

A DEFENSE OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE ETERNAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON

STEPHEN D. KOVACH AND PETER R. SCHEMM, JR.*

Gilbert Bilezikian boldly claims that “nowhere in the Bible is there a reference to a chain of command within the Trinity. Such ‘subordinationist’ theories were propounded during the fourth century and were rejected as heretical.”¹ In 1997, the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* published Bilezikian’s article “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead.”² This article was originally a paper he delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 18, 1994. Bilezikian claims that the current discussion of the eternal subordination of the Son by certain evangelical writers is based upon a theological innovation for the purpose of advancing an ideological agenda that makes women subordinate to men. The ministry of Christ on earth, according to Bilezikian, was only a temporary self-humiliation that has no bearing on his eternal status of complete equality of function and authority.³ Both Scripture and the Church councils exclude “any form of hierarchy, order or ranking” that would pertain to the eternal state of the Trinity.⁴ Bilezikian concludes his article with three recommendations for those who teach the eternal subordination of the Son: “1. *Do not mess with the Trinity . . .* 2. *Let us quit talking about subordination . . .* (and) 3. *Let us not use God to push our ideological agendas . . .*”⁵ As this article will show, Bilezikian’s warnings are far more rhetorical than they are biblical or historical.

The purpose of this article, then, is to offer an introductory survey of the historical and biblical data that support the teaching of the eternal subordination of the Son. There are three parts to the survey. First, it is necessary to explain the distinction between the heresy of “subordinationism” and the idea of “functional” or “economic subordination.” Bilezikian’s misunderstanding is based on an improper and overly negative definition of subordination. Second, a brief account of the early Church councils and the

* Stephen D. Kovach is instructor of theology at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 222 N. Wingate, Wake Forest, NC 27587. This article is primarily based on his 1995 ETS presentation in Philadelphia. Peter R. Schemm, Jr. is a Ph.D. student at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

¹ Gilbert Bilezikian, *Beyond Sex Roles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 241.

² Gilbert Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS* 40 (1997) 57–68.

³ *Ibid.* 58–60.

⁴ *Ibid.* 66.

⁵ *Ibid.* 65–68.

Church fathers shows that they adopted the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son, and that this doctrine continues in the Church as orthodoxy to this day. Third, the biblical record also confirms the eternal subordination of the Son. There are at least two main categories that affirm eternal subordination: the Son's relation to the Father and the Son's role on behalf of the Father.

The conclusion will look at a recent trend in Trinitarian thought that denies the eternal subordination of the Son by implication.⁶ The basis of these writings is that human beings are unable to discuss the interrelationships between the three Persons of the Godhead. These relations are a mystery and, therefore, one can only affirm the unity of God. Our sole basis for understanding the Trinity is the experience of being saved by God through Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Thus, any ideas of subordination are rooted in patriarchy and are prohibited because our personal experience of salvation promotes the full humanity of women. As such, feminists like LaCugna want to read the relations between the Trinity as supportive of a relational view of human beings with the values of mutuality, equality and community.⁷ A brief analysis and critique will be offered on this revision of orthodox Christianity.

I. THE HERESY OF SUBORDINATIONISM: WHAT IS IT?

Bilezikian assumes that any view that confers an order or hierarchy among the persons of the Trinity is a subordinationist heresy. He is not alone in this weighty mistake. In their article in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, R. C. and C. C. Kroeger claim that the heresy of subordinationism "assigns an inferiority of being, status or role to the Son or Holy Spirit within the Trinity."⁸ In reality, the definition of subordinationism is not quite as broad as the Kroegers make it out to be. The assumption made by these leading evangelical feminists is that subordination of any type (including role) within the Trinity is automatically heresy. In fact, subordination as seen within the context of the early Church councils and creeds can be potentially orthodox or heretical. It depends on who or what is being subordinated and to what extent.

Several other theological dictionaries define "subordinationism" with more historical and theological precision. Subordinationism is the view that the Son and the Spirit "do not fully possess *the divine essence (Homoousion)*,"⁹

⁶ See Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: the Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ R. C. and C. C. Kroeger, "Subordinationism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Ewell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 1058. Emphasis mine. The Kroegers further state that anyone who held this view of the Trinity (including role subordination) was condemned as a heretic by the Second Helvetic Confession.

⁹ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, eds., "Subordinationism," in *Dictionary of Theology* (2d ed.; New York: Crossroad, 1981) 488. Emphasis mine.

"the doctrine that in essence *and* status the Son is inferior to the Father, or the Spirit is inferior to the Father and the Son";¹⁰ "any christological position which subordinates the Son to the Father *in such a way as potentially to endanger his essential divinity*";¹¹ "a view of Christ which maintains that he is not equal *in substantial being* with God the Father."¹² All of these sources clearly betray the nature of the Kroegers' overstatement.

In an article in the *Westminster Theological Journal*, Michael Bauman discusses the different kinds of subordinationism during the Arian controversy.¹³ He draws a distinction between what he calls emphatic and economic subordination. The Arian heresy taught emphatic subordination which entails inequality of nature and being. Arians asserted that "a natural inequality existed between the Persons of the Trinity by virtue of their essential differentiation and the temporal derivative character of the Second and Third."¹⁴ This is heretical because it is a subordination of essence or nature. Economic subordination, adopted by the Council of Nicea, means that while all three divine Persons are identical in essence, the Son is economically subordinate to the Father with respect to his eternal mission and function. The Son is no less than the Father, but has voluntarily submitted himself to the will of the Father.¹⁵

Contrary to those who see subordination as always negative and abhorrent, there are in fact different kinds of subordination.¹⁶ In his book on gender roles, Stephen Clark asserts that subordination is difficult to understand because it is a cultural expression foreign to modern Western society.¹⁷ Subordination simply refers to a relationship in which one person, the subordinate, depends upon another for direction.¹⁸ Clark identifies three types of subordination (domination, mercenary and voluntary) and three different ways in which subordination is conducted (oppression, care and unity).¹⁹ Clark also notes that subordination and inferiority have no necessary conceptual link. The head and subordinate can be of equal worth, and furthermore, it is even possible for the subordinate to hold a greater rank or dignity.²⁰

¹⁰ Millard Erickson, "Subordinationism," in *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986) 161. Emphasis mine.

¹¹ Frances Young, "Subordinationism," in *The Westminster Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 553. Emphasis mine.

¹² Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, Dermot A. Lane, eds., "Subordinationism," in *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) 986. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Michael E. Bauman, "Milton, Subordinationism, and the Two-Stage Logos," *WTJ* 48 (1986) 177–182.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 177.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ For example, Bilezikian refers to Christ's stay on earth as a "humiliation" (citing John 14:28 and John 5:30). Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping" 58–59.

¹⁷ Stephen Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ: An Examination of the Roles of Man and Woman in the Light of Scripture and the Social Sciences* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1980).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 23–24.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 41.

²⁰ The following evangelical feminists automatically assume subordination equals inferiority: Virginia Mollenkott, "Foreword," in Paul K. Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 8; Letha Scanzoni and Nancy Hardesty, *All We're Meant to Be: A Biblical Approach to Women's Liberation* (Waco, TX: Word, 1974) 110.

In summary, then, the idea of subordination does not necessarily entail inferiority. As applied to the Trinity, the term subordination does not always amount to a heretical distinction of worth and dignity between the Father and the Son. While evangelical feminists may believe that an eternal difference in role between the Father and Son is heretical, the plain meaning of the word and its use in church history shows that the Son can be voluntarily subordinate for the purpose of a higher cause without being inferior in being or essence.²¹ As John Thompson has pointed out, both Karl Barth and P. T. Forsyth affirm the idea of "obedience in God" and they do it in such a way as to answer both "the charges of inferiority and authoritarianism in one."²² As Forsyth puts it, "subordination is *not* inferiority, and it *is* God-like. The principle is imbedded in the very cohesion of the eternal trinity. . . . It is not a mark of inferiority to be subordinate, to have an authority, to obey. It is divine."²³ Voluntary subordination is always necessary to the establishment of genuine community. This is true for the Godhead as well as people.

II. ETERNAL SUBORDINATION AND CHURCH HISTORY

It cannot be legitimately denied that the eternal subordination of the Son is an orthodox doctrine and believed from the history of the early church to the present day. The following statement by a twentieth century theologian expresses well the meaning of the doctrine and its pervasiveness in church history:

From the second century onward a concept of the Son's subordination to the Father has been combined with a concept of the full equality among the Three. Each is seen to be fully, equally and eternally divine, although in their relationship to one another, the Father assumes supremacy and the others a subordinate role.²⁴

What follows is a survey of the early church period. While not exhaustive, the survey clearly affirms the teaching of the eternal subordination of the Son. The main sources are the Nicene Creed and four classical exegetes. Both the Creed and the exegetes account for the early ecumenical consensus on an order and ranking in the Godhead. Three of the exegetes represent "the great ecumenical 'Doctors of the Church'" (Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus and Augustine), and the other one is "widely and perennially valued for accurately stating points of ecumenical consensus" (Hilary).²⁵ After the Nicene Creed, the exegetes appear in chronological order.

²¹ Clark, *Man and Woman in Christ* 44.

²² John Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 48.

²³ P. T. Forsyth, "The Divine Self-Emptying," in *God the Holy Father* (London: Independent, 1957) 42-43; cited in Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* 48.

²⁴ Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Redeemer* (Joplin, MO: College, 1987) 146.

²⁵ Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life, Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1989) xvii.

1. *Early Church.* Following the Arian controversy, the Church had to deal for the first time specifically with the issue of whether the Son was a created being or God. To deal with this issue, the Nicene Creed added to the earlier Apostles' Creed. Whereas the Apostles' Creed declared only that Jesus Christ is God's only Son, and our Lord, the Nicene Creed added the following declaration dealing with eternal subordination: "and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into being. . . ." ²⁶ As Schaff makes clear, these statements reflected a belief in the eternal subordination of the Son. The Nicene Fathers believed that the Father, Son and Spirit have the same divine dignity, but in an order of subordination. The idea that the Son is begotten and the Father unbegotten means that the Father is primary and Sonship secondary. The dependence of the Son on the Father is reflected in the statements of the Creed which call the Son "God from God, light from light, true God from true God." Schaff declares that "all important scholars since Petavius admit subordination in the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity." ²⁷

Hilary of Poitiers (c. 291–371) is widely known as the Athanasius of the Western tradition. In *De Trinitate* there is clear evidence of the notion of order and ranking in the Godhead. After an introduction to his subject in Book 1, Book 2 starts his detailed discussion on the Trinity. For his "basic statement about the Trinity Hilary uses the baptismal formula from Matthew 28:19" which appears at the very beginning of Book 2. ²⁸ The order of the baptismal formula implies an order in the Godhead:

For God the Father is One, from Whom are all things; and our Lord Jesus Christ the Only-begotten, through Whom are all things, is One; and the Spirit, God's Gift to us, Who pervades all things, is also One. *Thus all are ranged according to powers possessed and benefits conferred; the One Power from Whom all, the One offspring through whom all, the one Gift who gives us perfect hope.* ²⁹

Hilary ends the chapter with a pithy statement on the relations within the Godhead. The Father, Son and Spirit are identified respectively as "infinity in the Eternal, His Likeness in His express Image, our enjoyment of Him in the Gift." ³⁰ Thus, there is an order in the Trinity.

In Book III, Chapter 12, there is more proof that Hilary sees at least some sort of order and ranking. He says,

²⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1950) 215–216.

²⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. III (311–600) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950) 683.

²⁸ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994) 83.

²⁹ Hilary, *De Trinitate*, in W. Sanday, ed., *St. Hilary of Poitiers: Select Works* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; NPNF; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 9:52. Emphasis mine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Who indeed would deny that the Father is the greater; the Unbegotten greater than the Begotten, the Father than the Son, the Sender than the Sent, He that wills than He that obeys? He Himself shall be His own witness: *The Father is greater than I*. It is a fact which we must recognize, but we must take heed lest with unskilled thinkers the majesty of the Father should obscure the glory of the Son.³¹

Speaking of the above passage, Schaff claims that a subordination of order is “plainly expressed . . . by the champion of the Nicene doctrine in the West.”³² Schaff underscores the significance of this passage in a footnote when he says, “In the same way Hilary derives all the attributes of the Son from the Father.”³³

A natural reading of Athanasius (c. 296–373) leads one to conclude that the eternity of the Son affirms the eternal order in the Godhead. In *Orationes contra Arianos*, Athanasius gives three proofs of the Son’s eternity.³⁴ In doing this, Athanasius provides the classic expression of how the Son is related to the Father, an expression that clearly sees an order in the Godhead. His first point is that Scripture declares that the Son has an eternal and uncreated relationship with the Father. He says that Scripture refers to the Son as “‘always’ and ‘eternal’ and ‘coexistent always with the Father.’ For ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.’ And in the Apocalypse He thus speaks; ‘Who is and who was and who is to come.’ Now who can rob ‘who is’ and ‘who was’ of eternity?”³⁵ After many more citations from Scripture, Athanasius goes on to say that “it is plain then from the above that the Scripture declares the Son’s eternity.”³⁶ And so, the Son is eternal relationally.

But, he is also eternal essentially. In Chapter V, Section 14, Athanasius’ second point explains that the Son is the essential offspring of God. The Father and the Son were not generated from

some pre-existing origin, that we may account Them brothers, but the Father is the Origin of the Son and begat Him . . . Further, if He is called the eternal offspring of the Father, He is rightly so called. For never was the essence of the Father imperfect, that what is proper to it should be added afterwards; nor, as man from man, has the Son been begotten, so as to be later than His Father’s existence, but He is God’s offspring, and as being proper Son of God, who is ever, He exists eternally.³⁷

His third proof of the Son’s eternity, found in Chapter VI, also supports the fact that the Son is eternal essentially. Here Athanasius argues that the Son has to be eternal or God is a changing God. He says, “if the Word is not

³¹ Ibid. 65.

³² Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 682.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* in Archibald Robertson, ed., *St. Athanasius Select Works and Letters* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, NPNF; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 4:303.

³⁵ Ibid. IV.11; 312.

³⁶ Ibid. IV.13; 313.

³⁷ Ibid. V.14; 314–315.

with the Father from everlasting, the Triad is not everlasting; but a Monad was first, and afterwards by addition it became a Triad.”³⁸ He drives the point home with a provoking question when he asks, “What sort of a religion then is this, which is not even like itself, but is in process of completion as time goes on, and is now not thus, and then again thus?”³⁹

For Athanasius then, there are at least three ways to defend the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son. The Son’s eternity is affirmed by Scripture, by virtue of being the offspring of the Father, and by the immutability of the Godhead. These three arguments clearly affirm an order in the Godhead.

The Cappadocian Fathers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, all “helped to carry the Nicene faith to triumph at Constantinople in 381.”⁴⁰ Only one of them, however, was “called by the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus ‘The Great,’ and universally known as ‘The Theologian.’”⁴¹ Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–390) earned the lofty title because of his signal contribution on the Trinity, *The Five Theological Orations*.⁴² In at least two orations, Gregory clearly speaks of some sort of order and ranking in the Godhead.

In *The Oration on Holy Baptism*,⁴³ Gregory begins chapter forty-three with these words:

I should like to call the Father the greater, because from [H]im flows both the Equality and the being of the Equals (this will be granted on all hands), but I am afraid to use the word Origin, lest I should make Him the Origin of Inferiors, and thus insult Him by precedencies of honour. For the lowering of those Who are from Him is no glory to the Source. Moreover, I look with suspicion at your insatiate desire, for fear you should take hold of this word Greater, and divide the Nature, using the word greater in *all* senses, whereas it does not apply to the Nature, but only to Origination. For in the Consubstantial Persons there is nothing greater or less in point of Substance.⁴⁴

While it is not in modern theological vernacular, and perhaps it needs yet another small step, nevertheless, the idea is clear. Gregory has formed the foundational notion behind the modern terminology “ontological equality but economic subordination.”⁴⁵ He wants to call the Father “greater” but not greater “in *all* senses.” If he allows for greater “in *all* senses” then he loses consubstantiality. But, there must be some sort of relational order or

³⁸ Ibid. VI.17; 316.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Bromiley, *Historical Theology* 138.

⁴¹ Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, trans. and eds., *Select Orations of Saint Gregory Nazianzen* (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace; NPNF; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) 7:187.

⁴² Ibid. 200.

⁴³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Oration on Holy Baptism*, NPNF 360–377.

⁴⁴ Ibid. XLIII: 375–376.

⁴⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 251. Grudem does not make this connection to Gregory. I am simply citing the phrase.

ranking or else why call the Father “greater?”⁴⁶ Thus, he ends up at least laying some of the groundwork for a Trinitarian tension between ontological equality and economic subordination.

The next oration in which Gregory speaks of an order or ranking in the Godhead is *The Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit*. Here the context is a discussion on the procession of the Spirit. Gregory begins chapter nine like this:

What then, say they, is there lacking to the Spirit which prevents His being a Son, for if there were not something lacking He would be a Son? We assert that there is nothing lacking—for God has no deficiency. But the difference of manifestation . . . or rather of their mutual relations one to another, has caused the difference of their names. For indeed it is not some deficiency in the Son which prevents His being Father (for Sonship is not a deficiency), and yet He is not Father.⁴⁷

Gregory goes on to say that the distinctions in the Godhead are not due to “deficiency or subjection of Essence.”⁴⁸ Rather, they are given the names they have because they have different roles. He says, “The very fact of being Unbegotten or Begotten, or Proceeding has given the name of Father to the First, of the Son to the Second, and of the Third, Him of Whom we are speaking, of the Holy Ghost that the distinction of the Three Persons may be preserved in the one nature and dignity of the Godhead.”⁴⁹ Only a blatant misreading of the text would conclude that Gregory sees no order or ranking in the Godhead. Thus, Gregory is added to the list of the classical exegetes who affirm an order or ranking in the Holy Trinity.

There are differing views on whether the father of the Western Church, Augustine (354–430), reflects a belief of the eternal subordination of the Son. It is clear from *De Trinitate* that Augustine emphasized the unity of the Trinity. A frequently cited example of the unity of the Trinity is found early in *De Trinitate*:

The purpose of all the Catholic commentators . . . who have written before me on the trinity which God is, has been to teach that according to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God . . . This is also my faith inasmuch as it is the Catholic faith.⁵⁰

However, even though there is an emphasis on unity, that does not mean Augustine did not teach the eternal subordination of the Son. In an introduction to Augustine’s Trinitarian expression, J. N. D. Kelly offers several corollaries that follow from Augustine’s emphasis on unity. One of these corollaries is Augustine’s much needed response to the apparent obliteration

⁴⁶ Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*. Vol. 1: *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) 222–223.

⁴⁷ Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Fifth Theological Oration*, NPNF IX: 320.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Augustine, *The Trinity* (trans. Edmund Hill; New York: New City, 1991) I:7; 69.

of roles in the Godhead. It is true that the Son, not the Father, was born, crucified, and raised from the dead. But, it is also the case that the Father worked with the Son in each of these. What then is the reason for the distinction? The eternal distinction of roles is related to the external operation of the Godhead. That is, "each of the Persons possesses the divine nature in a particular manner . . . the role which is appropriate to him in virtue of his origin."⁵¹ With this corollary Kelly helps make an important connection between Augustine's concern for unity of essence *and* his desire to distinguish the roles within the Trinity. In other words, even in the unity of essence, there is an appropriate reflection of the eternally distinct roles of the persons in the Godhead. Thus, an emphasis on unity of essence is not necessarily a denial of subordination as to role.

Charles Hodge claims that Augustine did teach the numerical sameness of the essence of the Godhead, which excludes all priority as to being and perfection. However, this teaching does not exclude subordination as to mode of subsistence and operation. This subordination of subsistence and operation is, indeed, according to Hodge, taught by Scripture and by Augustine.⁵² Even Philip Schaff, who is opposed both to the concept of eternal subordination of the Son and that Augustine taught this doctrine, admits that Augustine taught that the Father stood above the Son, and that he alone is unbegotten. Augustine also declares, according to Schaff, that the Son is begotten from the Father and proceeds from the Father so that the Father is higher than the Son.⁵³ Therefore, a more accurate view, as reflected in the writings of Augustine is that while Augustine did emphasize the unity of the works of the Trinity, he affirmed the Nicene view of the eternal subordination of the Son by teaching that the Son is subordinate to the Father as to the person and relationship (not essence or dignity).⁵⁴ Two representative quotes from Augustine support this assertion:

He did not however say, "whom the Father will send from me" as he had said *whom I will send from the Father* (Jn 15:26), and thereby he indicated that the source of all godhead, or if you prefer it, of all deity, is the Father. So the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son is traced back, on both counts, to him of whom the Son is born.⁵⁵

But to return to the mutual relations within the trinity: if the producer is the origin with reference to what it produces, then the Father is origin with reference to the Son, because he produced or begot him.⁵⁶

In a further section, commenting on the Arian heresy and reaffirming the Nicene Creed (God from God, Light from Light), Augustine states:

⁵¹ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (rev. ed.; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978) 273–274. Cf. Augustine II:9; 103.

⁵² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 462.

⁵³ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* 685.

⁵⁴ William G. T. Shedd, "Introductory Essay," on Augustine's *On the Trinity* in NPNF, Vol. III (ed. Philip Schaff; Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887) 4.

⁵⁵ Augustine IV:29; 174.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* V:15; 199.

They are not both together God from God, but only the Son is from God, namely from the Father; nor are they both together light from light, but only the Son is from light, from the Father . . . It is in this sense that it says *I and the Father are one* (Jn 10:30); “are one” means “What he is, that I am too by way of being, not by way of relationship.”⁵⁷

It is clear from the overall context that Augustine, in affirming the Nicene Creed and the eternal begottenness of the Son, is offering the doctrine of eternal subordination which was held as orthodoxy at that time and has been ever since.

2. *The Reformation Period: John Calvin.* John Calvin, as Martin Luther, did not comment on the doctrine of the Trinity except as the Scripture expresses these truths.⁵⁸ Calvin specifically adopted Augustine’s interpretation of the Trinity. In comments on the unity of God and in reconfirming what he believes to be the teaching of the early Church fathers, Calvin states that the Father is the beginning of the Son. He offers Augustine’s statements that in relationship within the Trinity, the Father is eternally the Father and the Son eternally the Son: “Christ, as to himself, is called God, as to the Father he is called Son. And again, the Father, as to himself, is called God, as to the Son he is called Father.”⁵⁹ Charles Hodge states that in Calvin’s writings he affirmed as scriptural the three essential facts of the Trinity: “unbegottenness, distinction of persons, and subordination.”⁶⁰ In summary, Calvin is careful to maintain the essential unity of the Father and the Son while at the same time holding that “in respect of *order* and *gradation*, the beginning of divinity is in the Father.”⁶¹

III. SCRIPTURAL WITNESS TO THE ETERNAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON

The basis of Christian orthodoxy’s affirmation of the eternal subordination of the Son is none other than Scripture. Modern objections to the doctrine are based on the argument that the role of Christ on earth was only temporary. As Bilezikian states, it was a “task-driven, temporary phase of ministry.”⁶² Christ temporarily made himself subject to the Father and then returned to full equality with the Father.⁶³ That it was a temporary state is confirmed, according to Bilezikian, by the fact that Christ had to learn obedience (Heb 5:8). While Bilezikian claims that Scripture denies eternal subordination, both the Church fathers and the councils used Scripture to confirm this doctrine. As Carl Henry states it, “The biblical data put beyond doubt the subordination of the Son.”⁶⁴

⁵⁷ Ibid. VI:3; 207.

⁵⁸ Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:466.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (trans. Henry Beveridge; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) I:XIII, 19; 127.

⁶⁰ Hodge, *Systematic Theology* 1:467.

⁶¹ Calvin I:XIII, 24; 133. Emphasis mine.

⁶² Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping” 61.

⁶³ Ibid., 60–61.

⁶⁴ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority. Vol. V. The God Who Stays* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 207.

1. *The Eternality of the Son.* There is no argument that Jesus always is called the Son. The question is whether this term refers to the eternal relationship of the Godhead, or if it refers to the sameness of nature or essence alone. Scripture teaches that in the mutual relations within the Godhead, and not in essence alone, Jesus Christ is eternally the Son of God.

First, Jesus is eternally the Son. Galatians 4:4 teaches that God sent his Son in the fullness of time. Only one already existing could be sent. As Timothy George comments:

The coming of Jesus Christ . . . was the culmination of a plan devised within the eternal counsel of the Triune God before the creation of the world . . . seen in the context of Paul's other statements concerning the pre-existence of Christ (cf. I Cor 8:6, 12:4; Gal 1:15–17, Rom 8:3; Phil 2:5–9). The confession "God sent his Son" can only mean that Jesus Christ is the eternally divine Son of God sent forth from heaven. This perspective was certainly not unique with Paul. Jesus himself described God as "he who sent me" (Mark 12:11).⁶⁵

Thus, the Son is seen as the eternal Son of God sent by the Father. Thomas Oden agrees with this understanding of Gal 4:4, and like George, also couches it among several other Pauline texts that clearly affirm the preexistence of the Son.⁶⁶

A second example of the eternity of the relationship is the reference to God's work of election in Eph 1:3–4. Scripture tells us that the Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. As Wayne Grudem explains, the initiatory act of choosing by God the Father was that believers were united to Christ before they ever existed. The Bible speaks of the foreknowledge of God the Father in distinction from the other members of the Trinity (1 Pet 1:2).⁶⁷ God the Father planned the sending of his only begotten Son (John 3:16,17) from eternity because he was eternally the Son.

2. *The Divine Agency of the Son.* According to Scripture, there are three major agencies or eternal roles of the Son. First, he is the agent of creation. In John 1:3, the Word is the one "through" whom all things were created. Colossians 1:16 provides that "by him" all things were created. 1 Corinthians 8:6 explains that while God the Father is the originator of all things, the Lord Jesus Christ is the great agent "through" whom all things came into being. The Corinthian passage is especially relevant to the Trinitarian discussion because, as can be clearly seen in comparison, it supplied vocabulary for the Nicene Creed in several places. This leads Paul Rainbow to conclude: "From this earliest form of the creed we can see that the Father and the Son are united in being, but ranked in function."⁶⁸ The writer of Hebrews speaks of the Son as the one "through" whom God made the universe (Heb 1:2). Thus,

⁶⁵ Timothy George, "Galatians" (NAC 30; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) 301.

⁶⁶ Oden, *Word of Life* 68–69.

⁶⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 250.

⁶⁸ Paul Rainbow, "Orthodox Trinitarianism and Evangelical Feminism" 4. This is an unpublished paper. However, Rainbow's work on this section of his unpublished paper is based on his Oxford dissertation, "Monotheism and Christology in 1 Corinthians 8:4–6" (D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1987).

the pre-existent Christ is clearly defined as the person of the Godhead who created everything.⁶⁹

The second eternal agency of the Son is that of redemption. The Son, not God the Father or the Holy Spirit, was sent by God the Father to die on the cross for our sins that we might be redeemed (John 3:16; Eph 1:9–10). The Son obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for us (Heb 10:5–7). Earlier it was mentioned that Bilezikian argues that the Son could not be eternally subordinate to the Father because he had to learn obedience (Heb 5:8). While it is true that he learned obedience, it was in the context of his earthly life that he had never before experienced. With respect to his human nature, he had to learn obedience to God in the conditions of human life on earth.⁷⁰ While the Son had an eternal role as the agent of God, he had never experienced human nature until he came to earth. In this new experience, not in a changed eternal position, the Son learned obedience.

The third eternal function of the Son is as agent of the restoration of creation to the Father at the end of time. In 1 Cor 15:28, the Apostle Paul teaches that after Christ returns a second time to judge the world and put everything under the Father's feet, he will once again voluntarily subordinate himself to God the Father. This element of subordination should be viewed in relation to 1 Cor 15:24. Having brought all powers under his domain, the Son will voluntarily surrender his authority, power and prerogatives to God the Father.⁷¹ The purpose is that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:28). This does not mean that Christ and mankind will be absorbed into God, but that the unchallenged reign remains with God the Father alone.⁷²

Finally, all of this scriptural evidence provides a backdrop for 1 Cor 11:3 which states that God is the head of Christ. While there have been many disagreements about the meaning of the word "head," its meaning of authority is not only based on the natural meaning of the word *kephalē* but also the scriptural claim that God is the eternal origin of all things and Christ is the eternal agent (1 Cor 8:6).⁷³ In summary, then, the Son is eternally subordinate to God the Father both in relation and role.

IV. CONCLUSION: RECENT TRENDS

The bulk of this article did not deal with contemporary theological discussions on the issue of the doctrine of eternal subordination. Its main purpose was to show, contrary to the view of Bilezikian and some other evangelical

⁶⁹ While God is clearly stated as the Creator in Genesis 1, this is before the revelation of Jesus Christ as part of the Triune God. There is never any reference in the biblical text to the Holy Spirit as the agent of creation. Jesus is not only the agent of creation, but also sustainer of the universe (Col 1:17).

⁷⁰ F. F. Bruce, "The Epistle to the Hebrews" (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 103.

⁷¹ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968) 361. See John V. Dahms, "The Subordination of the Son," *JETS* 37/3 (1994) 351–353. Contra Gordon D. Fee, "The First Epistle to the Corinthians" (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 759–760 (functional subordination only in the work of redemption).

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ For an extended discussion of this issue see Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 459–460.

feminists, that this doctrine is both scriptural and based on the tradition of church history. However, as important as it has been to establish the historical and biblical witness, it is equally important to draw some contemporary theological conclusions.

Since the historical position of Christian orthodoxy is to accept the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son, it is not surprising that most evangelical systematic theologians in the twentieth century have also adopted this position as reflecting both Scripture and church history.⁷⁴ Two modern exceptions are J. Oliver Buswell and Millard Erickson.⁷⁵ Since most theologians have honestly found this doctrine in church history, recent attempts to refute the doctrine of eternal subordination by non-evangelical feminists and liberals (who dislike the implications of the doctrine) have shifted the way the Trinity is discussed.

In a recent book by former Notre Dame professor Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life*, this shift in approach to Trinitarian doctrine is clearly enunciated. LaCugna begins by stating that the doctrine of the Trinity should not be about the abstract nature of God. LaCugna argues that early Christian history and dogma took an improper approach by defining God's inner life, the self-relatedness of the Father, Son and Spirit.⁷⁶ Instead, LaCugna wants to make statements about God only in relation to our experience of salvation: that is, since Christian theology must begin with the premise of the mystery of God as revealed in the mystery of salvation, statements about the nature of God can only be revealed in the reality of salvation history. She defines this reality as our experience of being saved by God through Christ in the power of the Spirit.⁷⁷

One of the major reasons given for this approach by LaCugna is her desire to make the doctrine of the Trinity more relevant to modern life. In particular, she believes that valid criticisms have been made by liberation and feminist theologians about the Christian doctrine of God as sexist and oppressive. To respond to these concerns, the Christian doctrine of God must not discuss the metaphysics of substance or what God is in himself, rather, its only option is to start from the experience of being saved.⁷⁸ Therefore, she concludes that the doctrines of the Nicene Fathers and scholastic theology, as they relate to God's relations within himself, should be rejected.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ E.g., Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Vol. I (trans. George Musgrave Giger; ed. James T. Dennison, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992) 292–301; John Gill, *Body of Divinity*, Vol. I (repr.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 146. E. Y. Mullins, *The Christian Religion in Doctrinal Expression* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1917) 181; Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 5:207–210; Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 248–252; James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology: Biblical, Historical and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 583. L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 93–95; Oden, *Word of Life* 57–71; G. Rodman Williams, *Renewal Theology: God, the World and Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 323; F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I (St. Louis: Concordia, 1950) 390–391, 404.

⁷⁵ Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 1:112; Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 338, 698.

⁷⁶ LaCugna, *God For Us* 2.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 3–4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 209–210.

In the place of even discussing the inner relatedness of God, LaCugna believes that Christians should adopt Karl Rahner's view of the Trinity that makes soteriology decisive in the doctrine of God and the Trinity. Only God's action in salvation history through Jesus Christ and the Spirit fully expresses who God "is in the Godself." Rahner's view is partially summarized in this section of Piet Schoonenberg's article:

1. All our thinking moves from the world to God, and can never move in the opposite direction.
2. Revelation in no way suspends this law. Revelation is the *experienced* self-communication of God *in* human history, which thereby becomes the history of salvation.
3. With reference to God's Trinity, this law means that the Trinity can never be a point of departure. There is no way that we can draw conclusions from the Trinity to Christ and to the Spirit given to us; only the opposite direction is possible.⁸⁰

In a later portion of the book, LaCugna claims that defining the Trinity based on our experience of salvation will allow oppressed persons (women and the poor) to be able to restructure the human community as they define the doctrine of the Trinity according to their own experience of salvation. That experience is one of human community characterized by equality, mutuality and reciprocity among persons. Instead of women being subordinate to men, redefining the Trinity based on experience will allow women's experiences to be integrated into theological reflection and to deconstruct traditions that have contributed to the subjugation of women.⁸¹ In particular, the doctrine of monotheism and the idea of ruler that begins with the Father as a principle of divinity must be discarded and replaced with a Trinitarian ethos of inclusiveness, community and freedom. The idea of interrelationship must become the ruling idea of the Trinity.⁸²

LaCugna closes with these thoughts about her trinitarian doctrine of mutuality:

The Trinitarian *archē* of God emerges as the basis for mutuality among persons: rather than the *sexist theology of complementarity*, or the racist theology of superiority, or the clerical theology of privilege, or the political theology of exploitation, or the patriarchal theology of male dominance and control, the reign of God promises true communion among all human beings and all creatures.⁸³

Only a brief synopsis of this recent trend in Trinitarian theology is possible.⁸⁴ There are certain important criticisms to be made of these new directions in Trinitarian discussion. First, the concept of revelation is diminished

⁸⁰ Piet Schoonenberg, "Trinity—The Consummated Covenant: Theses on the Doctrine of a Trinitarian God," *SR* 5 (1976) 111; cited in LaCugna, *God For Us* 218. First emphasis mine.

⁸¹ LaCugna, *God For Us* 266–268.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.* 399. Second emphasis mine.

⁸⁴ For others with similar Trinitarian models, see Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991); Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).

to such an extent that God can only reveal to people what they experience. This implies that truth outside of experience cannot be given to people and/or is of no value. In an article about her Trinitarian view, LaCugna makes the following statement: "To talk only about the immanent Trinity is misleading, because it creates the illusion that one can know God independent of the experience of God."⁸⁵ LaCugna also avers, in agreement with Karl Rahner, that there is no independent insight about God outside of salvation history.⁸⁶ This existential approach to God is ultimately subjective and totally contrary to orthodox Christian belief about the revelatory nature of the Bible. It does not take into account that the Bible reveals things outside of our own experience. Feminists and other deconstructors of the Christian faith are thus left free to redefine and dismantle the faith according to how they feel about God. For example, if God is identified in revelation as Father, and this is contrary to one's experience of God, then God as Father can be renamed or rejected.

This new approach not only ignores the relevance of revelation outside of experience, it also ignores the fact that the Bible, as the revealed Word of God, was the driving force behind the theology of the Nicene Fathers and the early ecumenical creeds. A good summary of the issue is provided by Carl F. H. Henry:

Non-evangelical scholars often scorn the early ecumenical creeds as a translation of Christianity into Greek metaphysics. But the decisive question is whether the creeds affirm what is true. The fact is that early Christianity opposed much of Greek metaphysics. . . . What decided the formulation of the ecumenical creeds was not Greek philosophy or Christian consciousness, but only the biblical data. The creeds resist reducing NT statements about the persons of the Trinity to merely functional significance.⁸⁷

The creeds are based on biblical revelation, not Greek philosophy. The Bible clearly speaks of the inner relations in the Godhead. The Son is subordinate to the Father as to his subsistence (the Son is of the Father) and operation (the Father works through the Son). It is interesting to note that LaCugna's discussion provides almost no references to the biblical text to support her Trinitarian approach.

A final comment about this recent approach to the Trinity regards the feminist culture underlying the suggested new approach. Colin Gunton, in his recent book on the doctrine of revelation, states that the Church has been mistaken in the past in its understanding of the Trinity and women. While maintaining a belief in the concept of revelation, he goes on to note that dogma and theology are revisable. Scripture in certain respects is open to question but revelation mediated through Scripture is not open to question.⁸⁸ What is found here is a subjective view of revelation. Our "progressive"

⁸⁵ Catherine M. LaCugna and K. McDonnell, "Returning from the Far Country: Theses for a Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *SJT* 41 (1990) 205.

⁸⁶ LaCugna, *God For Us* 218.

⁸⁷ Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* 5:202.

⁸⁸ Colin Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1995) 81.

understanding of women (and the Trinity) as determined by culture can obviously change the content of revelation. Trinitarian names are ontological symbols based on divine revelation, not personal metaphors having their origin in cultural experience.⁸⁹ One cannot, therefore, dismiss the idea of order in the Trinity to conform it to our cultural experience and personal feelings about the meaning of equality. Instead, the biblical revelation, properly interpreted in light of its intended meaning, must be the final arbiter of the true meaning of equality as it relates to order.

Underlying these new ideas on the Trinity, as suggested by LaCugna's book, is an agenda that wants to redefine women's roles outside of biblical revelation and church history. If the Trinity can be redefined to exclude the Son as subordinate to the Father in any way, then evangelical and other feminists can continue their dogmatic assertion regarding gender roles that subordination of function *always* means subordination of dignity or essence. Therefore, in response to Bilezikian, it is respectfully suggested that the ideological agenda to change church tradition and Scripture is being carried out by the feminists and not by those who affirm the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son.

⁸⁹ Donald G. Bloesch, *The Battle for the Trinity: The Debate Over Inclusive God Language* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1985) 36. Mary Kassian quotes Bloesch in this context and states that the inclusive Trinitarian language of feminism obscures the intratrinitarian relation between the Son and the Father. Kassian states, "The Son was obedient to the Father. The Father, in love, sacrificed the Son. The Son, who had a right to refuse, submitted to the Father. Denial of the Trinitarian relationship denies the concept of equality and hierarchy that is evident in the Godhead and throughout Scripture. Furthermore, it would have been easy for a Creator to sacrifice a Redeemer, but it was not so easy for a Father to sacrifice his Son. Understanding God Father/Son/Holy Spirit as being in relationship to himself is essential to understanding God. In denying this relationship, feminists deny who God is." Mary A. Kassian, *The Feminist Gospel: The Movement to Unite Feminism with the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1992) 145–146.