

HERMENEUTICAL BUNGEE-JUMPING: SUBORDINATION IN THE GODHEAD

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Students of the history of Christian thought generally believe that hermeneutical deviations from what evangelicals consider to be orthodox doctrine do not appear as the result of premeditated conspiracies to create new heresies. Such aberrations creep into the belief systems of the Church imperceptibly carried by degrees into the corporate religious consciousness through concerns that often appear legitimate. The purpose of this presentation is to bring to the attention of evangelical scholars a hermeneutical approach to the doctrine of the Trinity that is being developed in our midst and that, I believe, stretches our tolerance for theological innovation beyond the limits of orthodoxy.

Ever since the formulation of the Nicene and Chalcedonian affirmations the Church, at least in its post-Augustinian expression, has rested securely in its understanding of the Trinity as it was interpreted by the councils and defined in the creeds. Occasionally some aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity comes under attack at the hands of sectarians. But Biblical Christians have been quick to rise to its defense and to guard it against redefinitions and new interpretations.

The Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) provides a striking contemporary example of this conservative reflex. Since its inception, the ETS had been content to maintain the following sentence as its doctrinal basis: “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written and is therefore inerrant in the autographs.” For decades this one-sentence creed served the Society satisfactorily. In recent years, however, it became necessary to expand it in order to protect the Society from infiltration by deviant views of the Trinity. To the existing sentence was added another: “God is a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory.” With this addendum the ETS resoundingly affirmed the historic view of the Trinity. It recognized the oneness of the Godhead along with the eternity, the ontological identity and the equality in authority or sovereignty (“power”) and honor or status (“glory”) among the three persons of the Trinity.

At this point, one wishes it were possible to be assured that all is well with the doctrine of the Trinity and that this theological legacy is scrupulously protected inside the evangelical camp. Unfortunately this is not so. From within our own ranks a potentially destructive redefinition of the

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

More pointedly, our reference is to the current discussion regarding gender roles in church and family. Some proponents of a hierarchical order between male and female attempt to use, as a divine model for their proposal at the human level, an alleged relationship of authority/subordination between Father and Son. Then a parallel is drawn between a hierarchical order that makes the Son subordinate to the Father to a hierarchical order that makes women subordinate to men, thus claiming theological legitimacy for the latter. It is not within the parameters of this presentation to enter into the gender roles debate. Our discussion will focus essentially on the theory of the subordination of the Son to the Father.

After the Arian controversy and its settlement at the councils, the western Church affirmed the consubstantiality of the Son and the Holy Spirit with the Father, the coeternality and the essential oneness of the persons of the Trinity, thus excluding any form of ontological hierarchy, order or ranking among them that would pertain to their eternal state. But while the Church affirmed the full divinity of Christ in both his nature and status, it also recognized that a radical disruption took place within the Trinity in relation to human history. After declaring in lofty terms that the Lord Jesus Christ is "true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father through whom all things came into existence," the creed goes on to state that he, "because of us men, and because of our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate and suffered, and was buried."

What the creed describes in those majestic cadences is not business as usual for the Trinity but the awesome and tragic travail of divinity from infinity to human brokenness for the purpose of its redemption, as if heaven had been thrown into a state of cosmic emergency, similar to that of a shepherd abandoning his ninety-nine sheep in the desert to go searching for a missing one. In many ways the Scriptures explain that this divine mission of mercy was accomplished at infinite cost for God and that it required an unprecedented and unrepeatable dislocation within the Trinity. In order to minister to humans out of love, and in characteristic servanthood, God in Christ became man.

Within the context of Christ's ministry to the world, and in this context alone, Scripture indeed teaches the complete humiliation of the Son. From the position of equality with the Father, at the pinnacle of divine glory, the Son descended to the most degrading experience of debasement known among

humans by suffering the humiliation of a public execution as a criminal. While in this state of humiliation the Son's divine nature was not affected. Although human personhood was added to the divine subsistence of the Son, he remained one in substance with the Godhead. As Christ in his humanity anticipated the joy of returning to the Father, he could state: "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). And as he described his mission to the world he said, "I do as the Father has commanded me" (14:31). When Christ the servant described his mission as not seeking to do his own will but the will of the Father who had sent him, he confessed: "I can do nothing on my own authority" (5:30).

But, conversely, Christ on earth could claim complete mutuality with the Father and full equality with him. When asked to reveal the Father, Christ broadly stated: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9). When he described himself as the source of eternal life and the Father as his warrant, Christ claimed: "I and the Father are one" (10:30). To summarize the claims that Christ made about himself, the gospel writer explained that Christ had made himself equal with God (5:18). And just prior to his ascension, when the Son was anticipating returning to his heavenly glory, he declared: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Matt 28:18).

So during his earthly life Christ remained a full participant in the Godhead, thereby retaining his divine subsistence. Paradoxically he also made himself subject to the Father when he assumed human personhood. Of course the relation of Christ's divine nature to the human nature assumed by him is a theological issue all its own. It is a separate issue and not of our concern at the moment. Our focus in this discussion is the Scriptures' definition of Christ's subjection when he functioned as Redeemer. The Scriptures qualify his subjection in the following manner.

Christ did not take upon himself the task of world redemption because he was number two in the Trinity and his boss told him to do so or because he was demoted to a subordinate rank so that he could accomplish a job that no one else wanted to touch. He volunteered his life out of sacrificial love. Being born in the likeness of man, he also took the form of a servant and as such became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Scripture describes this process in these words: "He humbled himself" (Phil 2:8). He was not forced to become a servant; he was not compelled to be obedient; he was not dragged to his death against his will. The Bible puts it tersely: "He humbled himself." Therefore it is much more appropriate, and theologically accurate, to speak of Christ's self-humiliation rather than of his subordination. Nobody subordinated him, and he was originally subordinated to no one. He humbled himself.

A second qualification pertains to Christ's humiliation. The Bible also teaches that the humiliation of the Son was an interim or temporary state. It was not, nor shall it be, an eternal condition. Christ's humiliation was essentially a phase of ministry coincidental with the need of his creatures. From all eternity, and in the beginning, Christ was with God, and Christ was God, and he was in the form of God. He was equal with God, but the time came when he did not consider his equality with God a privilege to clutch as his

own. Rather, he let go of it and took the form of a servant. It was something new for him. Being in the form of a servant was not an eternal condition. He took it up. He became obedient unto death. Prior to the incarnation there had been no need for him to be obedient since he was equal with God. But despite the fact that he had the dignity of sonship he learned obedience through what he suffered (Heb 5:8). Obedience was a new experience for him, something he had to learn. It was not an eternal state. When Christ came into the world he said, "Behold, I have come to do your will, O God" (10:5, 7).

The frame of reference for every term that is found in Scripture to describe Christ's humiliation pertains to his ministry and not to his eternal state. When this redemptive ministry draws close to its eschatological consummation, Christ will deliver the kingdom to the Father because God has already put all things under his feet, and one more time the Son will be made subject to the Father so as to bring the work of redemption to a triumphant finale as God becomes all in all (1 Cor 15:24–28). The stated purpose for this last act of subjection of the Son is that God may become all in all and thus bring to completion the redemptive process that had required Christ's humiliation (15:28; Eph 1:23; 4:10). Any inference relative to an eternal state of subjection that would extend beyond this climactic fulfillment is not warranted by this text or any other Biblical text. The nonexistence of such Biblical data is made obvious in an article by John V. Dahms.¹ In an effort to show that the NT teaches the "essential and eternal" subordination of the Son, Dahms forces questionable subordinationist inferences out of texts such as John 17:24; Eph 3:21; Phil 2:9–11; Mark 13:32; 14:62; John 1:1.

At the very end, when Christ's self-subjection will have achieved its redemptive purpose and as he is universally acclaimed as Lord, his reintegration to supreme preeminence will also bring glory to God the Father (Phil 2:11). In other words the Father will highly exalt him, and he will highly glorify the Father. Reciprocity remains the consistent mode of interaction within the Godhead until the end and into eternity.

Because there was no order of subordination within the Trinity prior to the Second Person's incarnation, there will remain no such thing after its completion. If we must talk of subordination it is only a functional or economic subordination that pertains exclusively to Christ's role in relation to human history. Christ's *kenōsis* affected neither his essence nor his status in eternity.

Except for occasional and predictable deviations, this is the historical Biblical trinitarian doctrine that has been defined in the creeds and generally defended by the Church, at least the western Church, throughout the centuries. It is worth reiterating that it has been singularly affirmed in our day by the ETS: "God is a Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory."

Thus it is impossible within the confines of orthodoxy to derive a model for an order of hierarchy among humans from the ontological structure of

¹ J. V. Dahms, "The Subordination of the Son," *JETS* 36/3 (September 1994) 351–364.

the Trinity, since all three persons are equal in essence. Moreover, because Christ's functional subjection is not an eternal condition but a task-driven, temporary phase of ministry, it is presented in Scripture as a model of servanthood and mutual submission for all believers (Phil 2:5–11). Because of its temporary character, Christ's subjection does not lend itself as a model for a permanent, generically-defined male/female hierarchy.

Unfortunately some propounders of female subordination cannot let it go at that. In order to make the trinitarian model work for them, they do not hesitate to stretch the concept of Christ's functional subordination from a temporary phase to an eternal condition and to define it not as a temporary necessity required to accomplish the work of redemption but as the eternal status of the Son in relation to the authority of the Father. To be specific, the work of two representatives of this school of thought will be cited and briefly evaluated.

Some of the authors of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* struggle with the definition of "head" as used by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians, Ephesians and Colossians.² They try to establish that "head" meant "authority over" or "leader" as it does in English, whereas in each of the contexts where it is used "head" in Greek naturally yields the meaning of "servant-provider of life, of growth and fullness" (1 Cor 11:3, cf. 8, 12; Eph 1:22–23; 4:15–16; 5:23; Col 2:19; etc.).

In particular the authors of *Recovering* endow "head" with the meaning of authority in their interpretation of 1 Cor 11:3: "Christ is the head of every man; the husband is the head of the wife, and God is the head of Christ." They insist that this text teaches the existence of an order of hierarchy between God and Christ on one hand and between men and women on the other. Of course they have no satisfactory answer for the fact that Paul's ordering of the three clauses rules out a hierarchical sequence (BCA instead of ABC) and for the fact that the meaning of "head" in this statement, as well as in other NT passages where it is similarly used, is better rendered as "one considered preeminent but acting as servant-provider, or source (of life and growth)."³

Wayne Grudem states about the clause "the head of Christ is God" (11:3) that it indicates "a distinction in role in which primary authority and leadership among the persons of the Trinity has always been and will always be the possession of God the Father." Again Grudem proffers that God the Son is "eternally equal to the Father in deity and essence, but subordinate to the Father in authority."⁴ But even if "head" in this passage were to mean authority, neither the passage nor its context contains any indication that this headship describes an eternal state. In this text Paul is referring to the relationship that prevails between God and Christ in the context of Christ's ministry to men and women within human history.

² *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (ed. J. Piper and W. Grudem; Wheaton: Crossway, 1991).

³ Cf. G. Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 157–162, 215–252.

⁴ *Recovering* 457, 540.

In the course of this discussion Grudem writes that the doctrine of the “eternal generation of the Son” implies “a *relationship* between the Father and the Son that *eternally* existed and that will always exist—a relationship that includes a subordination in role, but not in essence or being.”⁵ Grudem has it backwards. By definition the doctrine of eternal generation pertains precisely to “essence or being” since it defines the Son’s filiation. It says nothing about roles, much less about subordination.

The doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son, itself a creedal construction subject to aleatory interpretations rather than a strongly attested Biblical motif, and terminology such as Father and Son designations intended to convey ineffable mysteries into the immanency of human language have sometimes given way to simplistic anthropomorphic projections not warranted by Scripture. God is Father, but he never had a wife. Christ is the eternal Son, but he has no mother. Sons are always born within time, but Christ is without a beginning. Fathers are always older than their sons, but Father and Son are eternal. Sons normally outlive their fathers, but the Son and the Father are immortal. In their early years sons are subordinated to their fathers, but Son and Father have been and are eternally “equal in power and glory.” Sons are unilaterally dependent on their fathers for their existence, but by definition no member of the Trinity is unilaterally dependent on another for his existence. The oneness structure of the Trinity and its eternality require that each of its members be constantly dependent upon the other two for the Trinity to exist. The few references to the “only begotten” Son that are invoked to justify a doctrine of eternal generation require a more cautious treatment than to be used to legitimize the concept of an eternal subordination process otherwise not attested in Scripture (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). These would be better understood as referring to the necessity of the incarnation, just as “the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world” (Rev 13:8) refers to the crucifixion rather than to a theory of Christ’s eternal passion. Grudem’s notion of the eternal functional subordination of the Son to the Father bears the troubling marks of a reductive anthropomorphism.

In defense of his position Grudem takes to task theologians such as Millard Erickson, who see “subordination in role as non-eternal, but rather a temporary activity of the members of the Trinity for a period of ministry.”⁶ Grudem’s claim that the Son was in eternal functional subordination to the Father, however, also has devastating consequences for *kenōsis* Christology. According to Scripture the Son did surrender a dimension of his equality with the Father in his *kenōsis* (Phil 2:6). Since according to Grudem there was no functional parity to begin with, the only structure of equality left for the Son’s “emptying” was his ontological equality with the Father. Inevitably Grudem’s theory of the Son’s eternal functional subordination leads to an incarnate Christ who was fully divine neither in function nor in essence. Scripture teaches the opposite. In his incarnation the Son remained equal

⁵ Ibid. 457.

⁶ Ibid. 540.

with the Father. But he temporarily forfeited his functional equality to assume the “form of a servant.” This was a new mode of being for the Son in relation to the Father, not an eternal state (v. 7).

The other text adduced by Grudem in support of his theory of eternal subordination is Heb 1:3, where it states that when Christ “made purification for sin he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.” Grudem comments: “Jesus is at the right hand, but God the Father is still on the throne.”⁷ This is a very revealing statement. There is no mention in Heb 1:3 of any throne in connection with the right hand of God, although there is in 8:1; 12:2. But in the same verse that Grudem uses (1:3) are found some of the strongest ascriptions of the attributes of deity to Christ contained in the NT. It states that the Son is the radiance of God’s glory, the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. Instead Grudem assumes that sitting at the right hand of the throne is a position of subordination. In reality it can be cogently argued from Scripture that it is a position of exaltation to supreme glory. But we concede to Grudem that God’s throne is the ultimate transcendental symbol of divine authority.

We discover in Scripture not only that Christ is sitting at the right hand of God but also that he is sitting at the center of God’s throne. This is not an incidental reference but a heavy emphasis made especially in the book of Revelation. In Rev 3:21 Christ says, “I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne.” Only Christ may join the Father on his throne. Victorious believers are invited to become guest participants in the reign of Christ on a different throne. In 7:17 the Lamb is at the center of the throne of God. In 12:5 the Son who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter is “taken up to God and to his throne.” In 22:3 we are told that there will be one throne in the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal city of God. It is “the throne of God and of the Lamb.” Contrary to Grudem’s suggestion, God is not on the throne with the Son apart from him or below the throne in a position of subordination. According to Scripture, both God the Father and God the Son occupy the same throne for eternity. They are “equal in power and glory.”

The same willingness to assume the risk of appearing to devalue the sovereignty of Christ for agenda purposes is manifest in an article cited and endorsed by Grudem.⁸ In this article Robert Letham tries also to build a case for female subordination through the bias of trinitarian speculation. At first he seems to draw a distinction between the ontological equality within the Trinity and a relation of subordination within the functional or economic Trinity. He states: “In terms of God’s actions in the history of redemption and revelation we note a clear order [of hierarchy].”⁹

At this point Letham engages an issue that is simply ignored by Grudem. Letham is probably aware that a subordination that extends into eternity cannot remain only functional but that it also becomes *ipso facto* an ontological reality. Grudem tries to maintain that Christ can remain ontologically

⁷ Ibid. 457.

⁸ Ibid. 540.

⁹ R. Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52/1 (Spring 1990) 68.

equal to the Father while he is subjected to an eternal state of functional subordination to him. Letham seems to see the fallacy in this dichotomy. Since the attribute of eternity inheres in the divine essence, any reality that is eternal is by necessity ontologically grounded. Eternity is a quality of existence. Therefore if Christ's subordination is eternal, as both Grudem and Letham claim, it is also ontological. Letham understands this and faces up to it: "There is not only an order [understand "hierarchy"] in the economy of redemption but also in the eternal ontological relations of the persons of the Trinity." Thus for Letham the functional hierarchy is indicative of the ontological hierarchy that exists eternally within the Trinity. He emphasizes this proposition without inhibition: "The revelation of the economic Trinity truly indicates the ontological Trinity."¹⁰ The eternal ontological status of the Son *vis-à-vis* the Father takes the form of an order that is a relation of authority.

Having ventured this far into the hermeneutical minefields of subordinationism, Letham is too astute a theologian not to be aware of the fact that his view of an ontologically stratified, split-level Trinity leads him straight into the trap of Arianism. In a vain attempt to rescue himself from this danger he gives lip service to the coequality of the members of the Trinity while, astoundingly, denying this equality in the same breath. One can appreciate the dilemma from his statement: "The coequality of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the unity of the one God takes the form of an order of subsistence."¹¹ The confusion is flagrant: "coequality" in the form of an "order of subsistence"—which means an ontologically structured hierarchy. It should be either equality and no hierarchy, or hierarchy and no equality. On one hand, Letham cannot bring himself to sacrifice the oneness of the Godhead. On the other, he is driven to superimpose upon it an order of hierarchy. Incongruously he states again that "the *order of subsistence* in *coequal* unity [is] disclosed to be inherent eternally in God."¹²

Since according to Letham the Son was eternally subordinated to the Father both in essence and in function, one wonders where the equality came from that the Son let go in the *kenōsis*. Eternal subordination precludes equality. The Biblical definition of the *kenōsis* as the Son's refusal to exploit the status of equality he had with the Father attests to the fact that there was no subordination prior to the *kenōsis*.

Because he cannot bring himself to forfeit his classic trinitarian heritage, Letham tries to escape the implications of Arian tritheism intrinsic to his theory of ontologically grounded hierarchy in the Godhead. But he cannot. All his talk about equality in the Godhead does not release him from the dire consequences of his theory of Christ's eternal subordination to the Father. Equality suggests a circle of reciprocity in oneness instead of the tritheistic ladder of hierarchy. But the structure of relationships he and Grudem postulate between the persons of the Trinity is the ladder of hierarchy. Letham

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid. 73.

¹² Ibid. (italics mine).

gets himself into this predicament by positing that the order of hierarchy between Father and Son “consists in authority and obedience. The Father sends the Son. The Son obeys the Father.” Nowhere in Scripture, however, does the Father exercise “authority” over the Son, nor is the Son said to “obey the Father.” This is not NT terminology. But in any case Letham goes on to say, “Such is clear in the incarnate life of our Lord.” He cites as proof some of the passages of Scripture we have previously touched upon (John 5:19–43; 17:1 ff.; cf. esp. Heb 5:8; 10:5–10).

Such texts, however, teach Christ’s self-subjection exclusively in relation to the accomplishment of his redemptive ministry. But Letham engages in lethal speculation. He claims that the relation of authority and obedience that allegedly prevailed during the incarnation reflects the eternal relation of Father and Son. If this were not so, “we would have to say then that we had not received a true revelation of God, that Jesus Christ had not made known to us the true nature of God.”¹³ Therefore for Letham the state of subordination of the incarnate Christ is characteristic of his relation to the Father throughout eternity. The *kenōsis* is thus stripped of its singularity. It becomes normative, an eternal ontological reality within the Godhead.

Letham offers no support from the Scriptures for this jump of logic, and he cannot because there is no such teaching in the Bible. Indeed the Bible does teach very clearly and abundantly that the incarnation is a revelation and that it has made known to us the true nature of God as love. But never does the Bible teach that the Son is eternally subordinate because he took it upon himself to be the Savior. In fact the Bible teaches precisely the opposite of what Letham proposes. In support of his theory Letham carelessly cites a reference that actually argues against him: “Although he was a Son he learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8).

Three remarks must be made about this text. (1) The fact that he learned obedience “although” he was a Son indicates that the nature of his Sonship excluded the necessity of obedience. He learned obedience despite the fact that he was a Son. (2) The fact that he “learned” obedience indicates that it was something new in his experience as Son. Obedience was not a mark of his eternal relation to the Father. He learned it for the purpose of ministry. (3) The fact that he learned obedience “through” what he suffered indicates that obedience was required in relation to his suffering and that it was not an eternal condition. Christ’s experience of obedience was confined to his redemptive ministry as suffering servant. Letham’s handling of this text suggests that a hermeneutic that serves the promotion of ideology may engender exegetical distortions that turn the Biblical text against itself.

In conclusion, we offer three recommendations.

1. *Do not mess with the Trinity.* Especially, let us not run the risk of being found denigrating the lordship and majesty of Christ instead of exalting him. Let God the Father be our example. After the *kenōsis* he was eager to exalt again his Son to the highest place, to give him the name that is above

¹³ Ibid. 69.

every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. The supreme exaltation of the Son reflects glory even on the Father. If this is how the Father exalts the Son, may humans do less? By what right do humans assign subordination to the Son when the Father does not? In their efforts to assign a subsidiary role to the Son, subordinationists may actually be found dishonoring the Father. According to Scripture, the Father's desire is that "all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:23). Because Father and Son act cooperatively, they deserve equal honor. To assign a subordinate position to the Son may be an affront to both Son and Father. "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father" (5:23).

Through the councils, the Church cut across all speculations to affirm the coeternality, the interdependency and the oneness in substance of the three persons of the Trinity, thus excluding any form of hierarchy, order or ranking among them that would pertain to their eternal state. Once the Church recognized that the participation of each person of the Trinity in the ultimacy of divine oneness is absolute, it became impossible to superimpose an order of hierarchy upon the Godhead without violating the Church's primal belief in the absolute nature of God. The doctrine of an absolute Godhead requires that all its members be absolute. To extend the subordination of the Son into Christ's pre-existence to a time prior to creation and to the incarnation comes dangerously close to Arianism, which also recognizes the deity of Christ but in a subordinated form assumed prior to the creation of the cosmos. Then it becomes impossible to speak of the three persons of the Trinity as being one and equal in essence. Instead we have a tiered formation of three gods ranked by decreasing order of power—not the eternal embrace in oneness of Father, Son and Holy Spirit but the split-level stratifications of a pagan pantheon.

The concept of a split-level Trinity also has devastating consequences for the doctrine of salvation. According to Scripture, the redemptive power of the cross derives from the fact that the One who died on it was fully God. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). The work of redemption required the full involvement of the Godhead, not just a subordinate part of the Trinity. God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (John 3:16). He did not give the second-ranking officer of the Trinity, the lower god in an Olympian hierarchy.

It makes a lot of difference whether God in Christ offered his life out of sacrificial love, as the Scriptures affirm he did, or whether Christ acted out of obedience because he had no choice but to subject himself to the authority of the Father. To assume that God gave less than his best and his utmost to redeem his creation trivializes the enterprise of redemption and robs it of its tragic singularity and awesome grandeur. A Christology that minimizes the majesty and lordship of Christ by reducing his ministry to that of a subordinate function or to a ministry accomplished out of subordination must be recognized as a deviation from Biblical truth. A low Christology results in a weak soteriology. Let us not tamper with the doctrine of the Trinity lest we run the risk of devaluing the redemptive ministry of Christ and Christ him-

self. If some people's belief system requires the subordination of women, they should not build their hierarchy at the expense of Christological orthodoxy.

2. *Let us quit talking about subordination.* It is not Biblical terminology. It smacks of the Arian heresy. Subordination is a word of Latin derivation (*subordinare*) that governs a transitive verb. You do not merely subordinate; you subordinate someone. Thus the word carries connotations of coercion or obligation by reason of superior force or authority. The notion of such a relationship of subordination in the Godhead is completely foreign to Scripture. Indeed, its content teaches exactly the opposite.

According to Scripture, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are united in a relationship of mutual reverence and deference that expresses itself in reciprocal servanthood. The Father glorifies the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, and the Holy Spirit glorifies both. The Father gives everything he has to the Son, the Son gives everything he is to the Father, and the Spirit serves both in everything. The Father gives all authority in heaven and earth to the Son. The Son delivers the kingdom to the Father and subjects himself to the Father, who puts all things under the Son so that God may be all in all.

The Father is at the forefront of the work of creation, but both the *Logos*/Son and the Spirit are present and involved with the Father in creation. The Son is at the forefront of the work of redemption, but both the Father and the Spirit are present and involved with the Son in redemption. The Spirit is at the forefront of the work of sanctification, but both the Father and the Son are present and involved with the Spirit in the work of sanctification.

Indeed the Son made himself servant both to the Father and to humans in order to accomplish his redemptive work (Matt 20:28; Rom 15:8; Phil 2:7). But this servant function did not make him eternally subordinated either to the Father or to humans. Subordinationists must wrench apart the persons of the Trinity in order to place them on a ladder of hierarchy in relation to each other. Not so for the Bible. It was during the days of his flesh and from his servant ministry that the Son claimed to be equal with God the Father (John 5:18). It was from within his alleged "functional subordination" that Christ claimed that the Father was in him and he in the Father, and that he offered his deeds as proof of their functional oneness (10:38).

Any theory of the Son's subordination to the Father must take into account Christ's claim that his earthly ministry was the outworking of the Father's activity present within him: "It is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (14:10–11). With such statements the incarnate Christ claimed to be in functional oneness with the Father. The Son never acts in functional isolation from the Father. When he casts out demons, he does so by the finger of God and the Spirit of God. Both Father and Spirit are actively involved in the ministry of Christ (Luke 10:20; Matt 12:28). The dead are raised and given life through the conjugated operations of both Father and Son (John 5:21). Jesus' teaching about his relation with the Father obliterated any possible disjunction between his ontological oneness with the Father and an alleged functional autonomy of the Son from the Father. For Christ, it was the Fa-

ther present within him who was doing his work through the Son. Because the Father, living in Christ and at work in and through Christ, could not be in subordination to himself, any talk about Christ's functional subordination to the Father runs the risk of collapsing into nonsense.

The ministry of world redemption must not be reduced to a little side project that could be delegated to the services of a subordinate deity. According to Scripture, God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19). The all-encompassing work of world redemption required nothing less than the total involvement of the triune God to achieve it. This joint venture can only be described in terms of functional oneness, not functional subordination. To impose upon it a restrictive concept of functional fragmentation within the Trinity trivializes God's work of salvation and reduces it to "a particular limited purpose," as Letham calls it.¹⁴

The Church has generally rejected the subordination proposal as a pagan infiltration. After stating that to approach the "economic Trinity as the immanent Trinity, and vice versa" represents a broad consensus within Christian theology, Alister E. McGrath observes that "the most significant restatements of the doctrine of the Trinity within the western tradition date from the twentieth century."¹⁵ The current subordinationist proposal may well fall within the category of such modernistic formulations. Therefore we urge today's Christians to discard the terminology of subordination and to describe the servant ministry of Christ with the beautiful term Scripture assigns to it when it refers to his humiliation. He was not subordinated. He humbled himself—not subordination but self-humiliation.

3. *Let us not use God to push our ideological agendas.* The attempt may vitiate our hermeneutics and cause a theological crash.

I recently heard from his siblings that one of my sons had gone bungee-jumping. When I asked him why he had climbed to a high place, tied a line around his waist, and jumped off into a chasm, he answered: "Just to prove something."

Let us be careful not to use God to prove something. Let the Father be God, let Christ be God, let the Holy Spirit be God—all three in one, "equal in power and glory" for all eternity.

¹⁴ Ibid. 68.

¹⁵ A. E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 255, 260.