarchy, God-Christ-man-woman. This is not the case. Paul in fact speaks of a three-fold pairing; in each case one person being the metaphorical head of another, and not in a hierarchical order. First he mentions Christ and man and last, God and Christ. What Paul seems to be doing in this verse and throughout this passage is seeking to differentiate men and women, not subordinate Christ or women. Grudem wants us to believe that the Greek word *kephale* (translated into English as 'head') always means a 'person in authority over'.⁴³ His premise is that words have one fixed meaning, the context does not matter. Virtually all linguists are of another opinion. Any given word has a range of meanings and the context is the most important indicator of that meaning. The erudite Anthony Thiselton carefully considers Grudem's thesis and dismisses it. He holds that Paul

⁴³ Grudem, *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 47.

is playing on the 'multiple meanings' of *kephale* in 1 Cor. 11:3-16 and in v. 3 it does not 'denote a relation of subordination or authority over'.⁴⁴ The context rules out of court Grudem's understanding of *kephale* in v. 3 because Paul immediately goes on to speak of men and women leading the congregation in prayer and prophecy, the two most important ministries in the Corinthian church, so long as they are differentiated by what they have or do not have on their 'head'. To reply that prophecy does not signify authority to speak on behalf of God, whereas teaching does, is special pleading. Paul makes prophecy the second most important gift ahead of teaching (1 Cor. 11:28). Here we need also to remember that elsewhere in Paul the risen Son is said to be 'head over all things' (Eph. 1:22, Col. 2:10)—and no one disputes that

Paul in these verses is speaking of Christ as 'a person in authority over.'

1 Corinthians 15:28: In this passage Paul seems to speak of the Son's rule coming to an end at the consummation of all things and of him becoming subject to the Father. The first problem this text raises is that elsewhere the Son's reign is said to be 'forever' (2 Sam. 7:2-4; Isa. 9:7; Lk. 1:33; 2 Peter 1:11; Rev. 7:10-12, 11:15; cf. Eph. 1:20). Then there is the question as to whether the Greek verb translated 'subjected' is passive voice, 'Christ is subjected by God', or middle, 'Christ subjects himself'. The latter seems preferable because in the incarnation the Son voluntarily subordinates himself and this would be a parallel. What Paul thus seems to be suggesting is that the rule God the Father gave to God the Son at the resurrection is freely handed back to the Father by the Son at the end. Rather than speaking of fixed roles, or of the eternal subordination of the Son, this text indicates a changing of roles in differing epochs.

⁴⁴ Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 816. D. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003), p. 506-516, reaches virtually the same conclusion.

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