

# The Trinity, the Father's Authority and the Obedience of the Son and Spirit

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# 1 Submission of the Incarnate Son

## 1.1 Submission on earth

Nobody disputes that the Son submits to the Father during His time on earth. Multiple passages could be adduced where Jesus engaged in the various interactions with the Father that imply subordination (e.g. praying to the Father, obeying the Father) etc. Since the Incarnate Son is the Godman – fully human and divine, there is difficulty in arguing that only Jesus' human nature participated in these interactions with the Father but that his divine nature did not. Charles Hodge seems very clear not to consider the subjection of the Incarnate Son as pertaining only to the human nature separately. Fesko concurs and says this invites the Nestorian heresy.

Interactions with the Father cannot easily be lumped in the same category as hunger or dying which are clearly true only of Jesus' human nature. Scripture often speaks of Jesus' interactions with the Father as revealing the immanent Trinity (not just the economic Trinity) which implicates Jesus' divine nature. These interactions become disjointed and awkward if we start introducing an artificial distinction that it is only the human nature engaging with the Father. Matthew Barrett [has said](#):

...it raises the question as to how we can know anything at all about the immanent, at least if we say that the economic actions reveal nothing and have no implications for the relations of the immanent (see Swain's lecture critiquing Warfield on this point). It is hard to see how this doesn't lead to agnosticism regarding the immanent. Nor does this view pay heed to biblical language (see everywhere in John's Gospel) that does connect the dots from the economic back to the immanent.

For example, in John 17 several references connect back the dots. Jesus speaks of 'the glory I had with you before the world was' (John 17:5) and this cannot refer to the human nature which had not yet been assumed. Jesus speaks of His relation with the Father before creation, 'You loved Me before the foundation of the world' (John 17:24). Jesus speaks of being sent before He was in the world: 'As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world' (John 17:18). Jesus' also speaks of the unity of the Trinity, 'that they may be one, just as We are one' (John 17:22) which clearly we would say pertains to the immanent Trinity before the incarnation also. One of the classic passages speaking of Jesus' equality with God – John 5:18: '[He] was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God' is followed directly by Jesus talking about His relation to the Father in terms of submission (vs 19-23). If we say everything is merely economic then we risk undermining the equality of the Son with the Father.

Thus the dialogues of the Son with the Father (which are replete with notes that sound the Son's submission) cannot be simply dismissed as 'economic' without undermining the ground for knowing anything about the nature of the immanent Trinity at all – including its co-equality.

We must also beware of the Sabellian [heresy](#):

Some complementarians suspect that the egalitarian appeal to intratrinitarian life comes remarkably close to that another ancient heresy, Sabellianism (where Father, Son and Spirit are completely interchangeable because they are merely the occasional masks of the one divine substance).

## 1.2 The Son is subject to the Father at the End

1Cor 15:27-28: ...But when He says, "All things are put in subjection," it is evident that He is excepted who put all things in subjection to Him. When all things are subjected to Him, then

the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

In commenting on these verses, notice how careful Charles Hodge is not to ascribe this subjection merely to Christ's human nature alone:

In like manner we know that the verbally inconsistent propositions, the Son is subject to the Father, and, the Son is equal with the Father, are both true. In one sense he is subject, in another sense he is equal. The son of a king may be the equal of his father in every attribute of his nature, though officially inferior. So the eternal Son of God may be coequal with the Father, though officially subordinate. What difficulty is there in this? What shade does it cast over the full Godhead of our adorable Redeemer? **The subordination, however, here spoken of, is not that of the human nature of Christ separately considered**, as when he is said to suffer, or to die, or to be ignorant; **but it is the official subordination of the incarnate Son to God as God.** *Charles Hodge, An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians p. 333-334*

### 1.3 The Risen Son sits at the 'right-hand' of the Father

Luke 22:69: But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.

Mark 16:19: So then, when the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.

The term 'right-hand' denotes a hierarchy in the Godhead. Other references to the Son sitting at the Father's right-hand include: Matt 26:64; Mark 12:36; Mark 14:62; Luke 20:42; Acts 2:34; Acts 7:56; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; Heb 1:13; Heb 8:1; Heb 10:12; Heb 12:2; 1Pet 3:22.

Most of the above references have in view Psalm 110:1, where we see divinity and hierarchy entwined together:

The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet."

Note also that John 6:62 'What then if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before' suggests the Son was at the right-hand of the Father *before the incarnation* also. So central is this concept to the position of Christ, that it finds expression in the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed (381) among other historic Christian documents.

### 1.4 The Son makes intercession to the Father

Intercession is an appeal to a higher authority and the Son continues to perform this post-ascension:

Heb 7:23-26: Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

Rom 8:34: Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

Various other lines of evidence could be added that shows this pattern of relation of the Father to the Son and vica versa, such as the Father giving the Son a revelation to show His servants (Rev 1:1) or the position of the Lamb in relation to the Father (Rev 5).

## 2 Submission of the pre-Incarnate Son

### 2.1 In the Sending of The Son

There are dozens of verses that substantiate that the Father sent the Son. And this sending cannot be brushed off as a mere sending that happens *after* the Son has already come into the world and thus already has a human nature. A few examples:

John 8:42: For I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.

John 17: 18: As You sent Me **into the world**, I also have sent them into the world.

Mark 9:37: ...Whoever receives Me does not receive Me, but Him who sent Me.

Luke 10:16: ...the one who rejects you rejects Me; and he who rejects Me rejects the One who sent Me.

Gal 4:4: But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.

1John 4:9-10: By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son **into the world** so that we might live through Him.

To send someone implies greater authority on the part of the sender. [Some](#) have tried to deflect this by suggesting that the sending of the Son only reflects that the Son is eternally *from* the Father (eternal generation) and does not bear the normal connotations of rank that we associate with 'sender' and 'sent'. However, considering the context and common usage in scripture, this will not do. Consider just a few examples:

We see Jesus likening the meaning of being 'sent' to not coming of His own initiative:

John 8:42: ...for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.

We see Jesus likening the manner in which He 'sent' the disciples to the manner in which He Himself was sent:

John 17: 18: As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.

And in numerous places across scripture we see a distinction in authority between the sender and the one sent:

Luke 7:8: "...For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it."

Since the decision to send the Son must occur prior to the Incarnation, this means the authority of the Father above the Son existed *before* the Son humbled himself and became a man. This also requires us to distinguish between the *submission* of the Son and the *humiliation* of the Son (see Section 4.3). The latter should not be conflated with the former.

## 2.2 Eternal Fatherhood, Eternal Sonship

In biblical usage father-son language naturally implies, amongst other aspects<sup>1</sup>, an authority-submission structure. We see this throughout scripture (e.g. Mal 1:6), and it is particularly evident in the relation of Jesus the Son to the Father, for example:

John 5:19: ...the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing

John 8:28: ...I do nothing on My own initiative, but speak these things as the Father taught Me.

Since during the Son's time on earth His obedience is grounded in His Sonship, and the Father's authority is grounded in His Fatherhood, given that all agree this *Sonship* and *Fatherhood* are eternal<sup>2</sup> it naturally follows that the obedience and authority are eternal, too.

To posit that fatherhood and sonship are very different in the Trinity *ad intra* empties the names Father and Son of much of their natural meaning.

## 2.3 In Predestination and Creation

Even before the sending of the Son we see that the Father has a unique directive role, consistent with and indicative of His authority above the Son. As Grudem writes 'in the eternal councils of the Trinity, there was a role of planning, directing, initiating, and choosing, that belonged specifically to the Father.'<sup>3</sup>

This is evident in the work of predestination:

Eph 1:4: just as He [the Father] chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world...

Rom 8:29: For those whom He [the Father] foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son...

And also in the work of creation:

Heb 1:2: in these last days he [the Father] has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, through whom also He created the world.

See also: Rom 8:29; 2Tim1:9; Eph 1:9-11; Eph 3:9-11; 1Pet 1:20; John 1:1; 1Cor 8:6

## 2.4 In the Pactum Salutis

Including the previous verses on the sending of the Son, numerous passages attest to the so-called Pactum Salutis (covenant of redemption) - the pretemporal/eternal councils of God concerning the plan of redemption. Many of these reveal a pre-temporal ordering within the Trinity consistent with

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<sup>1</sup> Another aspect of Sonship is co-equality in terms of bearing the same image / likeness / essence of the Father e.g. John 5:18: 'He.. was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God'; Gen 5:3: 'Adam... became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth'; Phil 2:6: 'although He [Christ] existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.' Col 1:15: 'He [the Son] is the image of the invisible God'. Heb 1:3: 'He [the Son] is the radiance of His [the Father] glory and the exact representation of His nature'. See also John 1:18. The place of a son in the household is distinguished from the place of a servant or slave e.g. John 8:35; Gal 4:30.

<sup>2</sup> Not being limited to the time of the incarnation, for example as per Rom 8:29, Heb 1:2, John 1:14, 3:16-17, 6:38, 8:42, 10:36, Ps 2:2-7, Acts 13:33, Heb 1:5, 5:5.

<sup>3</sup> p233 Grudem (2012) *Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father, in The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*

that seen previously<sup>4</sup> and reveal promises made to the Son prior to His incarnation. If scripture teaches there is a 'sending' of the Son, then you've got to accept something like the *Pactum*.

Luke 22:29: ... just as My Father has granted [covenanted] Me a kingdom, I grant you...

John 8:42: For I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me.

Psalms 2:2-9 [Acts 13:33, Heb 1:5, 5:5]: ...the rulers take counsel together against the Lord [the Father], and against His Anointed [Messiah]...He [the Father] who sits in the heavens laughs...saying... But as for Me [the Father], I have installed My King [Messiah] upon Zion... I [David/Messiah] will surely tell of the decree of the Lord [the Father]: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'

Psalms 110: The Lord says to my Lord: "Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet." ... The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek".

Psalms 40:8 / Hebrews 10:5: Therefore when He comes into the world, He says "Behold, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God; Your Law is within my heart."

Isaiah 53:10-12: But the Lord was pleased to crush Him... by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many. Therefore I will allot Him a portion with the great...

Eph 1:4: ...just as He chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world

2Tim 1:9-10: granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus

See also Zec 6:13; 2Tim 1:8-10; John 5:30;43; John 6:38-40; John 17:4-12 and other passages discussed by Fesko.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Submission of the Spirit

One little discussion aspect in the debate is the place of the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son are said to send the Spirit. And the Spirit is said to intercede on our behalf.

John 14:26: But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, **whom the Father will send** in My name

John 14:16: I will ask **the Father, and He will give you another Helper**, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth

John 15:26: When the Helper comes, whom **I will send to you from the Father**, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father

John 16:7: if I go, **I will send Him** [the Helper] to you

Luke 24:49: And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you

Romans 9:26: the Spirit Himself intercedes for us

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<sup>4</sup> See Fesko (2016) *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* for detailed discussion of these and other texts, showing they reflect pre-temporal intra-Trinitarian deliberations.

<sup>5</sup> Fesko (2016) *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*

Given that the subordination inherent in these verses cannot be explained by appeals to the Incarnation and the assumption of a human nature, the subordination of the Spirit must be an ad-intra reality.

## 4 Counterarguments & Responses

Some deny the above conclusions.

### 4.1 Incarnation Only

David Burchard [writes](#):

the problem with seeking to establish ESS by these passages is that to do so ignores the fact that, upon the inimitable miracle of the incarnation, the Son took to himself a complete human nature, and thus added to himself a fully human will by which he submitted to God, obeyed God, intercedes before God, etc.

This statement concedes half the argument - doing nothing to deny the 'eternal' aspect of the Son's *future* submission. We are left puzzled at the objection to the 'E' in ESS. If submission is accepted in eternity future (i.e. everything from now on, since Christ first advent), then why the big fuss?

It also seems that this argument seeks to disallow the Christian from speaking as freely as scripture speaks concerning the Son's present/future eternal submission to the Father, trying to minimise and negate this submission as somehow sub-Trinitarian. But the Holy Spirit does no such thing, and the Christian is at liberty to speak as freely and without qualification of the eternal subjection of the Son to the Father as, for example, 1Cor15:27-28 does.

But most crucially, this argument flatly ignores the large body of biblical evidence that speaks of the Son's submission *prior to* the Incarnation, as outlined previously.<sup>6</sup> If, as is being alleged, the Son must first have taken on 'human nature and thus added to himself a fully human will' before He could obey and submit to the Father, then how can the multitude of pre-Incarnation texts be accounted for? Burchard actually quotes a pre-incarnation verse included by Grudem (John 6:38) in 'these passages', but does not address it and also omits the first half of Grudem's list of passages, all of which are [focused](#) on the pre-incarnate Son:

the Father who elects us in the Son (Eph. 1:4-5), creates the world through the Son (John 1:2, 1 Cor. 8:6, Heb. 1:2), sends the Son into the world (John 3:16)

Furthermore, this argument is powerless to deal with the subordination of the Spirit, Who never became incarnate.

### 4.2 'Christological' verses?

Related to the previous line of argument, some try and deny that *eternal* submission of the Son can be inferred since the relevant texts are 'Christological', meaning that because they have 'Christ' as a referent they must only concern the incarnate Son. Burchard [again](#):

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<sup>6</sup> Beyond the brief summary in this document, this has also been in print for long-time. It is old ground, having been hashed out over the last two decades in opposition to egalitarian rebels. See for example Grudem (2004) *Evangelical Feminism & Biblical Truth*, p405ff. Grudem states that Kevin Giles 'incorrectly says that complementarians only argue from revelation concerning the Incarnation when they argue for the eternal subordination of the Son' p406 – very similar to what you, brother Burchard, do here. See also the essays by Grudem and Ware in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?* (2012).

What Strachan misses is the obvious, that 1 Corinthians 11:3 is a Christological verse, stating a truth about the incarnate Son, when the Son of God has two wills, and a human will by which he can submit and obey.

This alleged 'Christological' silver-bullet should be scrutinised before being allowed to dictate play. It hasn't been spelled out, but to make sense the claim must be something along the lines of: If a verse contains the messianic title 'Christ' it must therefore be a technical reference strictly to the Son of God in His Incarnate state and concern His human will only. Let's test this claim by first looking at Phil 2:5-6:

...Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant...

Here, our keyword 'Christ' occurs. He is said to have 'existed in the form of God' and did not regard 'equality with God' a thing to be grasped – *these are pre-incarnate references*. And as Doug Wilson [states](#): 'The decision to take the form of a servant was prior to taking the form of a servant.'

Furthermore, since this text is 'Christological', surely we are thus forbidden to infer anything about the ad-intra Trinity? – including the ad-intra co-equality of the Son with the Father. What's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. I'm doubtful proponents of this 'Christological' hermeneutic would be willing to allow this restriction, and rightly so.

In fact, a brief survey of 'Christ' in the NT shows it is false to say that use of the word 'Christ' must denote the incarnate Son. Consider the following verses that contradict this notion:

Christ was the agent of creation:

1Cor8:6: one God, the Father, from whom are all things... and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him

We were predestined in the pre-existent Christ long before He ever appeared in the flesh:

2Tim1:9-10: grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, but now has been revealed by the appearing of our Saviour Christ Jesus

Eph1:4: ...just as He chose us in Him [Christ] before the foundation of the world

The pre-incarnate Christ accompanied Israel in the desert:

1Cor10:4: ...they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.

The prophets of old were guided by the Spirit of Christ:

1Pet1:11: seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating...

The Son of God is often referred to as 'Christ' before He has actually come into the world and taken on human form:

2Cor8:9: ...though He [Christ] was rich, yet for your sake He became poor

1Tim1:15: ...Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners

Heb9:26: Otherwise, He [Christ] would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He [Christ] has been manifested...

1Pet1:20: For He [Christ] was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times...

God the Father's covenant with Christ 'originates in eternity, not in redemptive history'<sup>7</sup>:

Heb5:5 [Psalm 2:7]: So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, "You are My Son, today I have begotten you"...

Charles Hodge has written similarly concerning Jesus' 'human' and 'divine' titles:

The fact is patent, and is admitted that the person of our Lord may be designated from either nature. He may be called the Son of David and the Son of God. And his person may be designated from one nature when what is predicated of Him is true only of the other nature. Thus, on the one hand, the Lord of Glory was crucified; God purchased the Church with his blood; and the Son is said to be ignorant; and, on the other hand, the Son of Man is said to be in heaven when He was on earth. *Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Vol 1:442*

It should also be pointed out that in one of the central verses being swept aside as merely 'Christological' - 1Cor 15:27-28 - the Apostle switches from using repeatedly using 'Christ' to using 'Son' *just at the point when he begins to talk about submission in the Trinity*:

1Cor 15:27-28: ...When all things are subjected to Him [the Father], then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.

If it is replied that 'Son' is not an exclusive 'ad-intra' reference (and it isn't<sup>8</sup>), then we are left asking 'what is?' In fact, for the 'Christological' argument to even be meaningful, proponents must also show a way to identify 'non-Christological' references to the Son, otherwise the required distinction between 'Christological' and 'non-Christological' references to the Son evaporates.

Added to this, with Christ now the God-man for all eternity, none of the post-incarnation texts ever make the qualification that the subjection spoken of only concerned His 'human will' (recall earlier Hodge's comments in Section 1.1). This appears to be an imported assumption, driven by philosophical commitments, and commits the Nestorian heresy. Consider what Craig French [says](#):

Some think Jesus has two identities: God the Son, and then there's Jesus... the man... as if He is actually two persons. But this is the heresy of [Nestorianism](#). In fact, Jesus is one Person with both a divine nature and a human nature... Because Jesus' two natures are unified, He

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<sup>7</sup> See p94 and p107ff in Fesko (2016) *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* for further argumentation concerning this point. Fesko summarises: 'when we coordinate the themes presented in Zechariah 6:13, Psalm 2:7, and Psalm 110 with those found in Ephesians 1 and 2 Timothy 1:9-10, Scripture itself places the timeframe of elements of these passages within the intra-trinitarian covenantal activity before the foundations of the world.' p107-108.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Hodge says concerning the sense in which the word Son is to be taken: 'That word is sometimes used as a designation of the λόγος, the Second Person of the Trinity, to indicate his eternal relation to the First Person as the Father. It is, however, very often used as a designation of the incarnate λόγος, the Word made flesh. Many things are in Scripture predicated of the Godman, which cannot be predicated of the Second Person of the Trinity as such.' Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1:441.

told His disciples that anyone who sees Him sees the Father (John 14:9)... Some try to say Jesus only obeyed His Father as a man. They think there can be no obedience within the Godhead (i.e. "subordination")... As we noted above, Jesus prays as a Person, not only as a human Person. When people say Jesus obeyed only as a man, they are actually engaging in blasphemy because they are really saying He is two persons: this is latent Nestorianism.

John Fesko concurs:

Some might try to eliminate the dialogue between the Father and Son by arguing that this is purely an economic event and not necessarily reflective of an ontological reality. Or in the desire to preserve the unity of the divine will they eliminate the idea of Father-Son agreement. First, we must remember that Christ dialogues with the Father as the God-man. **To say that only the human nature participates in these dialogues invites the Nestorian heresy, the postulation of two separate persons.** Second, if we eliminate the idea of covenant (in a thicker account), in the effort to preserve the unity of the triune will, we invite **hints of modalism**. The dialogue between Father and Son becomes an elaborate monologue. The Son does not truly engage the Father in prayer but merely talks to Himself under the guise of a dialogue...we must not allow the triune unity to compromise the 'relational opposition' of the persons of the Godhead. [emphasis added] p179-180, *Fesko (2016) The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*

The basic conclusion that emerges from the foregoing is that the title 'Christ' is not an exclusive technical reference to the Incarnate Son, rather it is used much more broadly - including of the pre-existent Son of God. Thus, the 'Christological verses' move is rightly regarded as a hoodwink.

### 4.3 Subordination versus Humiliation

Consider the following two texts:

Phil 2:6-8: although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Heb 5:8: Although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect...

Brother Burchard [writes](#) (presumably also with Heb 5:8 in mind):

Philippians 2 explicitly teaches that in the incarnation, the Son took to himself that which he had not before, the form of a servant. In the incarnation, he took to himself that which allowed him to *learn to obey*. Philippians is rendered uneventful and confused if the Son submitted and obeyed always and forever.

Not true. Aside from the fact that we still have all the pre-incarnate obedience verses that testify against this interpretation, one only need distinguish between the *subordination* and *humiliation* of the Son and Philippians 2:8 (and Hebrews 5:8) are rendered eventful and clear. As per W.T.Shedd<sup>9</sup>:

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in H. Wayne House (2012) The Eternal Relational Subordination of the Son to the Father in Patristic Thought. *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?* p144-145

The trinitarian subordination of person, not of essence, must not be confounded with the Arian and Semiarian subordination, which is a subordination of essence as well as of person. Neither must it be confounded with the theanthropic or mediatorial subordination. This latter involves condescension and humiliation; but the trinitarian subordination does not. It is no humiliation or condescension for a son to be the son of his father.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, [John Owen](#):

...And whatever is expressed in the Scripture, concerning the will of the human nature of Christ, as it was engaged in and bent upon its work, it is but a representation of the will of the Son of God, when he engaged in this work from eternity. So then he freely undertook to do and suffer whatever on his part was required, and therein owns himself the servant of the Father, because he would obey his will, and serve his purposes in the nature which he would assume for that end...

Philippians 2 doesn't say that Christ was not 'obedient' before the incarnation, just as it doesn't say He was not 'humble' before the incarnation. Rather, the manner and expression of the Son's obedience and humility were something new in the incarnation. We can say similarly that when Heb 5:8 adds 'And having been made perfect' it needn't mean that the Son did not possess perfection before the incarnation. He took the place of a 'bond-servant' which is very different than the place of a 'son' (see John 8:35 and Gal 4:30), especially the 'Son', hence too the note of surprise in Heb 5:8, 'Although He was a Son'.

Consider Calvin's comments on Heb 5:8:

The proximate end of Christ's sufferings was thus to habituate himself to obedience; not that he was driven to this by force... for he was abundantly willing to render to his Father the obedience which he owed... It may at the same time be truly said that Christ by his death learned fully what it was to obey God, since he was then led in a special manner to deny himself; for renouncing his own will, he so far gave himself up to his Father that of his own accord and willingly he underwent that death which he greatly dreaded. The meaning then is that Christ was by his sufferings taught how far God ought to be submitted to and obeyed.

O'Brien's commentary on Hebrews (Pillar) concurs.

Furthermore, this argument is powerless to deal with the subordination of the Spirit, Who never became incarnate.

#### 4.4 Divine Simplicity

In the present debate it is commonly objected that since orthodox doctrine teaches only one divine nature, and by implication one divine will in the Trinity, 'submission requires multiple wills' and thus cannot be granted as it would imply tritheism.

But we could equally reply that 'sending' requires multiple wills or that the covenant of redemption requires multiple wills. David Talcott [perceptively](#) writes:

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<sup>10</sup> (Henry M): This kind of distinction is similar to the one Calvin employs in his commentary on 1 Timothy 2 regarding the subjection of women. Calvin explained the subjection of women as being a result of the Fall, yet not being inconsistent with the subjection of women existing before the Fall. He merely added the distinction that the nature of that subjection changed, before the Fall it was easy and natural, after the Fall it became difficult.

It's special pleading to say the pactum salutis requires only one will, but submission requires two. I asked about this over a large, very theologically sophisticated, reformed email list and nobody was ever able to explain the difference in the cases. It's a bad look for the defenders of the traditional view. Let's let others invoke mystery to the same degree we invoke it ourselves. If there are problems with EFS/ESS it's not in the issue of one vs. two wills...

...we don't run pactum advocates out of the camp the way we're running EFS/ESSers out of the camp. This tells me it's not the "implied two wills" that's the real problem, it's something else. We should focus our argument on that something else.

Doug Wilson makes a [similar point](#):

Talking with some colleagues yesterday, one objected to Boyer's statement that "authority and obedience" could possibly be an ad intra Trinitarian reality. How is authority/obedience consistent with one divine will? In this world, I have never seen an exercise of authority and an obedient response that was the result of "one will." Granted. This is quite true, but neither have I ever seen a father and son with one will, a begetter and a begotten with one will, a covenant of redemption struck by parties with just one will, or a lover and a beloved with one will. And yet this is how the Bible teaches us to talk about God.

Matthew Barrett gives [two reasons](#) why the problem of multiple wills is not escaped by those who contend for an egalitarian trinity:

Given the biblical witness to the covenant of redemption, there certainly is an obedience of the Son to the Father in eternity. It will not work to say that the Son merely 'agrees' or 'accepts' the responsibility of being the redeemer, as if these terms somehow exclude any form of submission/obedience. To do so is to empty these terms of their meaning. How does the Son agree/accept the Father's plan of redemption (and appointment), especially when it involves dying on a cross (!), without there being at some level an act of 'obedience'? Given what the Father is asking the Son to do, and given that it is the Father doing the asking (again, see Fesko here), surely any agreement to the pactum involves obedience to the pactum's requirements, and by consequence, therefore, to the Father's plan. Jesus seems to assume this much in his incarnation when he constantly returns to the fact that he does what the Father tells him and, presumably, accomplished what the Father has planned. In other words, let's be careful not to cut the incarnate obedience of the Son off from the covenant of redemption in eternity. The two are related to one another, one giving birth to the other....

Additionally, even if you avoid 'obedience' language and triumphantly conclude that you have preserved one will in the trinity, you really haven't addressed the heart of the objection. Even if you say the Son doesn't 'obey' the Father in the pactum, but only 'assents,' 'agrees,' 'accepts' (whatever word you want to use instead), one still hasn't explained how there can be legitimate, even distinct, actions of one person toward another. For example, how does love function within the Godhead in eternity? Surely the distinct persons must act toward one another. This is one reason why eternal generation (as incredibly important as it is), shouldn't be waved around in people's faces as if it explains *everything* in the trinity in *eternity*.

One answer to the dilemma is to conceive of the same one will as being possessed by the three Persons from different 'volitional perspectives'. This appears to be an old answer, and John Fesko cites a few examples of this 'one will in threefold execution', including:

Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669):

"Indeed the will of the Father and the Son is the same, it is not diverse because they are one; but, insofar as the Father is not the Son, or the Son the Father; the same will is appropriated distinctly in its own way to both, namely, one giving and sending, the other is given and is sent." *Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) quoted in The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception by John Fesko*

Wilhelmus Brakel (1635-1711):

Since the Father and the Son are one in essence and thus have one will and one objective, how can there possibly be a covenant transaction between the two, as such a transaction requires the mutual involvement of two wills? Are we then not separating the persons of the Godhead too much? To this I reply that as far as personhood is concerned the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. As far as the Personhood is concerned the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father. From this consideration the one divine will can be viewed from a twofold perspective. It is the Father's will to redeem by the agency of the second Person as Surety, and it is the will of the Son to redeem by his own agency as Surety' p20 *Wilhelmus Brakel quoted in Fesko (2016) The Trinity and The Covenant of Redemption and [here](#).*

John Owen:

The will of God as to the peculiar actings of the Father in this matter is the will of the Father, and the will of God with regard unto the peculiar actings of the Son is the will of the Son; not by a distinction of sundry wills, but by the distinct application of the same will unto its distinct acts in the persons of the Father and the Son. p19 *John Owen quoted in Fesko (2016) The Trinity and The Covenant of Redemption*

Stephen Boyer [presents](#) a solution along similar lines, the differentiation in will being rooted in Person rather than Essence:

In principle, command and obedience might be thought of as the endpoints of a single, shared volition, in spite of the fact that two independent wills are typically involved in the "sharing". In other words, to "obey" is to accept as one's own a volition that originates in an other, viz., in one who "commands". Now this is exactly the relation that obtains between the Father and the Son, except that the Son accepts the will of "an other" without thereby having "another" will. The will that the Father and the Son share is, as we have seen, numerically one will, but it remains a personal will—that is, the will of a Person. Originally it is the personal will of the Father, and by begetting it is the personal will of the Son. As the Father's will it must include some sort of distinctive "volitional perspective" with respect to the Son, and as the Son's will it must include some sort of "volitional perspective" with respect to the Father. In neither case should this "perspective" be construed as a disposition of the will toward an external object, for the Father and the Son are not external to one another. Instead, the "perspective" is a mode of having the will that is distinctive to each particular Person. The Father "has" the will, or wills as he wills, in a manner that reflects his initiative as begetter of the Son, and the Son "has" the will, or wills what he wills, in a manner that reflects his responsiveness as begotten of the Father. Without some sort of differentiation at this interpersonal level, we inevitably end up confusing the divine Persons.

[Similarly](#) Scott Swain & Michael Allen:

The Son's obedience to the Father in the work of salvation is not indicative of a second will alongside that of the Father but of the proper mode whereby Jesus shares the Father's will as the only-begotten Son of the Father... There is a noncompetitive relationship between [the Son's] powerful will and his submission to the paternal will. *Scott Swain & Michael Allen, [The Obedience of the Eternal Son](#) (2013) pp. 127, 130-31*

[And again:](#)

When it comes to the relationship between the pactum salutis and the divine will, we must consider not only that will's unity, but we must also consider that will's tripersonal manner of subsistence if we are to appreciate the doctrine's status as an instance of orthodox Trinitarian reasoning *p122 Allen & Swain, Christian Dogmatics, Baker (2016)*

The point is not to be wed to a particular philosophical construction and make it a test of orthodoxy - that is what the modern scholastics do. No, the secret things belong to God. Rather, the point is that if Scripture affirms truths that seem difficult to put together then so must the Christian. We do this in all sorts of other aspects of doctrine (e.g. one God/three Persons or divine sovereignty/human responsibility) why the resistance when it comes to 'one will in threefold execution'? As Steve Hays has [asked](#):

...on the face of it, it's hard to see how one and the same God can accommodate three persons, but not two wills. Is a person less than a will? Isn't the will an aspect of a person?

Charles Hodge has said regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, 'To say that this doctrine is incomprehensible, is to say nothing more than must be admitted of any other great truth.'<sup>11</sup> Doug Wilson senses the danger of speculation in his largely positive [review](#) of Dolezal's recent book, when commenting on Thomists and some of their deliberations on the Trinity:

Thomas and Thomists sometimes remind me of a college of June bugs trying to explain quantum physics... We sometimes ask and try to answer questions about God that we have no business trying to answer.

#### 4.5 Where is the egalitarian Trinity to be found?

First we're told that *eternal* submission of the Son (ESS) is wrong, and that there is no subordination of the Son except in the Incarnation (= *ad extra*). But we're also [told](#) that subordination of the God-man exists in *eternity* future<sup>12</sup> (though oddly *eternal* submission of the Son is still disallowed) but that there is no 'eternal *ad intra* submission of the Son to the Father' as this 'necessarily posits two wills in God'.

But days later, we're [then told](#) that it's ok to speak of 'agreement' between members of the Godhead prior to the Incarnation - in the 'eternal' covenant of redemption (the *Pactum*) even though this 'might imply a multiplicity of wills'. We pause to note that this removes the objection to speaking of subordination within the *ad intra* Trinity, since some insist subordination requires more than one will. We also note how Mark Jones (in [contrast](#) to Matthew Barrett) predictably opts for the word 'agreement' but not and never 'submission', though the implication of both is identical ('might imply a multiplicity of wills'). This little tell betrays something. Yet still, even though we're [told](#) the *Pactum* concerns the *eternal* past, apparently *eternal* submission of the Son is still a no-no.

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Vol 1:420

<sup>12</sup> In the 'God-man' and 'voluntarily'. Though bro Burchard seems to imply this is only in half of the God-man, who now has a conflicted will (only the human will submits, we're told, the divine does not).

We're [also told](#) that being outside of time (eternal), the *Pactum* relates to *ad intra* Trinitarian relations. Connecting the dots, we see that contrary to what we we're initially [told](#) concerning [there being no](#) 'eternal *ad intra* submission of the Son to the Father', in actual fact, with the door now opened to the language of 'agreement' (and thus language that 'might imply a multiplicity of wills' - such as 'subordination') this is not true. The *ad intra vs ad extra* distinction no longer serves to delineate the Son's subordination and (alleged) non-subordination, since with the *Pactum* we have subordination in the *ad intra* Trinitarian relations. But then we're [told](#) that although language that 'might imply a multiplicity of wills' is ok to use for *ad intra* Trinitarian relations, it doesn't count since it doesn't pertain to necessary *ad intra* relations. In other words, even *ad intra* submission is no longer enough to finally allow us to say there is eternal submission in the Trinity.

At this point, the exegetical basis for this ever-retreating egalitarian Trinity should be requested. Across the pages of scripture, from the eternal councils of the Trinity concerning redemption (the *Pactum*), predestination and creation all the way through to the Consummation we see nothing but a one-way pattern of the Son submitting to the Father. Yet we are being asked to believe that there is in fact a radically different, egalitarian Trinity behind it all - a Trinity that is fundamentally different to the one revealed in scripture. An immanent Trinity that is divorced from the economic Trinity. Matthew Barrett helpfully [points out](#):

there are potential problems with those who say the economic and *ad extra* has no relation to the immanent and the life of the trinity *ad intra*. For starters, this move divorces and severs the immanent from the economic, the *ad intra* from the *ad extra*. Secondly, and related, it raises the question as to how we can know anything at all about the immanent, at least if we say that the economic actions reveal nothing and have no implications for the relations of the immanent (see Swain's lecture critiquing Warfield on this point). It is hard to see how this doesn't lead to agnosticism regarding the immanent. Nor does this view pay heed to biblical language (see everywhere in John's Gospel) that does connect the dots from the economic back to the immanent. So this move would do untold harm to how we understand divine revelation and the trinity....

If we say the economic and *ad extra* says nothing about the immanent and *ad intra*, then we risk dividing the works of the trinity from the identity of the trinity, succumbing to some form of agnosticism

And we are being asked to desist speaking in the way that scripture pervasively speaks with one voice concerning the Trinity. As Grudem has previously written:<sup>13</sup>

At this point someone might object, "Yes, I see the subordination of the Son to the Father in these verses and in these actions. But what about the relationship of the Son to the Father *apart from* the names Father and Son, and *apart from* creating the universe, and planning salvation, and the Father sending the Son into the world, and the Son coming and earning salvation, and the Son now reigning at the Father's right hand, and the Father delegating authority to the Son for final judgment, and the Son delivering to the Father the entire kingdom and being subject to the Father at "the end" of all things? What if the *eternal relationship* between the Father and Son is *different* from all of those things that Scripture reveals to us about the Father and Son?"

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<sup>13</sup> p259-260 Grudem (2012) Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father, in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*

To ask such a question is to ask, with respect to the relationship between the Father and Son, *whether God might be different from everything that He has revealed to us about Himself*. But when we begin to ask whether God might be different from everything that He has revealed about Himself in Scripture, we no longer have theology that is subject to Scripture. It is mere speculation. And it is speculation that leads us to conclusions that are contrary to the entire testimony of Scripture. J.Scott Horrell wisely says,

Philosophic arguments that a true equality of nature necessitates ultimate equality of social order are neither rationally required nor harmonious with God's self-revelation. Conversely, to insist on equality of eternal roles and order in spite of biblical evidence is methodologically parallel to that of heterodox theologians who reduce God to their own mental paradigms. When philosophic reasoning divorces a theology of the immanent Trinity from the revelation of the economic Trinity, it may have journeyed to where we dare not go.

These relationships between the Father and the Son are never reversed, not once in the entire Bible. The Son does not *predestine* us in the Father. The Son does not create through the Father. The Son does not send his only Father into the world. The Father does not come and obey the Son's will. The Father does not sit at the Son's right hand. The Father does not pray to the Son or intercede for his people before the Son. The Father does not, at "the end" of the age, subject himself to the Son....

...To deny these unidirectional relationships between Father and Son is to fail to speak the way Scripture speaks about the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. No single text or biblical teaching anywhere in Scripture suggests or teaches that the Father is ever, in any instance, under the authority of the Son or carries out any single action or set of actions in obedience to the Son. Every biblical text on this question shows the Father in the position of pre-eminence in authority, and the Son always and only carrying out the will of the Father.

This leads to the conclusion that common men should not be scolded for thinking and speaking about the Trinity in the way that scripture speaks about the Trinity.

#### 4.6 The 'Social Trinitarianism' bogeyman

One undercurrent in the recent Trinity debates is what is motivating these Reformed men to finally start fighting? The vast majority have been of little help where the battle actually rages (sexuality, masculinity, femininity etc.) But now they suddenly start making a big noise about the Trinity. But with no track record of fighting where needed, we should be suspicious. Why is it that the one time they take up their swords it happens to be in service of something that just so happens to be the flavour of the age – a repudiation of authority? It's the same level of bravery as Tim Keller speaking out against slavery and racism in the New York Times, never a word against feminism or abortion. As David Bayly has [written](#):

what these men fail to understand is that the attack today, unlike in the days of Nicea and Chalcedon, is not against the nature and person of the Son, but against the Father, against His nature as Father and His glory. These men, like failed soldiers, are re-fighting yesterday's battles. They're busy constructing a Maginot line against imaginary Christological foes, while their opponents are effecting a blitzkrieg on the Trinity by attacking the Father.

Consider Tim Bayly's excellent [article](#) on this theme.

We can easily see what is driving these men by the fact that they are sworn enemies of anyone who makes a link between the Trinity and earthly relations (especially anything to do with authority). Consider the predictable [objection](#) of men like Liam Goligher to any social implications of the Trinity:

to say, suggest, or speculate that God's life in heaven sets a social agenda for humans is to bring God down to our level... To use the intra-Trinitarian relations as a social model is neither biblical nor orthodox...

The primary response to this is the Bible itself, which often uses Trinitarian truth, including the fatherhood of God and the submission of the Son, to instruct social relations, for example<sup>14</sup>:

John 17: 20-23: [I ask] that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You... that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity...

1Cor11:3: But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

Eph 3:14-15: For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom all fatherhood [Gk. patria] in heaven and on earth derives its name

Phil 2:5-8: Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant... He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Heb 12:9: Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?

When these scriptural trinity-social connections are pointed out, the usual retort is 'that's not speaking of the ad-intra Trinity!'. Leaving to one side the truth of this claim, when we ask why this would invalidate the link scripture makes, and why we should stop making the same links, we meet usually with crickets<sup>15</sup>. As Doug Wilson [comments](#) on Eph 3:14-15, 'Is it not social Trinitarianism (albeit a conservative kind<sup>16</sup>) to simply accept what the apostle teaches us here'?

#### 4.7 Historical Argument

Mark Jones [tries to](#) dismiss numerous historical citations by [Grudem](#) concerning belief in subordination in the Trinity by other theologians. This includes Grudem's quotation of Charles Hodge. Jones [writes](#):

In another place, Grudem quotes Carl Henry. But it appears to me that Henry is doing what Calvin and any pro-Nicene theologian would do: speak of the authority of the Father in terms of **modes of subsistence**. That is not the same thing as those who hold to eternal submission (or subordination). **He's simply speaking of relations of origin. Same with Hodge.** [emphasis added]

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<sup>14</sup> See also Gen 1:26-27; Eph 5:22-33.

<sup>15</sup> Doug Wilson [draws](#) the proper conclusion that should be drawn by those who think 1Cor11:3 is utterly divorced from the ad-intra Trinity: '*Postscript: On 1 Cor. 11:3, keep in mind that Christ is an incarnational title. Substitute the Messiah, which means that we also have some ad extra things to imitate.*'

<sup>16</sup> (Henry M): It should be noted that egalitarians have made use of an egalitarian 'social Trinitarianism' to opposite ends.

Although Grudem's historical theology may not be something to write home about, it seems to me that Mark Jones too confidently dismisses much of the material Grudem cites. Although Jones makes some fair points, if you carefully compare each of Grudem's citations to Jones' engagement (of lack of) it is not as one-sided as Jones' belittling rhetoric might imply. Given Hodge's stature in Reformed theology (and also that I have his relevant works easily to hand) let's consider if Jones' reading of him is as much of a knock-out blow as he implies.

Notice that Grudem quotes Hodge not just with regard to 'modes of subsistence' (as Jones implies) but also 'modes of operation'. And helpfully, we don't have to take Mark Jones' word for it as to what Hodge means. Hodge himself [tells us](#) what he means by 'subordination' in 'modes of subsistence and operation' on at least two occasions in his Systematic Theology, and it is not limited to (as Jones implies) 'relations of origin' (i.e. eternal generation and eternal procession). As you read the quotes from Hodge a little further below, notice the following 8 things that concern Jones' claim re. 'relations of origin' and that 'there is not a whiff of subordination' amongst past orthodox theologians:

1. Hodge includes the Father 'sending' the Son and the Spirit and the Father 'operating through' the Son and the Spirit as part of what 'subordination in modes of subsistence and operation' means. These are distinct from 'relations of origin'. And as discussed previously, 'sending' and 'operating through' reach into the pre-incarnate realm and thus show that Hodge did not consider subordination to be merely limited to the incarnate Son. This is consistent with Edwards (his predecessor) who saw subordination *within* and *prior* to the *Pactum* but did not deny equality of Essence.
2. Hodge evidently senses a tension between equality of the three Persons and the fact that this subordination exists between them. This is most naturally suggestive of him conceiving of subordination in terms of authority rather than 'relations of origin'.
3. Hodge resolves this tension by allowing for subordination in 'modes of subsistence and operation' on the one hand or in terms of 'rank' or 'official' on the other. For Hodge it seems the former applies prior to the incarnation and the latter is the official subjection of the Godman in 1Cor15 for eternity future.
4. Hodge recognises the subjection (as per 1Cor11:3 and 1Cor15) of the Godman to the Father and is careful not to ascribe it merely to Christ's human nature alone. He describes this as an 'official' subjection as a king's son to the king.
5. Hodge uses the word 'subordination' in ways that clearly are not referring to 'relations of origin' e.g. 'in the 'human soul there is a subordination of one faculty to another'.
6. Hodge clearly distinguishes between 'eternal generation' and 'subordination', treating them in two separate sections.
7. In his 1Cor commentary Hodge distinguishes between subordination as to the Son *as God* with respect to 'mode of subsistence and operation', the subordination of the Son *as Man* and the subordination of the Son *as the God-man* (theanthropos). This is important as it confirms that for Hodge, subordination in 'mode of subsistence and operation' does not primarily have in view the works of the Incarnate Son either as Man or as Godman (i.e. he was at least including the pre-incarnate subordination of the Son *as God*). It also shows he did not consider the subjection of the Godman to be just with respect to the human nature (which he classes in a different category).
8. Despite the clear belief in pre-incarnate subordination (as per Edwards), Hodge expresses no obvious contradiction with divine simplicity re. number of wills, as is commonly alleged today regarding any pre-incarnate submission.

If the Scriptures teach that the Son is the same in substance and equal in power and glory with the Father, then when the Son says, “The Father is greater than I,” the superiority must be understood in a manner consistent with this equality. **It must refer either to subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation, or it must be official.** A king’s son may say, “My father is greater than I,” although personally his father’s equal...

...Notwithstanding that the Father, Son, and Spirit are the same in substance, and equal in power and glory, it is no less true according to the Scriptures, (a.) That the Father is first, the Son second, and the Spirit third. (b.) The Son is of the Father (ἐκ θεοῦ, the λόγος, εἰκὼν, ἀπαύγασμα, τοῦ θεοῦ); and the Spirit is of the Father and of the Son. (c.) **The Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit.** (d.) **The Father operates through the Son,** and the Father and Son operate through the Spirit. **The converse of these statements is never found. The Son is never said to send the Father, nor to operate through Him** nor is the Spirit ever said to send the Father, or the Son, or to operate through them. **The facts contained in this paragraph are summed up in the proposition: In the Holy Trinity there is a subordination of the Persons as to the mode of subsistence and operation...**

...Although Origen had insisted on the distinct personality of the Son, and upon his eternal generation, and although he freely called him God, nevertheless he would not admit his equality with God. The Father, alone, according to him was ἰ θεός, the Son was simply θεός. The Son was θεός ἐκ θεοῦ and not ἄυτο-θεός. **And this subordination was not simply as to the mode of subsistence and operation, but as to nature; for Origen taught that the Son was of a different essence from the Father...**

...(3) The Son was, therefore, **subordinate to the Father, not merely in rank or mode of subsistence, but in nature.** He belonged to a different order of beings. He was not αὐτόθεος, ὁ θεός, or ὁ ἀληθινὸς θεός; but simply θεός, a term which, **according to Origen...**

...On this subject the Nicene doctrine includes, — 1. The principle of the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. But this subordination does not imply inferiority. For as the same divine essence with all its infinite perfections is common to the Father, Son, and Spirit, there can be no inferiority of one person to the other in the Trinity. Neither does it imply posteriority; for the divine essence common to the several persons is self-existent and eternal. **The subordination intended is only that which concerns the mode of subsistence and operation, implied in the Scriptural facts that the Son is of the Father, and the Spirit is of the Father and the Son, and that the Father operates through the Son, and the Father and the Son through the Spirit...**

This [subordination as to mode of subsistence and operation] is distinctly recognized in Scripture, and was as fully taught by Augustine as by any of the Greek fathers, and is even more distinctly affirmed in the so-called Athanasian Creed, representing the school of Augustine, than in the Creed of the Council of Nice...

...**B. Eternal Generation. As in reference to the subordination** of the Son and Spirit to the Father, as asserted in the ancient creeds, it is not to the fact that exception is taken, but to the explanation of that fact, as given by the Nicene fathers, **the same is true with regard to the doctrine of Eternal Generation...**

Subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation, is a Scriptural fact; and so also is the perfect and equal Godhead of the Father and the Son, and **therefore these facts must be consistent.** In the consubstantial identity of the human soul there is a **subordination of**

**one faculty to another, and so, however incomprehensible to us, there may be a subordination in the Trinity consistent with the identity of essence** in the Godhead...

The relation of the Spirit to the other persons of the Trinity has been stated before. (1.) He is the same in substance and equal in power and glory. (2.) **He is subordinate** to the Father and Son, as to his mode of subsistence and operation, **as** He is said to be of the Father and of the Son; **He is sent by them, and they operate through Him.** [emphasis added].

Charles Hodge, [\*Systematic Theology, Vol 1\*](#): 184, 420, 426, 433, 437, 444, 490

... the apostle teaches that, as by the divine constitution the woman is subordinate to the man, and as the veil was the conventional symbol of that subordination, for a woman to appear in public unveiled, was to renounce her position...

...As the church is subject only to Christ, so Christ is subject only to God. The Scriptures speak of **threefold subordination** of Christ.

1. A **subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation**, of the second, to the first person in the Trinity; which is perfectly consistent with their identity of substance, and equality in power and glory.

2. The **voluntary subordination of the Son** in his humbling himself to be found **in fashion as a man**, and becoming obedient unto death, and therefore subject to the limitations and infirmities of our nature.

3. **The economical or official subjection of the theanthropos.** That is, the subordination of the incarnate Son of God, in the work of redemption and as the head of the church. He that is by nature equal with God becomes, as it were, officially subject to him...

... consistent with what the Bible teaches of **the subordination of angels to Christ, and to the church in him...**

... For a woman, therefore, in Corinth to discard the veil was to renounce her claim to modesty, and to refuse to recognize her subordination to her husband... He then reminds them of the divinely constituted subordination of the woman to the man... This subordination, however, of the woman is perfectly consistent with the essential equality and mutual dependence of the sexes... And still further, as the subordination of the woman to the man is perfectly consistent with their identity as to nature, so is the subordination of Christ to God consistent with his being of the same nature with the Father. There is nothing, therefore, in this passage, at all inconsistent with the true and proper divinity of our blessed Lord....

...It need here be only further remarked, that the word Christ is the designation, **not of the Logos or second person of the Trinity as such**, nor of the human nature of Christ as such, but of the Theanthropos, the God-man. It is the incarnate Son of God, who, in the great work of redemption, is said to be subordinate to the Father, whose will he came into the world to do...

...In like manner we know that the verbally inconsistent propositions, the Son is subject to the Father, and, the Son is equal with the Father, are both true. **In one sense he is subject, in another sense he is equal.** The son of a king may be the equal of his father in every attribute of his nature, though officially inferior. **So the eternal Son of God may be coequal**

**with the Father, though officially subordinate.** What difficulty is there in this? What shade does it cast over the full Godhead of our adorable Redeemer? **The subordination, however, here spoken of, is not that of the human nature of Christ separately considered,** as when he is said to suffer, or to die, or to be ignorant; **but it is the official subordination of the incarnate Son to God as God.** The words *αὐτόν, the Son himself,* here designate, as in so many other places, not the second person of the Trinity as such, but that person as clothed in our nature. And **the subjection spoken of, is not of the former, but of the latter, i.e. not of the Son as Son, but of the Son as incarnate;** and **the subjection itself is official** and therefore perfectly consistent with equality of nature...

Charles Hodge, [An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians](#) p. 16, 84, 118, 227-229, 333-334

Note that ESS critic Alastair Roberts has [granted](#) that Hodge (and possibly others) have [not been read wrongly](#) by Grudem.

In addition, neither does B.B. Warfield (writing in a similar era and context, being a successor to Charles Hodge and Hodge's son at Princeton) use the phrase 'modes of subsistence' as limited to 'relations of origin'. Rather, Warfield clearly [distinguishes](#) between 'subordination' and 'derivation' (he is addressing two subjects, not one) with only the latter ('derivation') referring to relations of origin. He uses the word 'subordination' in the same sense that Hodge uses it (though, unlike Hodge, he questions the truth **both** of 'derivation' (eternal generation/procession) and 'subordination in modes of subsistence'). Read the whole [extract](#) from Warfield and see for yourself how garbled it becomes if you substitute in 'relations of origin' every time 'subordination' (in modes of subsistence) is used. It also makes Warfield use two very different meanings of 'subordination' side by side (one for modes of operation and another for modes of subsistence):

It may be very natural to see in the designation "Son" an intimation of **subordination** and **derivation** of Being ...

...certainly does not convey the idea there **either of derivation or of subordination**... How can He be supposed, then, to be **subordinate to God, or to derive** His Being from God? If, however, the **subordination** of the Son and Spirit to the Father in modes of subsistence and their **derivation** from the Father are not implicates of their designation as Son and Spirit, it will be hard to find in the New Testament compelling evidence of their **subordination** and **derivation**...

There is, of course, no question that in "**modes of operation,**" as it is technically called - **that is to say, in the functions ascribed to the several Persons of the Trinity in the redemptive process, and, more broadly, in the entire dealing of God with the world - the principle of subordination is clearly expressed.** The Father is first, the Son is second, and the Spirit is third, in the operations of God as revealed to us in general, and very especially in those operations by which redemption is accomplished. Whatever the Father does, He does through the Son (Rom. ii. 16; iii. 22; v. 1, 11, 17, 21; Eph. i. 5; I Thess. v. 9; Tit. iii. v) by the Spirit. The Son is sent by the Father and does His Father's will (Jn. vi. 38); the Spirit is sent by the Son and does not speak from Himself, but only takes of Christ's and shows it unto His people (Jn. xvii. 7 ff.); and we have Our Lord's own word for it that 'one that is sent is not greater than he that sent him' (Jn. xiii. 16). In crisp decisiveness, Our Lord even declares, indeed: 'My Father is greater than I' (Jn. xiv. 28); and Paul tells us that Christ is God's, even as we are Christ's (I Cor. iii. 23), and that as Christ is "the head of every man," so God is "the

head of Christ" (1 Cor. xi. 3). **But it is not so clear that the principle of subordination rules also in "modes of subsistence," as it is technically phrased; that is to say, in the necessary relation of the Persons of the Trinity to one another.** The very richness and variety of the expression of their subordination, the one to the other, in modes of operation, create a difficulty in attaining certainty whether they are represented as also subordinate the one to the other in modes of subsistence. Question is raised in each case of apparent **intimation of subordination in modes of subsistence, whether it may not, after all, be explicable as only another expression of subordination in modes of operation.** It may be natural to assume that a **subordination in modes of operation rests on a subordination in modes of subsistence;** that the reason why it is the Father that sends the Son and the Son that sends the Spirit is that the Son is subordinate to the Father, and the Spirit to the Son. But we are bound to bear in mind that **these relations of subordination** in modes of operation **may just as well be due to** a convention, an agreement, between the Persons of the Trinity - a "Covenant" as it is technically called - by virtue of which a distinct function in the work of redemption is voluntarily assumed by each. It is eminently desirable, therefore, at the least, that **some definite evidence of subordination in modes of subsistence should be discoverable before it is assumed.** In the case of the relation of the Son to the Father, there is **the added difficulty** of the incarnation, in which the Son, by the assumption of a creaturely nature into union with Himself, enters into **new relations** with the Father of a definitely subordinate character....

...the fact of the humiliation of the Son of God for His earthly work does introduce a factor into the interpretation of the passages which import His subordination to the Father, which throws doubt upon the inference from them of an eternal relation of subordination in the Trinity itself. It must at least be said that in the presence of the great New Testament doctrines of the Covenant of Redemption on the one hand, and of the Humiliation of the Son of God for His work's sake and of the Two Natures in the constitution of His Person as incarnated, on the other, the difficulty of interpreting subordinationist passages of eternal relations between the Father and Son becomes extreme...

It seems clear that both Hodge and Warfield after him did not use 'subordination in modes of subsistence' to refer merely to relations of eternal origin, contra Jones (and [Kevin DeYoung](#)). It may still be the case that the meaning of these terms does not reflect the use in previous eras, but Jones' claim concerning the use of this term by Hodge (and 'any pro-Nicene theologian') is not tenable.

What should be thought of what else Jonathan Edwards has [written](#)? The 'head' terminology surely comes from 1Cor11:3, and not only does Edwards consider it as applicable prior to the incarnation, but also prior to the covenant of redemption:

**The economy of the persons of the Trinity, establishing that order of their acting that is agreeable to the order of their subsisting, is entirely diverse from the covenant of redemption, and prior to it...**

The Father, who determines whether a redemption shall be allowed or no, acts as the head of the society of the Trinity, and in the capacity of supreme Lord, and one that sustains the dignity and maintains the rights of the Godhead antecedently to the covenant of redemption; and **consequently that that economy, by which he stands in this capacity, is prior to that covenant...**

Nothing is more plain from Scripture [than] that the Father chooses the person that shall be the Redeemer, and appoints him, and that the Son has his authority in his office wholly from him, **which makes it evident that that economy, by which the Father is head of the Trinity, is prior to the covenant of redemption.** For he acts as such in the very making of that covenant, in choosing the person of the Redeemer to be covenanted with about that work. The Father is head of the Trinity, and is invested with a right to act as such before the Son is invested with the office of a mediator, because the Father, in the exercise of his headship, invests the Son with that office. By which it is evident that that establishment, by which the Father is invested with his character as head of the Trinity, precedes that which invests the Son with his character of mediator, and therefore **precedes the covenant of redemption,** which is the establishment that invests the Son with that character

Denny Burk [heads off](#) the common objection that Edwards' language of 'headship' (like 'subordination') is only technical language for 'relations of origin' (eternal generation etc.):

In all of this, Edwards is clear not to confuse the Father's headship with the relations of origin within the triune God. Rather, he argues that the Father's headship flows from and is "agreeable to the order of subsisting"

I'm not up to the task of fully assessing the historical argument. However, in addition to Hodge and Edwards, from what I've read it seems many of the ante-Nicene fathers could be added including the Cappadocian fathers, Hilary of Poitiers and Novatian amongst others. In more recent history, respected men like W.G.T. Shedd, A.H. Strong and Louis Berkhof could also be added. Perhaps it's just that these figures are in a minority?

An important consideration when reading these works concerns in what sense 'subordination' is meant. [Some](#) say it means *taxis* or *order* and that this only has reference to 'eternal relations of origin' (i.e. eternal generation/spiration). But since *taxis* itself [has reference to](#) the '*fittingness of relation between the three persons*' this does [not](#) appear to settle the authority point. In addition to Hodge and Warfield not using the term 'subordination' in this limited way, [neither does](#) the highly regarded dogmatist W.G.T. Shedd, [writing in the 1800s](#):

In his general position, Augustine agrees with the Nicene creed; but laying more emphasis upon the consubstantiality of the persons, and definitely asserting the procession of the Spirit from the Father and Son. Some dogmatic historians seem to imply that he differed materially from the Nicene doctrine on the point of subordination. Hagenbach (Smith's Ed. § 95) asserts that "Augustine completely purified the dogma of the Trinity from the older vestiges of subordination;" and adds that "such vestiges are unquestionably to be found in the most orthodox Fathers, not only in the East but also in the West." He cites Hilary and Athanasius as examples, and quotes the remark of Gieseler, that "the idea of a subordination lies at the basis of such declarations." Neander (II. 470, Note 2) says that Augustine "kept at a distance everything that bordered on subordinationism." These statements are certainly too sweeping and unqualified. [See discussion here](#)

If the word 'subordination' in the above quote is taken to mean 'eternal relations of origin' then it makes Augustine (incredibly) to be denying eternal generation/procession, right after affirming procession of the Spirit! If, on the other hand, it is taken to mean Arian subordinationism, then it makes Augustine (and the 'most orthodox Fathers') into Arians. Both these options are obviously untenable. Rather, Shedd is just following in the tradition of Hodge before him, and is referring to subordination in modes of subsistence and operation.

Finally, it should also be borne in mind, as [Boyer](#) points out, that the 4th century battles were focused against the Arians who denied Christ's divinity, so the direction of argument and emphasis was naturally on the equality of the Son with the Father in those days. I'd think this would likely influence the writing of the whole tradition of those following in their stead, especially in ages where hierarchy is taken for granted. This context should give us pause lest we misread the egalitarian errors of our own age into earlier ages.

#### 4.8 Further Study

There is still more thought and discussion needed regarding the contention (in Edwards and Owen?) that the 'new habitude' is not being in God *naturally* but arising as of *free agreement*. Read Edwards on the covenant of redemption. Read [here](#) too.

#### 4.9 Miscellaneous Fragments

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An index of the most of the main trinity debate posts/articles can be found [here](#) see the comments section for some additional posts including ones by Steve Hays. A more extensive one can be found [here](#). These indexes do not include two more recent (but particularly instructive) posts from Warhorn: [one](#) and [two](#).

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On distinguishing persons in the Godhead based on 'relations of origin' see [here](#):

To my knowledge, it's common in Reformed theology to say the Son became incarnate rather than the Father because it was "fitting" for the Son to become incarnate rather than the Father. It was "fitting" for the Father to send the Son, rather than vice versa, because the Father generates the Son.

If, however, you're going to argue that it would be unfitting for the Father to become incarnate, that there's no possible world in which the Father became incarnate, then that seems to commit you to a necessitarian principle of intra-Trinitarian subordination. A metaphysical hierarchy in which the Father must be the sender while the Son must be the sent.

With that in mind, I don't see that critics of Grudem et al. who subscribe to eternal generation (and eternal procession) are in any position to denounce the notion of eternal subordination. If they think there's an order in the Trinity which *requires* the Son rather than the Father to be sent, then what is that if not eternal subordination? I think their Confessionalism blinds them to the parallel.

On the allegation is that EFS posits two distinct wills in the Godhead, and that entails heretical subordinationism. From [here](#):

it's hard to see how that's a legitimate inference from anything the Nicene creed says. Indeed, Mark Jones resorts to Thomistic metaphysics (e.g. divine simplicity, God as pure act) to make his case. But it's grossly anachronistic to accuse Grudem et al. of denying the Nicene creed because their position may be at odds with Thomism. 4C Greek Fathers and Greek bishops weren't Thomists. Even if you think Thomism is the greatest thing since lava lamps, the metaphysical underpinnings of the Nicene creed aren't based on that paradigm.

On the authority of the creeds, from [here](#):

Calvin famously or infamously (depending on your viewpoint) modified traditional Nicene Christology by claiming the Father generates the person of the Son rather than the nature or deity of the Son. Cf. P. Helm, Calvin's Ideas, chap. 2. So Calvin himself didn't regard Nicene Christology as a nonnegotiable, norming norm.

Moreover, prominent Reformed theologians like B. B. Warfield, Paul Helm, John Frame, John Murray, John Feinberg, and Robert Reymond have taken that a step further by denying the eternal generation of the Son (as well as denying the eternal procession of the Spirit)...

...There's more to councils like Nicea, Chalcedon, and Constantinople than their creedal statements. In addition, you have the conciliar canons. And in the case of Chalcedon, you also have the letter of Pope Leo.

It's a potential problem when evangelicals cherry-pick church councils. When they pluck the creeds, but discard other conciliar mandates.

I don't think there's anything inherently wrong with that. If all you're looking for is what is true and useful, then it's fine to be selective in your appropriation of the church councils.

If, however, the council itself is a criterion of truth, if the fact that a council said it validates the claim, then it's arbitrary to pick and choose what you will believe or enforce. Since people like Trueman seem to be mounting an argument from authority when they appeal to conciliar creeds, their selectivity is ad hoc.

And [here](#):

As someone who's debating many Catholic apologists and not a few Orthodox apologists, I'm struck by the unguarded way that Confessional Calvinists default to the Nicene creed as an unquestionable benchmark. I wonder how their appeal to patristic authority and conciliar authority would fare if they ever got into a debate with a Catholic or Orthodox apologist. Where do they draw the line? Their selective deference to church councils represents an unstable mediating position. It paves the way to Rome or Constantinople....

... Although I don't agree with Grudem's position, the "mind of the church" didn't terminate with the church fathers or Greek Orthodox councils... There's no magic cutoff, as if pre-Reformation theology represents the mind of the church while post-Reformation theology does not.

On the lop-sided fear of tritheism (due to multiple wills), to the neglect of the danger of unitarianism and modalism (apparent from flattening of distinctions between the Persons in their interaction), from [here](#):

I'm struck by how so many theologians think it's more important to guard against the appearance of tritheism than unitarianism. Do they think unitarianism is less heretical than tritheism?... I find [Alastair's] formulation strikingly modalistic.

Useful terminology (columns are not equivalent terms, but there is a lot of commonality/overlap):

Immanent/ontological	<----->	Economic
Modes of subsistence	<----->	Modes of operation
Mode of being	<----->	Mode of action
Eternal	<----->	Temporal

Ad intra	<----->	Ad Extra
Necessary	<----->	Contingent / Voluntary
Essential	<----->	Accidental
Naturally	<----->	Freely
Substance/Essence	<----->	Person/Relation
Divine/eternal Processions	<----->	Contingent/covenantal Missions