

“Written as a contribution to an important evangelical debate, this erudite volume deserves a readership across ecclesial divisions. All Thomists, for example, will find Tyler Wittman’s brilliant account of Aquinas’s Trinitarian theology to be necessary reading. May this volume’s Trinitarian reflections have a healing and unitive effect, not only among the evangelicals involved in the debate, but also across ecclesiastical lines so that we ‘may all be one!’”

—Matthew Levering,

James N. and Mary D. Perry Jr. Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary,  
and coeditor of *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*

“This new collection of Trinitarian studies is theologically sensitive, biblically attuned, and historically concerned. Everyone interested in the future of Trinitarian theology within evangelical Protestantism will find this book a good and encouraging guide.”

—Lewis Ayres,

Durham University and Australian Catholic University

“In recent years, the waters of evangelical Trinitarian theology have been roiled and muddied by unfortunate debates about the subordination of the Son. The very fine essays collected in this volume make genuine progress in exegetical, biblical, as well as historical and systematic theology, and they will do much to help bring an end to this debate.”

—Thomas H. McCall, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Professorial Fellow in  
Exegetical and Analytic Theology, University of St Andrews

“Orthodoxy matters. Who is the God we are confessing, worshipping, and living for in faith and obedience? Who is the God whom we long to share eternal communion with on the new heaven and the new earth? What theological cultures are we receiving? It is incumbent upon the church to retrieve an orthodox confession and pass that down to the next generation. *Trinity without Hierarchy* addresses the different academic, dogmatic, historic, and practical camera angles of a contemporary debate regarding whether there is hierarchal distinction between the persons of the Godhead. The impact of this teaching has already left a heavy fingerprint on the church. As a laywoman, I see who pays the price when academics try to apply an unorthodox view of the Trinity to gender relations. What will the continuing intergenerational impact be if we do not call for renewal of the orthodox faith?”

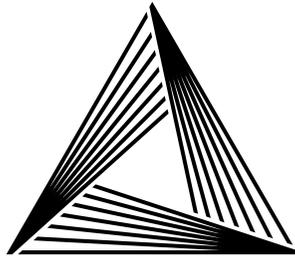
—Aimee Byrd,

author of *Why Can't We Be Friends?* and *No Little Women*,  
cohost of “Mortification of Spin”

“First, open theism; now, eternal functional subordination of the Son. Evangelical theology has shown itself to be soft at the very point on which the gospel depends: the doctrine of the triune God. This collection of essays rightly reminds us that the primary purpose of Trinitarian theology is to enable the right reading of Scripture and to preserve the integrity of the gospel message, not to serve as a template for human social relations. The authors of *Trinity without Hierarchy* carefully examine key New Testament texts, as well as the work of past and present theologians. The result is a compelling and comprehensive case that evangelicals are most biblical when they adhere to the catholic and orthodox tradition.”

—Kevin J. Vanhoozer,  
Research Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

# TRINITY WITHOUT HIERARCHY



Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy  
in Evangelical Theology

**MICHAEL F. BIRD &  
SCOTT HARROWER**

EDITORS

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**Graham Cole,  
in thankful appreciation,  
for his leadership and service  
to Christ the King.**



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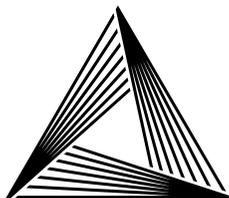
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## PREFACE

# Theologians of a Lesser Son

MICHAEL F. BIRD

I entered the debate about the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father with two articles coauthored with my former colleague Robert Shillaker. There we argued *contra* Kevin Giles that an economic submission of the Son to the Father did inform relationships within the immanent Trinity; and we concurrently argued *contra* Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem that this had very limited relevance to issues of gender roles, and that furthermore we should probably drop the language of subordination since it was flirting with Arianism.<sup>1</sup> As far as I could tell, Ware and Grudem were clearly not Arians; they did not deny the eternity of the Son, they affirmed that the Son was of the same substance as the Father, and they believed in their own minds that they were orthodox Trinitarians. That said, their language of “subordination” certainly bothered me, but I erstwhile assumed that such scholars were using the term not in its actual sense, but as more of a clunky yet effective way of correlating the economic Trinity with the immanent Trinity and safeguarding the personal distinctions within the Godhead. I imagined that their preference for “subordination” was akin to how Karl Barth used the term “modes of being” (*seinsweise*), not because he was a modalist, but because he wanted to avoid the philosophical baggage attached to the words for “person” used in both the

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1. Michael F. Bird and Robert Shillaker, “Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles: A Response to Recent Discussion,” *TrinJ* 29 (2008): 267–83; idem, “The Son Really, Really Is the Son: A Response to Kevin Giles,” *TrinJ* 30 (2009): 257–68.

fourth- and twentieth-century discussions.<sup>2</sup> For myself, I much preferred Wolfhart Pannenberg's notion that Jesus's divine sonship implies his obedient self-distinction from the Father, but it is a horizontal rather than a vertical obedience, principally about *taxis* ("order") rather than *archē* ("authority").<sup>3</sup>

However, after reading and rereading several volumes by complementarians, where the language of subordination and hierarchy are championed, I am now convinced that Grudem, Ware, and others were arguing for something analogical to a semi-Arian subordinationism.<sup>4</sup> The Trinitarian relations being advocated by such scholars are not identical to Arius, since proponents identify the Son as coeternal with the Father and sharing the same substance as the Father. In addition, I think it is fair to say neither are Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS) advocates pure semi-Arians, because they do not think Jesus is merely like the Father nor do they consider the Son to be the Father's creature. Those caveats aside, they resemble a species of semi-Arianism, called "homoianism,"<sup>5</sup> by virtue of three things: (1) an overreliance on the economic Trinity in Scripture for formulating immanent Trinitarian relationships, (2) leading to a robust subordinationism characterized by a hierarchy within the Godhead, (3) consequently identifying the Son as possessing a lesser glory and majesty than the Father.<sup>6</sup>

Problems abound with this subordinationist and/or quasi-homoian complementarianism view of the Trinity, not least in how advocates describe the theological lay of the land and map their own position within it. For a start, one wonders if it wise to divide perspectives into so-called "feminist" views of the Trinity in contradistinction to so-called "complementarian" views of the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> I submit that this classification tells us more about the classifiers than it does about the *status quaestionis* in contemporary Trinitarian discussions. A historical taxonomy would normally refer to "orthodox," that is to say Nicene-Constantinopolitan formulations, over and against "heterodox" positions, such as Arianism, Sabellianism, and Tri-theism. Going further, within orthodox Trinitarianism, one could opt to distinguish "Classical" from "Social" configurations of the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> On close inspection, then, the descrip-

- 
2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969), 1/1: 406–31.
  3. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991 [1988]), 1:308–17.
  4. See Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), esp. 250–51; Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); Bruce A. Ware and John Starke, eds., *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinctions of Persons, Implications for Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).
  5. For a good introduction to homoianism, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 348–86.
  6. A similar observation is made by Tom McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism? Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 186.
  7. Wayne A. Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).
  8. As done in Jason S. Sexton, ed., *Two Views on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).

tion of “feminist” and “complementarian” views of the Trinity do not represent historical categorizations or even correspond to contemporary schools of Trinitarian thought. Thus, to insist on views of gender roles as the single criterion for classifying Trinitarian formulations is a strange move. It is also a categorization that is, to be frank, utterly bizarre in that it subordinates Trinitarian doctrine to a very narrow band of anthropology (i.e., gender roles); it even turns out to be a meaningless categorization when it is realized that complementarian and egalitarian advocates both can affirm a non-subordinationist Trinitarian theology.

The problem, as I see it, is that a quasi-homoianism was drafted into the complementarian narrative by a small cohort of theologians in order to buttress their claims about gender roles and to define what distinguishes them as complementarians. In which case, something like homoianism is being utilized as scaffolding for complementarianism with the result that a defense of complementarianism involves a defense of a quasi-homoianism. Now it is quite clear that not all complementarians will allow their views of gender roles in the church to be tethered to this quasi-homoianism since many complementarians will regard such a formulation as extrinsic to their accounts of gender roles and will simultaneously wish to affirm an orthodox and Nicene Trinitarianism in which there is no subordination. Indeed, this book proves that very point since it comprises of several essays written by a mixture of egalitarian and complementarian scholars who are all singularly united in their articulation of a non-subordinationist and non-hierarchical account of intra-Trinitarian relationships. This is fatal to the quasi-homoianistic brand of complementarianism because it demonstrates that a Nicene and orthodox Trinitarian theology ultimately transcends and even unites those with different convictions about gender roles, marriage, and family. Clearly, then, one does not have to hold to a homoian and hierarchical view of the Trinity in order to be complementarian.

The central thesis of this book is that the evangelical consensus, in keeping with its catholic and orthodox heritage, affirms that the Trinity consists of one God who is three distinct and equal persons, and the distinctions do not entail subordination or hierarchy. As such, this volume tries to do two things. First, it constitutes a robust restatement of Trinitarian orthodoxy with special attention paid to a non-subordinationist and non-hierarchical account of the relationships within the Godhead. Second, it attempts to wrestle the doctrine of the Trinity away from the trenches of American evangelical debates about gender and authority.<sup>9</sup>

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9. In this sense, the volume issues a challenge to the complementarian wing of the evangelical church to reconsider whether one sibling in their family has gone a bridge too far in trying to anchor gender roles in a particular articulation of the Trinity that potentially risks mutating into homoianism. See a similar plea by Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordinationist Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 259.

With those goals in mind, it is my hope that the following presentation of Nicene trinitarianism is as clear and persuasive as Wayne Grudem's description of the deity of Christ, and our critique of quasi-homoianism is as effective and forceful as Bruce Ware's refutation of Open Theism.<sup>10</sup> Hopefully, one day, we can all be united together and recite the wonderful words of the Athanasian Creed, which says of the church's faith:

Nothing in this Trinity is before or after,  
 nothing is greater or smaller;  
 in their entirety the three persons  
 are co-eternal and co-equal with each other

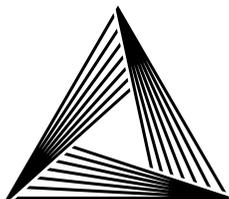
And

For the person of the Father is a distinct person,  
 the person of the Son is another,  
 and that of the Holy Spirit still another.  
 But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,  
 their glory equal, their majesty co-eternal.

The editors would like to thank the editorial team at Kregel for their massive efforts in bringing this book to completion, Mr. John Schoer for doing the indices, and the authors for their contribution and collaboration in this project.

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10. See Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 543–63; Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000); idem, *Their God Is Too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003).



# Introduction

MICHAEL F. BIRD

**T**he objective of this volume is to provide a non-hierarchical and pro-Nicene account of intra-Trinitarian relations. This will be achieved by exemplifying instances of Trinitarian interpretation of the New Testament, appropriating insights from historical theology, and offering reflections by systematic theologians on the subject of the Trinity. Our contributors are diverse in terms of age, gender, denomination, views of ministry, and geographical distribution. However, they are all united in their concern that evangelical accounts of the Trinity remain fiercely committed to a catholic and orthodox theology of the Godhead. Evangelical theologians, who claim to be biblical and orthodox, are not at liberty to dispense with eternal generation, nor to substitute roles of authority for Nicene terms for articulating the relationships between the divine persons. Thus, the contributors of this volume engage in a robust defense of Trinitarian hermeneutics and Nicene orthodoxy.

The essays that follow are broken down into three sections: biblical perspectives on the Trinity, insights from historical theology, and perspectives in systematic theology.

## **Biblical Perspectives on the Trinity**

Although the word “Trinity” is not found in the New Testament, nonetheless, Trinitarian doctrine is the result of the church’s exegesis of Scripture and its philosophical reflections on the language of Scripture. The aim of theology proper has been to develop a framework and grammar to describe Scripture’s coherence and to rule out erroneous configurations of the Godhead.

The Gospel of John was vital in the church's christological controversies by providing the textual terrain and grammar upon which the controversies were largely fought. This gospel, more than any other, also shaped the church's Trinitarian discourse and how it articulated both the Son's agency and unity with the Father. Thus John's Gospel cannot be ignored in any study of immanent and economic Trinitarian relationships. To this end, Adesola Akala examines how the Gospel of John, which mostly portrays the Son's submission to the Father, also effectively expresses the Son's equality with the Father. She argues that John's Gospel ingeniously unveils Jesus, who is divinely equal with God, as the *Son sent by the Father* into the world to fulfill a salvific mission. Then, using John 5 as a case study, she surveys how pro-Nicene theologians have understood the theme of subordination in the Gospel of John without negating the Son's equality with the Father. Her conclusion is that the Son's eternal divinity and equality with God is uncompromised by his mission into the world for the salvation of humanity.

In regards to 1 Corinthians 11:3–11, with the language of headship for God over Christ and man over woman, Madison Pierce offers a direct counterpoint to complementarian readings of this passage which stress God's economic authority over the incarnate Christ, which is projected into eternal immanent relations between Father and Son, and then made the template for male-female relations in terms of authority and submission. First, Pierce proposes that the God-Christ relationship expressed in 1 Corinthians 11:3 is at best analogically representative of eternal subordination, but is not the sum of immanent Trinitarian relations. Second, she highlights the importance of *taxis* ("order") over *archē* ("authority") for understanding the Father-Son relations and how the persons are distinguished by their number and sequence within the Trinitarian *taxis* and not by any rank discerned in their economic operations. Third, Pierce presents lexicographical evidence that *kephalē* in 1 Corinthians 11:3 has the meaning of "first" and "prominent." The result is that God is prominent over Christ in a manner that reflects the dynamics of pro-Nicene *taxis* language use, that is, unity of purpose at the same time as economic differentiation. Paul's intention, Pierce claims, is not to establish relations of authority for the Corinthian church but to set forth the right worship for men and women given their distinctiveness. Consequently it would be misleading and inadequate to ground gender relationships between men and women within a reading of Corinthians 11:3 that postulates hierarchy between God and Christ. Finally, applying the concept of *redoublement* (French for "repeating") to the topic, Pierce contends that God is the Father only insofar as he has a Son and vice versa for the Son. This entails that the primary matrix for understanding their relationship is not authority and subordination; rather, it is unity and mutuality. She concludes rather that we do best to remember that according to Paul the Trinity is characterized by *taxis* rather than *tiers*.

In the epistle to the Hebrews, another christologically rich document, Amy Peeler examines how the Father-Son relationship depicted there

informs Nicene orthodoxy. According to Peeler, Hebrews discloses that while God the Father and God the Son are both distinct persons, nonetheless, both persons are equally and gloriously sovereign and they act out of the one divine will to rescue humanity. The author uses paternal and filial language to communicate the uniquely intimate relation between two distinct persons of the Godhead. In contrast, supporters of subordination commit a category mistake by equating the Father's primacy in relation to the Son with the Father's authority over the Son. Yet the author of Hebrews argues that there never was a time when the Father's authority was distinct from the Son's, since Father and Son are mutually dependent upon the other, and upon the Spirit. The language of sending and being sent does not pertain to the Son's submission, but more properly expresses differentiated roles to achieve the one divine will which is human salvation. Peeler concludes that in a theological reading of Hebrews there was and is mutual authority but no submission. That is because authority was given by the Father to the exalted Son as a reiteration of the equal glory, will, and power that the Son shares eternally with the Father.

Ian Paul has the gargantuan task of exploring how the book of Revelation describes the relationship between Jesus and God the Father. He begins with examination of the opening greeting of the book as well as the worship of God and the Lamb in Revelation 4–5. His conclusion is that while Jesus and the Father are distinguished, nonetheless, Jesus shares in the being, actions, and worship of the one God. In addition, the book of Revelation is far from binitarian, since it has a germinal Trinitarianism in that the Spirit is the agent who activates life in the present and in the age to come, and so participates in and effects the salvific work of God the Father and Jesus Christ. In the end, Revelation explicitly attributes the roles and functions of God to Jesus, God and Jesus are regarded as equal persons in the Godhead, and John the Seer presents the Spirit as acting for both God and Jesus. Paul's final comment is quite apt: "Nicene belief in God as Trinity is the only doctrinal and theological framework which can make sense of the narrative shape and diverse imagery of the book of Revelation in its depiction of the threefold identity of God."

### Insights from Historical Theology

Trinitarian orthodoxy developed, we might say, like a slow-cooked BBQ. It took time for theologians, especially in the patristic period, to develop a lexicon and grammar for explaining what Scripture affirmed about the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (e.g., they are all divine, all persons, and all equal), developing a language that could not be used in double-speak for affirming mutually exclusive ideas (e.g., *homoousios*), and identifying which configurations of the Trinity were unbiblical or incoherent (e.g., modalism, tri-theism, and subordinationism). As such, any discussion of the Trinity will inevitably involve analysis of patristic, medieval, reformation, and modern Trinitarian discussion. The

Trinity is a doctrine, not a text, so it requires us to investigate how theologians of the past have developed and defended Trinitarian orthodoxy.

Peter Leithart demonstrates from Athanasius how any account of hierarchy within the Trinity is notoriously problematic. The Father can never be said to act independently of himself, even hypothetically, because unless the Father eternally begets the Son, he would not be the Father. This is the heart of Athanasius's axiom: No Son, no Father. Hence, the Father never *chooses* to act through the Son and Spirit, he is constituted as Father because he works in cooperation with the Son and the Spirit. Leithart then proceeds to demonstrate from Athanasius's exegesis of 1 Corinthians 1:24 how the mutual dependence on the divine persons is basic to Athanasius's account of Trinitarian theology. Here Athanasius judges that the Son is not an expression of God's wisdom and power, but is its very contents. The Father has no wisdom or power that is not identical to the Son. By implication, the Father is neither wise nor powerful without the Son. Thus, God is his power because the Father has proper power of his own that *is* the Son begotten by the Spirit. God is identical to his wisdom because the Father has eternally begotten a Son through the Spirit, a Son who *is* his word and wisdom. Athanasius's account of the Trinity rests on mutuality not hierarchy.

Amy Brown Hughes's chapter focuses on Gregory of Nyssa's specific contribution to a mode of Trinitarian discourse that came to characterize the thought of the Nicene Cappadocians such as Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil of Caesarea. She points out that Gregory played a crucial role in the establishment of theological language and concepts that locate divine unity at the level of being, while preserving the distinction of the Trinity from all other being, and avoiding hierarchies within the Godhead. During the volatile period of Trinitarian deliberation that was the late fourth century, the overarching question for Gregory was how to conceive of God as one undivided essence as well as three distinct persons. According to Brown Hughes, Gregory's theological method allows for a speaking of God that both resists hierarchical notions of God that lead to the subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and provides the church with a meaningful way to speak about God.

Tyler Wittman brings medieval scholasticism into the discussion with a study of Thomas Aquinas's account of God's inner life which attaches material significance to the divine names through the distinction between theology and economy. By focusing especially on the principles of Aquinas's inquiry, Wittman demonstrates how it frames what we can and cannot say about God's inner life through privileging the essential intelligibility of the personal names of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The relevance of Aquinas's apophatic yet contemplative approach is seen through the example of how he navigates the language of "authority" in Trinitarian discourse. Then, moving on to early modern theologians, especially in the Reformed tradition, Wittman shows that this same commitment to characterizing the inner-Trinitarian relations in minimalist terms is complemented by the traditional distinction between

theology and economy. The latter distinction in particular helps theologians such as Francis Turretin, Amandus Polanus, and John Owen situate the differentiation of authority between the Father and Son within God's economic condescension. Though the language of "authority" has figured into Trinitarian theology for a long time, it has always done so differently than it does in contemporary debates. The conclusion Wittman reaches probes the contrasts between traditional and revisionist accounts of "authority," and he suggests that the older approach for expressing and speaking about the Trinity remains the most promising avenue.

T. Robert Baylor examines the relevance of the *pactum salutis* to the eternal functional subordination debate. Drawing on the writings of John Owen, Baylor contends that early Reformed accounts of the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son to redeem the elect were intended precisely to undermine any notion that subordination is an eternal personal property of the Son. For Owen, the whole of God's redeeming work is grounded in a voluntary agreement between the Father and the Son. The Son's subordination to the Father was eternally willed as part of that agreement, but it was not naturally inherent to his relation to the Father as the Son. This is because the Son's subordination to the Father is not to be grounded in the Son's relation of origin. Instead, the subordination of Christ in the economy of grace refers us to a dependence that the Son has upon the Father in virtue of a new relationship established within the *pactum salutis*. According to Owen, it is the covenant, and not the processions, which form the sole foundation of the Son's dependence upon the Father. What is more, covenants can only be made on a voluntary basis, so that the Son was absolutely free in making this covenant. As a result, Owen ultimately grounds the Father's authority over the Son in the Son's own freedom and will. Owen seemed to be of the mind that, if the eternal Son was naturally subordinate to the Father, then his obedience in the economy would have been necessary rather than the free act of grace that it is. For Owen, then, the love and grace of the Son's mission is apparent not simply in the fact that he was humbled by the Father, but that, in his absolute freedom, the Son humbled himself and willed to take on flesh for our sakes.

Jeff Fisher looks at perspectives among Protestant scholastics on the Trinity and the intra-personal relationships therein. Fisher covers several notable Protestant theologians—Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562), Girolamo Zanchi (1516–1590), Theodore Beza (1519–1605), Zacharias Ursinus (1534–1583), Francis Gomarus (1563–1641), William Ames (1576–1633), and Francis Turretin (1623–1687)—all of whom consistently maintained the eternity and equality of the Father-Son relationship within the Trinity. Fisher explains how these theologians endeavoured to qualify and clarify almost every instance where the charge of the Son's subordination to the Father might possibly arise. They married together the eternal generation of the Son with the Son's divine aseity. In the fusion, they maintained that the Son was *homoousion* with the Father, and therefore, in the eternal generation of the Son as a

person, the divine essence was “communicated” to the Son. Accordingly, the Son was not in any sense inferior to the Father; indeed, the Son was operationally subordinate to the Father only in his role as the incarnate mediator. The Protestant scheme, then, was not eternal functional subordination, but rather something better described as *preincarnate functional obedient subjection*, since these theologians would reject any sense that the Son’s subordination corresponded with his eternal divinity or even his personhood. In a distinctively Protestant way, they supposed that the preincarnate submission of the Son to the Father was exclusively because of the triune plan that he would assume the office of the mediator and not because of his personal relationship as Son to Father. Fisher shows how the Protestant scholastics insisted that the order of subsisting as first, second, and third persons within the Godhead did not refer to a chronology of origins or to a hierarchy of authority. There is, then, no historical support among the Protestant scholastics for the view that the Son is relationally subordinate to the Father eternally.

Jules Martínez-Olivieri examines the christological method of the proponents of eternal functional subordination and finds it wanting. All christological formulations imply something about the Father-Son relationship and Martínez-Olivieri contends that a faithful Christology should be based upon the depiction of God’s hypostatic activity in the economy of redemption, concurring with the creedal confessions of Nicaea and Chalcedon. However, advocates of “eternal functional subordination” (EFS) fail to uphold this because they are attempting to trace hierarchical human gendered relations from a hierarchical conceived view of the Trinity. The divine persons are not differentiated by relations of origin—generation and procession—as normally claimed by tradition, but by active roles and expressions of authority and submission. Martínez-Olivieri regards this as a “conjecture” and “innovation,” which makes the Son’s place in the Trinity contingent upon his role within creation and thus impugns divine aseity and freedom. Further confusion appears over the Son’s two wills, human and divine, which for EFS proponents anchor claims that the Son’s divine will was for incarnation not equality with the Father. Yet a divine will that is not identical to the Father’s will implies a separate centre of consciousness indicative of tritheism. In the end, Martínez-Olivieri regards EFS as following a liberal tradition in theology that has attempted to conceive of the Trinity as a means to justify certain models of social organization.

Among modern theologians worthy of consideration, John McClean mines Wolfhart Pannenberg for perspectives that can contribute to the debate about intra-Trinitarian relationships. According to McClean, Pannenberg’s doctrine of God makes much of the submission of the Son to the Father in the historical life of Jesus. This self-distinction of the Son from the Father turns out to be, because of the resurrection, also the movement of unity of the son with the Father. Thus Pannenberg’s view, shaped by his eschatological metaphysic, is that God’s triune life takes up the economic movements

in such a way that it is not marked by submission and authority but by intimate dynamic love between the persons of the Trinity. Pannenberg posits the Father's monarchy while simultaneously claiming that the Son is the locus of the monarchy of the Father, rendering the Father as dependent upon the Son. Of course, McClean does find some aspects of Pannenberg's Trinitarianism to be problematic, not least of all Pannenberg's attempt to transpose all the economic relations of the Father and the Son into an account of eternal mutually dependent relations. McClean finds the classical approach preferable whereby the economic submission of the Son is understood in a twofold way: first, the proper submission of the incarnate Son to the Father as temporary; and second, human submission is the fitting analogical expression of the *ad intra* Father-Son relation which we signify by the phrase "eternal generation."

### Perspectives in Systematic Theology

The role of systematic theology is to resource biblical and historical theology in order to provide a contemporary restatement of the Christian faith. That restatement often engages in competition with other contemporary restatements of the faith. Accordingly, our systematic contributors deploy the tools of their craft to contend that some complementarian expressions of the Trinity are running the gauntlet of not Arianism but a semi-Arianism.

Stephen Holmes contends that within Anglophone evangelical theology and church life there has been much debate over the idea of eternal functional subordination or "eternal relationships of authority and submission" (ERAS). To ask whether EFS/ERAS are adequately Trinitarian, he says, we must first define "Trinitarian." Following Michel Barnes, Holmes argues that the only possible definition is historical. To be Trinitarian is to hold to the doctrine developed in the fourth-century debates. Insisting on a strong distinction between the divine life *in se* and the economic acts of God rules out any appeal to, for instance, the *pactum salutis* in an attempt to defend EFS/ERAS. A consideration of the Father-Son relationship suggests two possible defences of such positions, one relying on finding an eternal analogue to the economic ordering of the divine acts, and the other pressing Father-Son language to suggest that the relationship of eternal generation might entail something like EFS/ERAS. An examination of what must be said concerning the simple divine essence, however, excludes both these possibilities. According to Holmes, therefore, EFS/ERAS, or any similar doctrines, are incompatible with classical Trinitarianism.

Graham Cole provides an essay that very much summarizes the theme of the volume where he exhibits his concerns about any claims pertaining to the eternal subordination or submissiveness of the Son. He identifies the current debate as largely an internal one among social Trinitarians as to whether the Trinity is egalitarian or hierarchal and so authorizes relationships of that nature. His objection to hierarchal formulations of Trinitarian relations is that it creates "tiers" of authority within the Trinity which resonate with

species of Arian theology. He, too, sees current expressions of subordinationism as rehearsals of the semi-Arianism of the Blasphemy of Sirmium. While Arian and semi-Arian expressions of subordination need to be differentiated, Cole—following John Murray—sees the danger of collapsing the economic Trinitarian actions into the immanent Trinitarian ontology, simply because operations and essence are related but are not strictly the same thing. What is more, using any view of the Trinity to presage views of gender and ministry is likely to prove problematic in the end.

James Gordon offers a critical engagement with Philip R. Gons and Andrew David Naselli concerning the equality and distinction of persons within the Godhead. Gons and Naselli contend that their position on EFS is no more problematic than eternal generation or eternal procession. Further, they argue that their position fits within traditional orthodox Christianity. Gordon demonstrates that Gons and Naselli's claims are either unfounded or unorthodox. Moreover, they do not meet their initial hopes for their work, which was to overcome McCall and Yandell's well-known arguments against EFS. Firstly, Gordon shows that Gons and Naselli's view of divine and personal properties entails four distinct divine beings: God, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Secondly, Gordon demonstrates that Gons and Naselli drive a wedge between the divine essence and the persons in such a way that the result diverges from the mainstream Christian doctrine of God. This, together with other claims about unique personal properties for the Father and the Son, undermines Gons and Naselli's claim that their doctrine of God fits within historic Christian orthodoxy. Gordon then moves to a descriptive section on how prominent theologians including Aquinas and Anselm dealt with the issues at hand. Gordon advances the classical position (classical for both Catholics and Protestants) that the divine essence consists of nothing more than the simple divine essence, which is equal to the relations and attributes of the divine persons who are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hence, what distinguishes the persons is their opposed relations to one another rather than any "additional" personal properties. Within this account of God, the Son's fitness for incarnation—as opposed to the Father and the Spirit—is not based on a unique property of subordination to the Father. Indeed, to posit a personal property distinction between the Father and the Son would undermine not only the unity of God, but also the value of what is *divinely* revealed and accomplished by the Son in salvation.

Scott Harrower critiques Bruce Ware's Trinitarian hermeneutics and theology as exemplified in Ware's volume *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*. Harrower contends that Ware's appeal to "Rahner's Rule"—where the "economic" Trinity is the "immanent" Trinity—is a misstep because Rahner's rule is capable of strict or loose readings. What is more, the "strict" applications create some serious problems especially if one introduces Jesus's relationship to the Spirit, meaning that Ware must utilize Rahner's Rule very selectively. On top of that, Harrower asserts that

Ware's work is full of inconsistencies at the level of its use of Scripture and its postulation of relationships between the members of the Godhead. According to Harrower, Ware's strict employment of Rahner's Rule is not exegetically warranted and as such does not provide a secure basis for the doctrine of God.

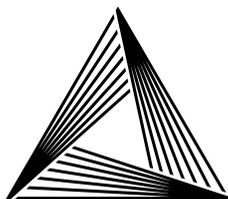
Finally, Scott Harrower offers a second contribution, something of an epilogue to the volume, talking about the value of creating a theological culture that endures. He uses Isaac Newton, William Whiston, and Samuel Clarke as his examples of how seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Anglican academics gradually slid toward semi-Arianism, then into Arianism and even into full-on deism and unitarianism. He warns: "The point to note here is that sub-Nicene tendencies in one generation may well lead to committed sub-Trinitarian and non-Trinitarian believers in the next." Thus, it is vital that we do not allow the theological cultures of our churches, colleges, and seminaries to get wishy-washy, nonchalant, confused, or loose with Trinitarian doctrine. The best way to avoid sliding into Arianism is to call out people who start building semi-Arian slides.

### Summary

The debate about the Trinity within North American evangelicalism has certainly ratcheted up in the last eighteen months.<sup>1</sup> It has become increasingly clear to many that a hierarchical account of the Trinity with a semi-subordinationist Christology is neither biblical nor orthodox.<sup>2</sup> In this book, we add our own voices to the discussion as to what it means to be truly Trinitarian, to make Nicaea normative for doctrine and practice, and to be overwhelmingly orthodox and catholic by conviction when it comes to speaking about God. It is the conclusion of the editors, and by implication of the contributors too, that whom evangelicals believe in—or should believe—is a Trinity without hierarchy of authority or gradations of glory and majesty. The apostolic and evangelical faith is to confess one God and three equal persons, distinguished by relationships of origin, not by degrees of authority and glory.

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1. See Kevin Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017) and Logos Mobile, TH361, "Perspectives on the Trinity: Eternal Generation and Subordination in Tension," Faithlife Corporation, 2017.
  2. See Fred Sanders and Scott Swain, eds., *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017).





## CHAPTER 1

# Sonship, Sending, and Subordination in the Gospel of John

ADESOLA AKALA

**T**he key to understanding the Johannine Jesus is the gospel's pronounced portrayal of the Son *sent by the Father* into the world to proclaim and bestow eternal life. John 20:31 clearly defines the gospel's purpose: "These have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."<sup>1</sup> In the Fourth Gospel, therefore, Christ is uniquely presented as the divine Son sent into the world by the Father. Those who believe in the Son's message will obtain eternal life, and as God's children, partake in the divine relationship (1:12).

Jesus in John's Gospel is the Father's emissary; accordingly, his obedience to the salvific mission is inevitably emphasized. The following narrative analysis shows how the Son's submission to the Father in the mission is strategically unveiled within a Johannine "theology of sending."<sup>2</sup> In the Prologue (1:1–18), the Son is introduced emphatically as divinely equal with God the Father. Interspersed within the ensuing narrative are "conflict passages" where the

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1. Scripture references are from the *New American Standard Bible: 1995 Update* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 1995).

2. The phrase "theology of sending" is attributed to Rudolf Schnackenburg. See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Jesus in the Gospels: A Biblical Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 248.

Son emphasizes his divine equality with the Father. In these pericopes, the Son simultaneously explains his obedience and devotion to the Father using the subordination language expected of emissaries. As the Son's mission draws to an end, in the Farewell Discourse and Prayer (13–17), he commissions his disciples to continue the salvific mission, following his example of submission to the Father. Throughout the Johannine narrative, the Son's submission to the Father is unveiled entirely within the framework of his life-giving message and mission in the world.

### The Prologue (1:1–18)

In the Gospel of John, the Prologue is the *terminus a quo* of the Son's mission from the Father. Introduced as the divine *Logos* who is coeternal and coequal with God (1:1–5), the Son's eternity and divinity is established at the onset of the narrative. It may be argued that by underscoring the Son's equality with the Father before introducing his sonship, the Prologue is emphasizing divinity and equality with God over the Gospel's ensuing portrayal of the sent Son.<sup>3</sup> The Prologue also foreshadows the opposition to the divine mission (1:10–11), which would lead to the Son's affirmations of divine commission and pronouncements of obedience to the Father. At the end of the Prologue, the eternal *Logos* is unveiled as God's incarnate Son, who is in the world to reflect the Father's glory, grace, and truth to humanity (1:14–18). This responsibility of the Son as the Father's representative in the world is the context within which the subordination texts emerge in the conflict passages.

### The Conflict Passages

Rejection by the Jewish religious elite is the catalyst that drives the Johannine portrayal of Jesus as Son sent from the Father. In the gospel, Jesus's actions such as breaking the Sabbath laws lead to controversies and confrontations. These conflicts force Jesus to defend himself by proclaiming both divine equality and unity with the Father on the one hand, and on the other, obedience and submission to the Father's will. The Son's assertions follow a pattern—the Father has sent the Son into the world and the Son is obeying by speaking the Father's words and accomplishing his works. Most of the subordination texts appear within this repeated explanation.

The first conflict occurs in chapter 5, where Jesus heals a lame man and is accused of breaking the Jewish Sabbath laws. Responding to this accusation, Jesus replies that he and the Father are at work together (5:17), implying that all the Son's words and works on earth are equal to and synchronous with the Father's. Since Jesus equates his actions with the Father's, the religious leaders interpret his statement as a claim of equality with God (5:17–18). In a lengthy monologue, Jesus reveals how he and the Father work together, affirming both

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3. Adesola Akala, *The Son-Father Relationship and Christological Symbolism in the Gospel of John* (London: T & T Clark, 2015), 219.

his equality with, and subordination to the Father: the Son can do nothing apart from the Father (5:19, 30); he carries out the same actions as the Father (5:19–20, 30); he accomplishes the Father’s works to prove that the Father sent him (5:36); both the Father and Son raise the dead and grant eternal life (5:21); the Son’s voice will raise the dead because he shares the Father’s life (5:25–26); the Father authorizes the Son to execute eternal judgment (5:22, 27–30); both the Father and Son share equal honor (5:23); acceptance of the Son’s message is equivalent to belief in the Father who sent him (5:24). These statements show how Jesus’s submission to the Father in the work of salvation is rooted in his unity and equality with God.

In chapter 6, Jesus miraculously multiplies five barley loaves and two fish to feed five thousand people (6:1–13). The next day, the crowd challenges Jesus to produce more bread, to which he responds that *he* is the true Bread of Life. During this exchange, Jesus gives further insight into the Father-Son relationship and the divine mission: He is the one on whom the Father has set his seal (6:28); his hearers are to believe in him whom the Father has sent (6:28); the Father gives true bread from heaven which provides life for the world (6:32–33); all whom the Father has given to the Son will come to him (6:37); the Son has come from heaven to fulfill the will of the Father who sent him (6:38); the Father’s will is that none given to the Son will be lost, but raised in the eschaton (6:39); the Father’s will is that those who believe in the Son will have eternal life (6:40); only those drawn by the Father will come to the Son (6:44); those who hear the Father and learn from him are drawn to the Son (6:45); only the Son has seen the Father (6:46); the Father has sent the Son, the Son lives because of the Father and whoever feeds on the Son will live also (6:57). In chapter 6, the Son’s submission is based on his representation as the Bread of Life sent by the Father from heaven to give humanity eternal life.<sup>4</sup>

Further controversy ensues in chapter 7, where the source and authority of Jesus’s teaching is questioned (7:14–15). Jesus insists that his teaching originates from the Father who sent him (7:16), that those who desire to do God’s will recognize the source of his teaching (7:17), and that he seeks the Father’s glory (7:18). To validate the divine authenticity of his teaching in this chapter, Christ refers to his sending from the Father five times (7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33).<sup>5</sup>

Jesus’s claim in chapter 10, that he is the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep, causes division among his audience (10:1–21). When pressed to admit whether or not he is the Christ, Jesus points to the works he has accomplished in his Father’s name (10:22–26). Again in his defence, the Son stresses his relationship with and agency from the Father: The Father and Son know each other (10:15); the Father loves the Son because

4. The word “life” (*zōē*) occurs eleven times in the Bread of Life Discourse (6:22–71); “eternal life” (*zōē aiōnios*) occurs five times.

5. Cf. 7:16, 18, 28, 29, 33.

he lays down his life for the sheep (10:17); the Son has received this charge from the Father (10:18); the Son's works are performed in the Father's name (10:25); no one will be able to take from the Father those he has given to the Son (10:29); the Son and Father are one (10:30); the Son reveals the Father's works (10:31, 37); the Father has consecrated and sent the Son into the world (10:36); the Father and Son indwell each other (10:38). In this chapter, Jesus emphasizes the extent of his obedience to the Father, namely, his impending crucifixion. Simultaneously, Jesus also affirms his unity and divine equality with the Father.

Chapter 12 narrates the prophetic rejection of the Son (12:37–43) and the Son's appeal for people to believe in him. Speaking of his relationship with the Father, Jesus states: whoever believes in and sees the Son also believes in and sees the Father who sent him (12:44–45); the Son speaks on the authority of the Father, who has sent and commanded what he should say (10:49); the Father's commandment is eternal life (10:50). In this conflict passage, the Son attempts to overturn the people's rejection of his agency by pointing to his obedience to the Father.

### The Farewell Discourse

In the Farewell Discourse (chs. 13–16), Jesus meets with his disciples before the crucifixion, and prepares them for his departure by reaffirming his relationship with the Father: The Father is glorified in the Son (13:31–32; 14:13; 15:8); no one comes to the Father except through the Son, thus, knowing and seeing the Son is equivalent to knowing and seeing the Father (14:6–7, 9); the Father and Son indwell each other (14:10–11, 12, 20; 16:32); the Son acts on the Father's authority, and the Father works through the Son (14:10–11); the Son is returning to the Father (14:12; 16:10, 17, 28); the Son will ask the Father to send the Holy Spirit in the Son's name (14:16–17, 26; 15:26); the Father loves those who love the Son (14:23; 16:27); the Son speaks the Father's words (14:24; 15:15); the Son is returning to the Father, therefore the Father is greater than the Son (14:28);<sup>6</sup> the Son loves the Father and is obedient to him (14:31); the Son is the vine and the Father is the vinedresser (15:1); the Father loves the Son (15:9); the Father answers prayers made in the Son's name (15:16; 16:23, 26); all that the Father has, belongs to the Son (16:15).

The subordination texts in the Farewell Discourse reiterate aspects of the Son's mission in the world as the Father's representative. The disciples also learn about how they are to continue the mission following the example of the Son's obedience to the Father.

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6. The Father's priority in this notable subordination verse can be attributed to his act of sending the Son, who at this point is about to return to the Father after having completed the mission in which he was sent: "I go to the Father, for the Father is greater than I"

## The Farewell Prayer

The final cluster of subordination texts in the Gospel of John occurs in the *terminus a quem* of the Father-Son relationship—the Farewell Prayer. This prayer expresses the Son’s obedience to the Father in the divine plan of salvation and refers to his sending by the Father six times (17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25). Jesus mentions what the Father gave him to accomplish the mission: authority to grant eternal life (17:2); work to accomplish (17:4); believers (17:6–7, 12, 24); words to speak (17:8); glory (17:22, 24). In the prayer, the Son reiterates that he has glorified the Father (17:4); manifested the Father’s name (17:6, 26); given the Father’s words (17:8, 14) and the Father’s glory (17:22). Contingent to this portrayal of submission, however, is the Son’s oneness with the Father (17: 11, 21, 23), which is demonstrated in their sharing all things (17:10), including eternal glory (17:5). In this prayer, “Jesus portrays himself as an example to his disciples in his earthly life and ministry . . . a model Son, a paradigm of sonship for believers whom he calls to come into relationship with the Father as children of God.”<sup>7</sup> The Son is expressing his devotion and obedience to the Father in the salvific mission—the disciples are to continue the mission in the same manner.

## Sending Theology in the Gospel of John

From the above narrative analysis, the sending of the Son by the Father is evidently a distinguishing Johannine theological theme. The Father is characterized by his sending the Son into the world and the Son incessantly identifies himself in relation to the Father who sent him.<sup>8</sup> Virtually every time the Father is mentioned in the Johannine narrative, some aspect of the Son’s emissary role is also narrated.<sup>9</sup> In the Gospel of John, therefore, the word “send” occurs thirty-seven times in context of the Father-Son relationship,<sup>10</sup> compared to only fourteen occurrences in the Synoptic Gospels combined. Most of the subordination texts in the Gospel of John are embedded in passages where the Son defends or explains his earthly mission. In these conflict passages, the word “send” occurs twenty-seven times—more than 70 percent of the total occurrences in the Gospel of John.<sup>11</sup>

7. Akala, *Son-Father Relationship*, 219.

8. The Father’s unique title in John’s Gospel is *ō pempas [patēr] me* (“one who sent me” or “the Father who sent me”). Cf. 1:45; 4:19, 44; 6:14; 7:40; 9:17.

9. Paul N. Anderson, “The Having-Sent-Me Father: Aspects of Agency, Encounter, and Irony in the Johannine Father-Son Relationship,” *Semeia* 85 (1999): 37.

10. References to the Father sending (Gk. *apostellō* or *pempō*) the Son in the Gospel of John are as follows: 3:17, 34; 4:34; 5:24, 30, 36, 38; 6:29, 38, 39, 44, 57; 7:16, [18], 28, 29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21.

11. In the Conflict Passages, Farewell Discourse, and Prayer, “send” (Gk. *apostellō* or *pempō*) occurs twenty-seven times. Cf. *apostellō*: 5:33, 36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 10:36; 17:3, 8, 18, 12, 23, 25; *pempō*: 5:23, 24, 30, 37; 6:38, 39, 44; 7:16, 18, 28, 33; 12:44, 45, 49.

Jesus's sonship and submission cannot be understood outside of the plan of salvation for humanity. The Son's subordination to the Father is that of an emissary sent into the world to act and speak words that will lead people to eternal life. For the message of eternal life to be received and believed, the Son must convince his hearers that he has been sent by God and that he is acting and speaking in obedience to a heavenly directive. At the same time, the Son asserts his coequal and coeternal status with the Father, and affirms that his works and words are synchronous with God's. The Johannine portrayal of Jesus's sonship is deeply entwined with his role as emissary from the Father, and thus accounts for the Gospel's language of subordination.

### Pro-Nicene Theology and the Gospel of John

The subordination language in the Gospel of John was at the center of the Arian heresy that erupted in the first quarter of the fourth century. Arianism viewed the Son as inferior to the Father, a distinct being who was created as a derivative copy having only some of the Father's attributes.<sup>12</sup> On May 20, 325 C.E., more than two hundred church delegates from the Roman Empire convened in Nicaea to discuss the contentious Arian heresy, which essentially denied the Son's eternality and equality with God the Father. The orthodoxy that corrected the Arian heresy was articulated in the Nicene Creed, which expressed in Johannine language a declaration of eternality and equality in the Father-Son relationship: *We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth.* These christological principles in the Nicene Creed were revised and expanded in the ecumenical councils of 381, 431, and 451.<sup>13</sup>

The councils used the Gospel of John as a primary document for the support of pro-Nicene Christology.<sup>14</sup> By the time the Arian heresy emerged, the Gospel of John had recovered from the "Johannophobia" of the first and second centuries.<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus of Lyons in his *Against Heresies* had made

12. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth Century Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15–16.

13. Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

14. Kyle Keefer, *The Branches of the Gospel of John: The Reception of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*, Library of New Testament Studies 332 (London: T & T Clark, 2006), 1. See also Harold W. Attridge, "Johannine Christianity," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity. Volume 1: Origins to Constantine*, eds. Margaret M. Mitchell and Frances M. Young (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 125.

15. "From the end of the second century on, there is virtual agreement in the Church as to the authority, canonicity and authorship of the Gospel of John." Carson, *Gospel according to John*, 28. For discussion of the reticence of early church theologians' usage of John, or lack thereof, see Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Keefer, *The*

extensive use of the Gospel of John to refute gnostic Christianity,<sup>16</sup> making the gospel a powerful theological tool for the refutation of heresy and establishment of orthodoxy. The Gospel of John thus provided the language for articulating the christological debates of the third century and beyond.<sup>17</sup> T. E. Pollard sums up the role of the gospel in pro-Nicene orthodoxy: “From the very beginning of the controversy it was St John’s Gospel, the pre-eminent New Testament witness to the divine Father-Son relationship, which provided Arius’ opponents with their most powerful arguments.”<sup>18</sup>

John’s Prologue provided a theological basis for the Son’s eternity and equality with the Father; it also shaped the doctrine and language of *homoousios* (“one substance with the Father”),<sup>19</sup> which was enshrined in the Nicene Creed. The Johannine narrative introduces Christ in the grandeur of divine glory and subsequently unveils him as Son in the humility of his mission to humanity. Due to this distinct dualism, the Gospel of John became an equivocal text that lent itself to both sides of the debate regarding the Son’s equality with, and subordination to the Father. Pro-Nicene theologians not only vigorously attacked the way Arians used John’s Gospel to deny the Son’s eternity and equality with the Father; they simultaneously used the subordination texts in the Gospel in defence of orthodoxy. In sum, Johannine theology framed pro-Nicene theology. The following analysis of John 5 demonstrates how pro-Nicene theologians interpreted subordination texts to affirm the eternal and equal divinity of the Son with the Father in context of his life-giving mission in the world.

### Sonship, Sending, and Subordination in John 5

In John 5, Jesus heals a lame man on the Sabbath thereby instigating the ire of the Jewish religious leaders, who accuse Jesus of breaking the Sabbath laws (5:16). In Jesus’s defense, which happens to be his longest, uninterrupted

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*Branches of the Gospel of John*; J. N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943).

16. Irenaeus vindicated John’s Gospel as the *regula veritatis*, and used it to establish the main standard by which theological orthodoxy is to be measured. Sanders, *Fourth Gospel*, 72, 86–87.
17. Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 21.
18. Pollard also notes that Arian documents provide little evidence of the usage of John’s Gospel. T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 146. The importance of Johannine language in defining the Father-Son relationship and articulated in fourth-century pro-Nicene theology is affirmed by Ayres. See Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 15.
19. A standard connotation of the term *homoousios* was membership in a class, a generic similarity between things that were, in some sense, coordinate. However, the term became problematic because it also conveyed biological or material analogies, such as the generation of a human son by a human father. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 94–95. According to Andrew Louth, *homoousios* became the hallmark of later ecumenical debates and councils. Andrew Louth, “The Fourth-Century Alexandrians: Athanasius and Didymus,” in *Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Frances Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 278.

speech to opponents in the gospel (5:19–47),<sup>20</sup> he offers insight into his relationship with the Father as divine Son and representative. The passage, therefore, contains key subordination verses.

Jesus's defense in 5:17 is a declaration of equality with God,<sup>21</sup> "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." The implications in this statement are so clear that the religious leaders plot to kill Jesus, on the grounds of breaking the Sabbath law, and more importantly, on the grounds of blasphemy (5:18; cf. 10:33).<sup>22</sup> The basis of the blasphemy charge is Jesus's claim that he is equal with God, the divine Law-giver; their works are the same.<sup>23</sup> Jesus is claiming "the fundamental powers of God."<sup>24</sup> The Gospel has made it clear from the start that Jesus is God precisely as the Father is God (1:1, 18), therefore, to hear it implicitly from Jesus's own lips, and explicitly from his opponents, is a confirmation of the fact.<sup>25</sup> The declaration of divine equality in 5:17 is important for interpreting the subordination texts in the ensuing passage (5:19–47).<sup>26</sup> Underlying the Son's professions of obedience and submission to the Father in the divine mission is their shared equality and unity. As Jesus claims equal rank with the Father, he also declares that his works are in obedience and on the Father's delegated authority,<sup>27</sup> thus, signaling the two-dimensional nature of the divine relationship as it unfolds in the narrative.

In his *Discourse against the Arians*, Athanasius approaches 5:17 by first castigating the Arian heretics for interpreting the verse to mean that the Father "made the Son for the making of things created."<sup>28</sup> The Son, argues Athanasius, is not a mere instrument for the Father's use nor was he taught to be creator; rather, Christ does the Father's work by virtue of his "being the Image and Wisdom of the Father."<sup>29</sup> Commenting on 5:17–18, Augustine also attacks the Arians: "Behold, the Jews understand what the Arians do not understand. The Arians, in fact, say that the Son is not equal with the Father,

20. Michaels, *John*, 306–307.

21. *Contra* Keener, who argues that Jesus is not claiming equal rank with the Father. Keener, *John*, 1:647–48. Other scholars argue contrary to Keener. See Michaels, *John*, 304; Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 2:225.

22. For an explanation of the Jewish notion of blasphemy in this passage see Keener, *John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:647. See also Ramsey J. Michaels, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 305.

23. *TDNT*, 3:352.

24. von Wahlde, *John*, 1:405.

25. Michaels, *John*, 305.

26. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 184.

27. According to Keener, "Neither the lowly obedience nor the implication of deity should be overlooked." Keener, *John*, 1:648. See also Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 278.

28. *NPNT*<sup>2</sup> 4:363–64.

29. *NPNT*<sup>2</sup> 4:363–64.

and hence it is that the heresy was driven from the Church.<sup>30</sup> In other words, although the Jews did not agree with Jesus's claim, they recognized that Jesus believed that he was equal with the Father. Explaining the Son's equality in John 5, Augustine states, "He did not make Himself equal, but the Father begat Him equal. . . . He usurped not equality with God, but was in that equality in which He was begotten."<sup>31</sup> Christ's equality with the Father is, therefore, as eternal as his generation from the Father. The term "equal" (*isos*) in 5:18 expresses the notion of equal nature and will—the essential and perfect equality that the Nicene term *homousios* was designed to defend.<sup>32</sup>

Next, Jesus explains that because of his oneness with the Father, he is not blaspheming: "the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner" (5:19). The Son's essential equality and unity with the Father is evident in the fact that the Son does nothing on his own (cf. 5:30; 7:17, 28; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). The Son and Father are jointly and equally active in the mission to the world; their oneness is demonstrated in synchronous action. The phrase "can do nothing of Himself" (5:19; cf. 5:30) was used by the Arians to portray the Son as incapable of any action, and therefore inferior to the Father.<sup>33</sup> Patristic pro-Nicene theologians did not view 5:19 as a suggestion of the Son's inability or inferiority; their interpretations defended the Son's divinity and equality with the Father.

For Athanasius, Jesus in 5:19 was expressing how the Father manifests his works through the Son on earth. Athanasius comments, "Where the Father is, there is the Son, and where the light, there the radiance; and as what the Father worketh, He worketh through the Son."<sup>34</sup> In his commentary, Cyril of Alexandria explains how it is naturally impossible for the Son not to desire to do the Father's works, in other words, the Son is saying, "by the laws of uncreated nature, I ascend to the same will and action as God the Father."<sup>35</sup> Cyril concludes that the word "cannot" in 5:19 shows "the stability of the Son's substance and his inability to change into something other than what he is."<sup>36</sup> Hence, the Son is intrinsically equal with the Father in every action. Hilary of Poitiers, in *De Trinitate IIV* comments, "He told them that, because the power and the nature of God dwelt consciously within Him, it was impossible for Him to do anything. . . . His liberty of action coincides in its range

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30. *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 7:116.

31. *NPNF*<sup>1</sup> 7:187, 188.

32. *TDNT*, 3:353.

33. According to Ayres, probably because of its use by the Homoians in the 360s, John 5:19 was the subject of extended discussion by Christian theologians. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 233.

34. *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 4:370–71.

35. *ACT*, *John* 1:143.

36. *ACT*, *John* 1:146.

with His knowledge of the powers of the nature of God the Father.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, “cannot” denotes not the Son’s inequality with the Father, but rather, his inseparable power with the Father, which is inherent in him by birth and by sharing the Father’s nature.<sup>38</sup> Gregory Nazianzen’s *Fourth Theological Oration* asserts the unity of the Father and Son: “It is impossible and inconceivable that the Son should do anything that the Father doeth not.”<sup>39</sup> Gregory Nyssa explains that the Son is “equally provident” with the Father because they exhibit a “communion of nature” and purpose to do the same things.<sup>40</sup> In his commentary on this verse, Augustine addresses the Arian heresy that the Son “is surely less, not equal” because in 5:19, Jesus is trying to show that he is not equal with God in order to offset the anger of the Jewish leaders.<sup>41</sup> For Augustine, the word “cannot” in 5:19 means “the works of the Father and of the Son are inseparable.”<sup>42</sup> The pro-Nicene theologians viewed John 5:19, not as a negative assertion of incapability and inferiority, but rather, as insight into the Son’s co-divinity with the Father, which is expressed in unity of thought and equality of action.

An intriguing aspect of the Son-Father relationship in John 5 is the Son’s act of “seeing” what the Father is “doing” (5:19–29).<sup>43</sup> The pro-Nicene Church Fathers did not view this claim by the Son as one of subordinate imitation. Hilary argues that when in 5:19 the Son declares that he does the same things he sees the Father doing, their actions are equal.<sup>44</sup> Cyril of Alexandria points out that based on the actions of seeing and doing in the Father-Son relationship, Arians view the Father as the sole originator of the Son’s works. Cyril regards this Arian argument as ultimate ignorance, for “how could he [the Father] ever originate anything alone by his own power, since he has the Son as his operative power for everything . . . who is with him eternally and who reveals his will and activity in every matter?”<sup>45</sup> Thus, for Cyril, the Father and Son work in unison and simultaneously, in a way incongruent of imitation. Augustine states clearly that the actions of the Son do not imitate the Father; rather, their works are simultaneous, for “it is by the Son that the Father does”; therefore, Augustine concludes, “let the heretic be convinced: The Son is equal to the Father.”<sup>46</sup> In his book, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Lewis Ayres

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37. NPNE<sup>2</sup> 9:336.

38. NPNE<sup>2</sup> 9:177, 178.

39. NPNE<sup>2</sup> 9:630.

40. NPNE<sup>2</sup> 5:144.

41. NPNE<sup>1</sup> 7:190–91.

42. NPNE<sup>1</sup> 7:218.

43. Due to its emphasis on divine revelation, verbs of seeing occur more in the Johannine Gospel than the Synoptics. The three verbs of seeing, *horaō*, *theaomai*, and *phaneroō*, occur altogether more than forty-five times in the Gospel of John.

44. NPNE<sup>2</sup> 9:178.

45. *Ancient Christian Texts (ACT)*, John, 1:147.

46. NPNE<sup>1</sup> 7:194.

examines how Augustine and other pro-Nicene theologians understood the Son's action of "seeing" the Father without being "thought to act subsequently to the Father or as one subordinate in power."<sup>47</sup> Ayres notes that in 5:19, these patristic theologians mostly viewed the Son's seeing as a consequence of his generation from the Father and his sharing divine essence or nature.<sup>48</sup> Both Greek and Latin pro-Nicene Fathers all view the Son's seeing as an intrinsic part of what it means for him to possess divine nature and power.<sup>49</sup>

In 5:20, Jesus declares that the Father will show Him "greater works"; these greater works are explained in the next verse, "just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes" (5:21). "Greater works," therefore, refers to the main purpose of the Son's mission on earth—the bestowal of eternal life to humanity through resurrection from spiritual death. Rather than view 5:21 as a subordination text, Cyril of Alexandria teaches that since God is the one who has the power to resurrect from the dead, Jesus is establishing his equality with the Father.<sup>50</sup> Hilary explains that because they share the same nature, the Father and Son have equal power to raise the dead.<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Augustine argues that the Son's power is not different from the Father's, like that of a servant or an angel; rather, "the Father and the Son have one substance, so also one will."<sup>52</sup> For Augustine, therefore, "the power of the Father and of the Son is the same, and also the will is the same."<sup>53</sup> John 5:21–22 portrays the Son and Father willing and working together to grant spiritual life.

The bestowal of eternal life by the Father and Son is directly connected to the notion of judgment. In the Gospel of John, judgment is the refusal to believe in the Son sent by the Father. For this reason, the Son inevitably assumes the position of Judge, which is why he declares in 5:22, "the Father has given all judgment to the Son" (cf. 5:27). This verse further establishes the Son's deity, for in the Old Testament, God is Judge;<sup>54</sup> hence, both the Son and Father are equally honored (5:23). Judgment was taking place as Jesus was teaching—those responding to the voice of the Son of God were rising to eternal life (5:25). Within this context of life-giving mission, Jesus states, "just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself" (5:26).<sup>55</sup> How did the pro-Nicene Fathers interpret this verse?

47. See chapter entitled "Showing and Seeing," in Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 230–50, esp. 233–34.

48. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 236.

49. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 237, 240.

50. *ACT, John*, 1:189.

51. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup> 9:125–26.

52. *NPNE*<sup>1</sup> 7:141.

53. *NPNE*<sup>1</sup> 7:123.

54. Cf. Gen. 18:25; Pss. 50: 4, 6; 58:11; 75:7; 96:13; 98:9; Isa. 2:4; 33:22; 66:16; Dan. 7:9–10.

55. This statement should be understood against the Old Testament background of God as the source of life (Gen. 2:7; Deut. 30:20; Job 10:12; 33:4; Pss. 27:1; 36:9). Morris, *John*, 283.

In *Four Discourses against the Arians*, Athanasius explains that like the Father, the Son has always had life; the “Son’s Godhead is the Father’s Godhead, and thus the Father in the Son exercises His Providence over all things.”<sup>56</sup> Cyril of Alexandria comments that Jesus is speaking in human terms, “mixing the message fitted for human nature with God-befitting authority and majesty.”<sup>57</sup> Based on this explanation, Cyril rephrases Jesus’s words: “Though I am now like you and I appear as a human being, promise to raise the dead and threaten to bring judgment. The Father has given me the power to give life. The Father has given me the authority to judge.”<sup>58</sup> For Cyril, therefore, Jesus is explaining the source of the life he bestows to humanity in terms his opponents understand, namely, as a divine Son sent by the Father, and as an emissary equipped and authorized to fulfil the life-giving mission. The Son’s life, Cyril asserts, originates together with the Father’s life, by reason of their shared divine nature.<sup>59</sup> In *On the Councils*, Hilary fiercely defends the Son’s equality with the Father, stating that anyone who views 5:26 as a denial of Jesus’s divine essence should be anathema.<sup>60</sup> The life spoken of in 5:26, explains Hilary, signifies the substance and the life of *both* the Father and Son, for the Son’s origin is a “perfect birth of the undivided nature.”<sup>61</sup> In the following words, Hilary eloquently refutes any notion of the Son’s subordination in 5:26:

There is no diversity in the likeness of the essence that is born and that begets, that is, of the life which is possessed and which has been given. For though God begat Him of Himself, in likeness to His own nature, He in whom is the unbegotten likeness did not relinquish the property of His natural substance. For He only has what He gave; and as possessing life He gave life to be possessed. And thus what is born of essence, as life of life, is essentially like itself, and the essence of Him who is begotten and of Him who begets admits no diversity or unlikeness.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, Augustine argues that 5:26 refers to the Son’s generation from the Father.<sup>63</sup> In *Homilies on John Tractate XLVII*, the theologian states that there is no lessening of the Son because he “is said to receive of the Father what He possesses essentially in Himself.”<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, Augustine explains, the Father does not add gifts to the Son as though the Son were imperfect; rather, the Son’s gifts are part of his begetting, for the Father “gave Him equality with

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56. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup> 4:414.

57. *ACT, John*, 1:156.

58. *ACT, John*, 1:156.

59. *ACT, John*, 1:156.

60. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup> 9:8.

61. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup>

62. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup>

63. For more on the Son’s eternal generation, see Kevin Giles, *Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

64. *NPNE*<sup>1</sup> 7:265.

Himself, and yet begat Him not in a state of inequality.”<sup>65</sup> Pro-Nicene exegesis viewed the Father’s act of “giving life to the Son” through the lens of the Son’s eternal generation from the Father—a divine state of contemporaneous existence in which the Son exerts power equal with the Father’s, in order to impart eternal life to humanity. The Son’s eternal generation does not equate with eternal subordination.

The Patristic commentaries on verses in John 5 examined above are by no means exhaustive; nevertheless, they demonstrate how pro-Nicene exegesis refuted implications of the Son’s subordination, even within his role as the Father’s emissary. Pro-Nicene theologians refuted Arian claims of the Son’s subordination by painstakingly stressing the Son’s equality with the Father—they interpreted the subordination language in the Gospel of John in light of the Son’s incarnate, human state, and his mission of redemption and salvation.

### Conclusion

The Johannine theology of sending ties Jesus’s divine sonship to his agency from the Father, making the gospel’s subordination language inevitable. The subordination conundrum in John’s Gospel, therefore, stems from the theological tension originating from the narrative portrayal of the Father who *sends* his *equally divine* Son into the world as his unique emissary.<sup>66</sup> In the narrative, in every instance where the Son uses subordination language, his essential equality and oneness with the Father is clearly affirmed. As highlighted by patristic pro-Nicene theologians, the Johannine Jesus is eternally equal with the Father; his divinity supersedes his delegated role as the Father’s emissary.

The Gospel’s unique presentation of Jesus is a clear invitation to enter into divine relationship with the Son and his Father. To this effect, the sending Father works together with and through the sent Son in the life-giving mission to humanity. Through the Johannine portrayal of Jesus, believers have a clear picture of how to relate to the Father within the divine relationship. The devotion and obedience demonstrated in the earthly mission is an example to Jesus’s followers, who have been commissioned by him just as he was commissioned by the Father (17:18; 20:21). Believers in Christ are to relate to God as subordinate and obedient children who continue the Son’s life-giving mission in the world.<sup>67</sup>

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65. NPNE<sup>1</sup>

66. Akala, *Son-Father Relationship*, 218.

67. Akala, *Son-Father Relationship*, 219.

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