

In the 1970's, a novel Trinitarian doctrine drove a wedge between the immanent and economic Trinity, claiming that the Son was equal to the Father in his ontology, yet eternally subordinate in his function or role.<sup>1</sup> Asserting that the Father and Son are equal in their personhood, deity, and importance;<sup>2</sup> the proponents of this view maintain that the Father always related to the Son as a human father would. They contend that the Father has eternally directed and held authority over the Son, while the Son has forever acquiesced to the Father.<sup>3</sup> Professing that his position stems from the Athanasian Creed, Wayne Grudem alleges the following:

The heresy of subordinationism, which holds that the Son is inferior in being to the Father, should be clearly distinguished from the orthodox doctrine that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in role or function: without this truth, *we would lose the doctrine of the Trinity* for we would not have any eternal personal distinctions between the Father and the Son, and they would not eternally be Father and Son."<sup>4</sup>

Donald Fairbairn avers that the Son obeys the Father yet this does not diminish Christ in the least. Therefore, just as the Son willingly obeys the Father, so those called to submit in the home should recognize their subjection as a gift.<sup>5</sup> Confirming Kevin Giles's claim that this doctrine arose in response to women leading in the church,<sup>6</sup> Grudem devotes five pages of his chapter titled "Man as Male and Female" to the Trinity,<sup>7</sup> despite his admission that no analogy can convey the mystery of the Triune God without major error.<sup>8</sup> R. C. Sproul contends that being given a subordinate position does not infer inferiority, as the Son and Spirit are co-eternal and equal to the Father in power and dignity.<sup>9</sup>

This poses several critical questions. What exactly is a "role"? Can one be eternally subordinate in function while remaining ontologically equal? Did the theologians of the past consider women existentially equal to men? Do the creeds of the church regarding the Trinity reflect this position? What does Scripture actually teach?

A "role" is defined as either "an actor's part in a play, movie, etc.;" or "the function assumed or part played by a person or thing in a particular situation."<sup>10</sup> Therefore, conventional usage indicates that to eternally perform a role consists of an oxymoron. Furthermore, if the authority of the Father over the Son is rooted in the very fabric of the Trinity, then this must be considered an essential quality, making the Son inferior to the Father in his very essence.<sup>11</sup> That anyone can be eternally subject to another while equal in ontology mirrors the famous quote from George Orwell: "All animals are equal but some are more equal than others."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 83. This differs from the views of Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and Arius, who believed that the Son was ontologically subordinate to the Father by virtue of having been begotten (pp. 60-64).

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 459.

<sup>3</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249.

<sup>4</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 245 (italics mine).

<sup>5</sup> Donald Fairbairn, *Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity press, 2009), 80–1.

<sup>6</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*, 113.

<sup>7</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 455–60.

<sup>8</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 241.

<sup>9</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Purpose of God: Ephesians* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1994), 131–2. 1

<sup>10</sup> "Role," Oxford Dictionaries, accessed November 21, 2014,

[http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/role?searchDictCode=all](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/role?searchDictCode=all).

<sup>11</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 308.

<sup>12</sup> George Orwell, "Animal Farm Chapter X," *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, 1946, accessed November 21, 2014, [http://www.george-orwell.org/Animal\\_Farm/9.html](http://www.george-orwell.org/Animal_Farm/9.html).

Theologians prior to the twentieth century would have been astonished to discover that women today are considered existentially equal to men.<sup>13</sup> According to Chrystostom, the Lord set husbands over their wives because women are weaker beings who are light-minded and easily deceived.<sup>14</sup> Augustine argued that the natural order required women to assist their husbands because the lesser serves the greater.<sup>15</sup> Aquinas examined three reasons why women are not in the image of God.<sup>16</sup>

Among the Reformers, John Calvin stated, “Wherever even natural propriety has been maintained, women have in all ages been excluded from the public management of affairs...it becomes her to be under subjection.”<sup>17</sup> He asserted that nature has formed a woman to obey, for government by women has always been considered grotesque.<sup>18</sup> John Knox wrote, “No less monstrous is the body of that commonwealth where a woman bears empire; for either it does lack a lawful head (as in very deed it does), or else there is an idol exalted in the place of the true head.”<sup>19</sup> John Wesley concurred that women were inferior to men.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the notion that women are analogous to Jesus would have seemed blasphemous to the authors of the great creeds of the faith and never intended by them.

Regarding the Trinity, the historic witness of the church declares that an indelible link endures between God’s character and his actions;<sup>21</sup> no split separates the immanent and economic Trinity.<sup>22</sup> The earliest extant Christian sermon begins,<sup>23</sup> “Brethren, it is fitting that you should think of Jesus Christ as of God.”<sup>24</sup> Gregorius Thaumaturgus avowed that nothing created nor subservient exists within the Godhead.<sup>25</sup> Lucian of Antioch noted that the Father is really a Father and the Son really a Son, but in harmony they are one.<sup>26</sup> As Augustine stated, “If the Son were not equal to the Father, he would not be the son of God.”<sup>27</sup> Since the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed claim the deity of the Son but fail to overtly deny his subordination, the Athanasian Creed deftly

<sup>13</sup> Kevin Giles notes that in his survey of theologians he found not one prior to 1900 who did not believe that woman are inherently inferior to men (*The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*, 148).

<sup>14</sup> John Chrystostom, “Homily XXXVII: 1 Cor xiv.34,” in *Homilies On First and Second Corinthians*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. Talbot W. Chambers Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 12:222.

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, 1.153.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 33.5.13.

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<sup>17</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*. vol. 1, Translated by John Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 468.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. Translated by John Pringle (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 68.

<sup>19</sup> John Knox, “The Empire of Women is Subversive of Good Order, Equity and Justice,” in *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women*, Selected Writings of John Knox: Public Epistles, Treatises, and Expositions to the Year 1559 (July 23, 2011, 1558), under “78,” accessed November 21, 2014, <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/firblast.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, *Notes On St Paul's First Epistle to Timothy* (London: The Wesley Center Online, 1862), under “1 Tim 2:13,” accessed November 21, 2014, <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-st-pauls-first-epistle-to-timothy#Chapter+II>.

<sup>21</sup> David S. Cunningham, “What Do We Mean by ‘God’?” Pages 76-92 in *Essentials of Christian Theology*, ed. William C. Placher (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 80.

<sup>22</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*, 1.

<sup>23</sup> William C. Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press, 2003), 56.

<sup>24</sup> Clement, “Second Letter of Clement,” Translated by Roberts and Donaldson, 1. Circa 95–140 AD.

<sup>25</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, 6th ed. vol. II: The Greek and Latin Creeds*, 1931; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 25. Circa 270 AD.

<sup>26</sup> Schaff, *Greek and Latin Creeds*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 140.5*, Translated by R. G. MacMullen.

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summarized the first four ecumenical councils (AD 325–451). This “triumphant paean of the orthodox faith,”<sup>28</sup> states:

...the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son...they are not three Almighty but one Almighty...And in this Trinity none is afore, or after another: none is greater or less than another...but the whole three persons are coeternal and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid: the unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in unity, is to be worshiped ... [Christ is] equal to the Father, as touching his Godhead; and inferior to the Father as touching his manhood... This is the Catholic Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved.<sup>29</sup>

Although unlikely to have been penned by Athanasius,<sup>30</sup> the tone of the Athanasian Creed fits with his statement that Christ, “While ever abiding in union with the Father, yet fills all things that are. But now he entered the world in a new way, stooping to our level and self-revealing to us.”<sup>31</sup> Since then, none of the seventeen Evangelical Protestant creeds concerning the Trinity,<sup>32</sup> nor the Council of Trent,<sup>33</sup> have promoted the subjection of the Son to the Father.<sup>34</sup> Grudem ignores this overwhelming witness of the church, quoting Charles Hodge’s 1871 assertion that the Nicene Creed teaches that the subjection of the Son to the Father has “*been accepted by the Church Universal.*”<sup>35</sup>

Those who maintain that the pre-incarnate Christ was equal to the Father in cosmic authority agree that Jesus obeyed the Father during the Incarnation.<sup>36</sup> The Son did not take advantage of his equality with God,<sup>37</sup> but willingly relinquished that which was *always* his.<sup>38</sup> To accomplish this, he “emptied himself,”<sup>39</sup> pouring himself out completely for the benefit of others (Phil 2:3–8; 2 Cor 8:9).<sup>40</sup> “Although he was a Son, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 8:5). Furthermore, Jesus prayed, “Father, glorify me with your own glory, that which I was having with you before the world [came] to be” (John 17:5).

Nevertheless, David Pao claims that since “God [is] the head of Christ” (1 Cor 11:3), Jesus’s subordination is undeniable.<sup>41</sup> However, he ignores the context of verses 3–13, which clearly indicates that here the term “head” refers to the source or origin, as in the head of a river, rather than to a ruler.<sup>42</sup> Grudem argues that the Father consistently speaks, initiates, and sends; while the Son

<sup>28</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, 6th ed. vol. I: The History of Creeds*, 1931; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 37-8.

<sup>29</sup> Schaff, *Greek and Latin Creeds*, 66-70.

<sup>30</sup> Schaff, *History of Creeds*, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 2.8.

<sup>32</sup> Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom, 6th ed. Vol. III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, 1931; (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

<sup>33</sup> Schaff, *Greek and Latin Creeds*, 79.

<sup>34</sup> See Appendix

<sup>35</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 252 (italics original).

<sup>36</sup> Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 307.

<sup>37</sup> Roy W. Hoover, “*Harpagmos* Enigma: A Philological Solution,” *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 1 (January 1971): 95–119, 109, 117.

<sup>38</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 208 (italics original).

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<sup>39</sup> Where Scripture appears in quotation marks, this represents the author’s translation from the NA<sup>28</sup>. Whenever possible, the Greek word order is preserved, as this reflects the emphasis of the original author.

<sup>40</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC vol. 43 (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2004), 117.

<sup>41</sup> David W. Pao, *Colossians and Philemon*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 262.

<sup>42</sup> Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “*kephale*”, Pages 302–4 in *NIDNTA* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 303.

always obeys by creating, sustaining, and coming to earth.<sup>43</sup> Yet, many of these functions are also attributed to Jesus.

For example, “Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, thus also the Son to whom he wishes gives life” (John 5:21). During the Last Supper, Jesus promised, “I will ask the Father and he will give the Holy Spirit to you” (John 14:16). Later that evening, he said, “...when the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth...” (John 15:26).

Earlier in his ministry, when Jesus was pressured to reveal his messianic status, he responded, “The works which I do in the name of my Father, these testify concerning me...my sheep are listening to my voice, and I know them and they are following me, and I give to them eternal life, and never shall they perish into eternity. And no one shall seize them from my hand (John 10:25–8)... and no one is able to seize [them] from the hand of my Father. I and the Father are one.” (John 10: 30).

Verse 29 proves to be a mare’s nest, with five variant readings.<sup>44</sup> “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all” has been rated with a “D” in terms of its probability of being correct.<sup>45</sup> Ultimately, the United Bible Society Committee determined that the most likely original reading was, “As to my Father, that which he has given to me is greater than all,” with “that” meaning the sheep. This decision remains highly disputed.<sup>46</sup> Regardless which variant proves correct, a text this questionable should not be used in an effort to convince others. Nevertheless, D. A. Carson, in spite of noting the issues, wrote the following concerning this verse:

Who has strength or subtlety sufficient to overpower or outwit the sovereign Father? *My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all.* Indeed, at certain junctions in the history of redemption, the preservation of those the Father has given to the Son is explicitly and immediately assigned to the Father. In particular, when Jesus is about to undergo the isolation and grim agony of the cross, he formally hands over the responsibility for the preservation of his own to his Father (17:12).<sup>47</sup>

However, John 17:12 says, “When I was with them, I was protecting them in your name, the ones you gave to me, and kept watch and none from them perished except the son of destruction, in order that the Scriptures might be fulfilled.”<sup>48</sup>

Congruent with the perfect unity of the Father and the Son, in this era of the now-and-not-yet, Christ rules over all authorities, powers and dominions (Eph 1:20–2). However, once everything is subjected to him, then Jesus shall place everything under the Father, including himself, “in order that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:24–8). According to Augustine, due to the unity within the Godhead, whenever one of them is manifested, so is the other. Therefore, “When [Christ] shall have delivered up the kingdom to ...the Father”, Jesus does not take the Kingdom from himself. Just as Christ moves his people to contemplate the Father, doubtless, the Father shall turn their focus to contemplate the Son.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, the Greek term *perichoresis* best captures the essence of the Godhead: as in a perfectly choreographed dance, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit so interpenetrate one another that their wills are unified.<sup>50</sup> Where there is one, the other two are also, without one being greater than

<sup>43</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 459.

<sup>44</sup> George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, WBC 36 (Dallas: Word, Inc., 2002), 165.

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<sup>45</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed., (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 197.

<sup>46</sup> Beasley-Murray, *John*, 165.

<sup>47</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 393-4.

<sup>48</sup> In all fairness, this may have been simply an error, as verse 15 would make much more sense in that context.

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.9

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<sup>50</sup> Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*, 113.

the others,<sup>51</sup> a community of perfect love.<sup>52</sup> Even Grudem acknowledges, “This tri-personal form of being is far beyond our ability to comprehend. *It is a kind of existence far different from anything we have experienced*, and far different from anything else in the universe.”<sup>53</sup>

[Author’s note: I wrote this paper in December 2014. In November 2016, the Evangelical Theological Society [affirmed](#) that the concept of the Eternal Subordination of the Son [does not conform](#) to the association’s doctrinal basis. My academic advisor, who attended that convention, described it to me as “a bloodbath.”

I first heard of ESS around 2004. After taking New Testament and Systematic Theology courses at Wheaton in the early eighties, I thought the pastor teaching this doctrine had misspoken, as it contradicted what I had been taught in college. That mainstream Christians would hold such a position seemed unthinkable.]

[Related posts include [Equality with God](#) (Phil 2:5–6); [A Summary of Trinitarian Creeds](#) (Appendix to Phil 2:5–6); [Taking the Form of a Slave](#) (Phil 2:7); [Obedient to the Point of Death](#) (Phil 2:8); and [The Name Above Every Name](#) (Phil 2:9–11); [Three Heads](#) (1 Cor 11:3); and [Interdependence](#) (1 Cor 11:11–12)]

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<sup>51</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Alan W. Gomes, Ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 250.

<sup>52</sup> Placher, *Essentials of Christian Theology*, 59.

<sup>53</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 255 (italics original).

**Appendix: The Creeds of Christendom, Schaff 1996**

CREED	DATE	PAGE(S)	EQUALITY/SUBORDINATION
Volume II: The Greek and Latin Creeds:			
Gregorius Thaumaturgus of Neo-Caesarea	ca 270	24–27	“nothing created or subservient”
Lucian of Antioch	300	25–28	“in personality three, but in harmony one”
First Creed of Epiphanius/Nicene Creed 1 <sup>st</sup> Formula	374	33–34	“only begotten Son of God”
The Athanasian Creed	5 <sup>th</sup> Century	66–70	“none is greater or less than another... three persons coeternal and coequal... Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity”
Volume III: The Evangelical Protestant Creeds:			
The Augsburg Confession	1530	7–9	“unity of the divine essence and persons”
The Formula of Concord	1576	179	“heresy that Father and Son have distinct essences, equal or unequal, we condemn.”
The French Confession of Faith (John Calvin)	1559	359–363	“same essence, equal in eternity and power”
The Belgic Confession	1561	389–395	“there is neither first nor last... the Son is equal to the Father in all things.”
Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of Church of England	1562	487–489	“of one substance, power, and eternity”
The Irish Articles of Religion	1615	528	“in unity... substance, power, and eternity”
The Westminster Confession of Faith	1647	606	“one substance, power, and eternity”
The Westminster Shorter Catechism	1647	677	“same substance, equal in power and glory”
Methodist Articles of Religion	1784	807	“in unity of this Godhead, there are three persons of one substance, power, and eternity”

CREED	DATE	PAGE(S)	EQUALITY/SUBORDINATION
Evangelical Free Church of Geneva	1848	781–782	“born from a virgin...has been able to obey God in a perfect way”
Articles of Religion of Reformed Episcopal Church	1875	814–815	“in unity of this Godhead, there be three persons of one substance, power, and eternity”
The Second Helvetic Confession	1566	835	“in order, one going before another, yet without any inequality”
Presbyterian Church of England Articles of Faith	1890	916	“[Christ] at the right hand of God ...clothed with authority and power as Lord over all”
American Congregational Statement of Doctrine	1883	914	“of one substance with the Father...worshiped and glorified”
Brief Statement of the Reformed Faith	1902	922	“one in substance, equal in power and glory”
The Basis of Union of the United Church of Canada	1925	935–936	“same substance, equal in power And glory...express image of the Father’s person”
Orthodox-Reformed Statement on the Holy Trinity 1992 <a href="http://www.reformiert-online.net/agora2/docs/18warctd.pdf">http://www.reformiert-online.net/agora2/docs/18warctd.pdf</a>			“conjoined in all their distinctiveness, for the entire and undivided Godhead resides in each Person, and each Person dwells in or inheres in the Other; so that the whole of one Person is imaged in the whole of the Other”