
TRINITY AND SUBORDINATION

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I. THE SUBORDINATION DEBATE

1 A contemporary debate with a classic edge

Over the past few months we have all witnessed a bruising presidential race in the United States where the standard of debate has been generally appalling. The name-calling, the spurious allegations, the insinuation of motive and claims of catastrophic consequences if one or other of the candidates were elected, all came thick and fast, didn't they? And now we know that Donald Trump has been elected, I don't expect the arguing suddenly to evaporate.

What I'd like to say, is that debates among Christians are always free of the things I've just mentioned, that opposing points of view are respected and Christian people always concentrate on the issues not the personalities, what has actually been said or written rather than an inference about motive or the projection of dire consequences. I'd like to say that. But sadly it's not the case. Christians can be as bad at debate and argument as US politicians (or Australian politicians it should be said). And people are hurt along the way.

Earlier this year a debate erupted in the blogosphere about the doctrine of the Trinity, or so it seemed. Liam Golligher, a respected evangelical minister of the word of God — a Scotsman now serving as Senior Minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia — wrote a post that was hosted on the 'Mortification of Spin' website. The post, dated 3 June 2016, was entitled 'Is it Okay to Teach a Complementarianism Based on Eternal Subordination?'¹ It was followed a few days later (6 June 2016) by a post entitled 'Reinventing God'.² Right from the start it was clear that a particular way of arguing the case for the complementarity of men and women in Christian life and

¹ <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/is-it-okay-to-teach-a-complementarianism-based-on-eternal-subordination#.WCKJp3er3XS> (accessed 9 November 2016).

² <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/reinventing-god#.WCKJ-3er3XS> (accessed 9 November 2016).

ministry was under review. Can we anchor the doctrines of headship and voluntary submission in the relationship of the Father and Son from all eternity? Can we say that just as the Son submits to the Father while being equal in every way to the Father — a voluntary submission of relationship not a fixed hierarchy of being — so a wife should submit to her husband while being equal in every way to him? And it should be clear, even just from the title of Liam's second blogpost, that he considers the answer to these questions to be 'No'.

In some ways, but by no means all, this was a re-run of a debate from the first years of this century between the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission and men like Peter Carnley and Kevin Giles. In 1999 a report from the Doctrine Commission was published entitled 'The Doctrine of the Trinity and its bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women'.³ This report was a response to a conference on Women's Ministry held in May 1998, in which both sides of the debate had appealed to the doctrine of the Trinity. So the Archbishop of the day referred the question to the Doctrine Commission, and, critically, the words 'egalitarian' and 'subordination' were used in the referral to the Doctrine Commission. That is critical because the 'boo' word, 'subordination', was not introduced into the discussion by the Doctrine Commission, it was part of the frame in which it was asked to assess the question. The Commission concluded 'that the concept of "functional subordination", of equality of essence with order in relation, represents the long-held teaching of the church, and that it is securely based on the revelation of the Scriptures'.⁴

Now for full disclosure, I should say that I am the current Chair of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission, though I was not on the Commission in 1999. Not too long after the report was published, responses were produced by Kevin Giles, an Anglican clergyman in Melbourne who has been a long-term champion of the ordination of women, and the then Archbishop of Perth, Peter Carnley.⁵ Kevin Giles has now written two books on the subject, which have been scathingly reviewed by some and — inexplicably — embraced by others.⁶

³ <http://www.sds.asn.au/assets/Documents/reports/T/TrinityDoctrineComm.pdf> (accessed 9 November 2016)

⁴ Ibid., 19.

⁵ K. Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002); P. Carnley, *Reflections in Glass: Trends and Tensions in the Contemporary Anglican Church* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2004).

⁶ Giles' second book on this subject is *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006). His first book was scathingly reviewed by Mark Baddeley, 'The Trinity and Subordinationism: A Response to Kevin Giles', *Reformed Theological Review* 63/1 (2004): 29–42.

In this debate an even earlier debate was invoked. So this year's blogosphere debate echoes a debate of a decade ago and in that earlier debate appeal was made to one of the great controversies of the early church. In the early fourth century, an Egyptian elder named Arius started teaching that the Son is not God in the same way the Father is: 'there was a time when the Son was not' he said. The Father alone is absolutely, entirely and eternally God. The Son might be a divine creature, the firstborn of all creation, given the honorific title of 'Son', but he was not the same in being or essence as the Father. In response, the Council of Nicaea affirmed Jesus Christ is 'the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father'.⁷ After almost an entire century of debate, Arius was confirmed as the archetypal heretic and his teaching, known as 'Arianism' or 'Subordinationism', became something to be feared and avoided at all costs. In fact, if you want to cast doubt on anyone's orthodox theological credentials, you call them 'Arian'. And both Peter Carnley and Kevin Giles knew that when they labelled the Sydney theologians as 'Arian'.

Now this historical tracing of the debate becomes important because in the debate this year, the debate in the blogosphere, some of those who argued in support of Liam Golligher's posts labelled their opponents as Arian or subordinationist. Actually they were often a little more subtle than that, suggesting those who supported eternal functional (or relational) subordination were really 'Homoians'.⁸ The Homoians in the fourth century were those who preferred to say the Son was similar to the Father, but not of the same essence. Some very fine Christian men and women, who have taught the Bible and lived a faithful life of discipleship for many years, suddenly found themselves lumped together with one of the Christian church's most notorious heretics, Arius. As I said earlier, people have been hurt along the way. There has been a significant amount of collateral damage, not just the result of what has been said but also because of the way it was said.

2 On using and abusing doctrine

Now one of the things that was clear from the beginning of this year's debate, and became clearer as time went on, was that while both sides were talking about God there was another agenda that was driving the debate and providing a substantial

⁷ 'Nicene Creed' in *Common Prayer: Resources for gospel-shaped gatherings*, 35.

⁸ e.g. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/evangelion/2016/06/the-coming-war-nicene-complementarians-vs-homoian-complementarians/> (accessed 9 November 2016)

amount of its heat. Undoubtedly Liam Golligher, Carl Trueman and the others were concerned about the doctrine of God and the great statements of the Creeds about the divinity of the Son. However, what they were really het up about was the way this doctrine had been used to justify a position on the relation between men and women which lies out at the extreme: the so-called 'Biblical Patriarchy' or 'Christian Patriarchy' movement. Associated with that movement is something blogger Aimee Byrd has described as 'soap bubble submission' with its correlate 'sanctified testosterone'. Now without going into the details of that movement, the point simply is that some of the people that Golligher, Trueman and Byrd identified as expounding an oppressive, absolute and all-encompassing submission on the part of women — not just wives but all women — were also said to be justifying this on the basis of the Son's eternal submission to the Father. So both those these friends were attacking, and these friends themselves, were talking about God with another agenda.

Of course the doctrine of the Trinity has bearing upon everything else we have to say about how God relates to the world he has made and what life is like for those who have been created in his image. Everything is ultimately related to God because he is the only eternal absolute there is. Yet the doctrine of the Trinity is not a means to an end. We can in fact distort the Bible's teaching on a particular doctrine if we seek to use it in ways it was not intended. Take, for example, the doctrine of predestination. We are told about God's choice of those who are his from all eternity, not in order to create anxiety (to have us spending our lives wondering whether we're one of the chosen or not), nor to cause us to start dividing up those around us into 'the elect' and the 'non-elect'. Rather we are told this wonderful truth to give us a deep and enduring comfort. My salvation is secure because from beginning to end it does not depend on me but it depends on him. He chose us from the foundation of the world to be his in Christ (Eph 1.4). My salvation is his eternal plan and his plan never fails. That confidence and comfort is the proper motive for a commitment to godly living, not an alternative to it.

There have been other problems with the debate that's gone on this year as well. Words can be used in ways they were never intended by the people quoted. Does subordination always mean inequality? Is it possible for an equal to submit to another equal — even over an extended period of time — without undoing their equality? To suggest that whenever someone uses the term 'subordination' they are actually teaching 'subordinationism' is quite unfair, particularly when those who use it try to make clear their meaning by talking about 'functional subordination' or 'relational

subordination'. Similarly, to suggest that those who argue one side of the debate are trying to blur biblical teaching in order to serve their own agenda or that those on the other side of the debate are driven by a devaluing of women perhaps arising from an addiction to pornography (and that unsubstantiated charge was made in an interview held in the midst of this debate), is just plain wrong, unless you have undeniable evidence from them or eyewitnesses that these are in fact their motives. One last problem with the debate is the way some people have simply appealed to a great name who speaks into the debate as sufficient reason to say that 'the game is over'. Because x has spoken we should all pack up and go home. But couldn't x be wrong, even if they are a leading expert in a particular academic discipline? Shouldn't we test what x says against the teaching of the Bible? Otherwise we are all prisoners of the academy.

In the end so much of this year's debate has been one step removed from the teaching of the Bible and that is a little troubling. And too often the debate itself has borne more than faint resemblances to the worst of the political debates we have endured.

3 That 'other debate'

None of which is to say that 'the other debate', the debate behind the debate about the Trinity, the debate about the complementary roles of men and women, is unimportant. How we understand the Bible's teaching about the fundamental equality of men and women before God, both equally created in God's image, both with the same value, both saved only by Christ's blood, both with the same hope and future, is very important, especially as our world confuses and distorts the nature of equality into sameness. Just as important is an exploration of the Bible's delight — God's delight really — in the distinctive natures of men and women and all that flows from them. It is right to delight in being a woman. It is right to delight in being a man. God delights after all that he made us men and women. Maleness and femaleness was part of the world God looked at in the beginning and said, 'It is very good' (Gen 1.31). How men and women image God in their relation to one another and the world around them is a very good question to explore.

And it is all the more important that we get this right when there is such confusion on this topic all around us, and where people misuse the Bible in order to justify their own selfishness, harshness, cruelty and abuse — particularly of women. Domestic abuse is

one of the scourges of our time and it is a scourge in our churches as well as outside of them. It is never, ever condoned in the Scriptures. It is never, ever something you must just endure in the name of biblical submission. And any attempt to use the biblical doctrines of headship and submission to mask or justify bullying and domestic abuse needs to be exposed for what it is — a grotesque distortion of the Bible's teaching which dishonours God.

So I want to stand with Liam and Carl and Aimee and oppose this kind of behaviour wherever it is found. And I want to join with them in exposing the hypocrisy and misuse of the Bible that allows people to turn a blind eye or insist that it should just be endured. This is most certainly one of the pressing social issues of our time and we Christians are not immune to its impact. But I want us to look to the Bible's teaching on God, first and foremost, in order to understand God better, to understand who Jesus actually is better, and to give him the praise and worship that is his due. That's what I want to do this morning, but I will make a few wider comments at the end.

II. THE SON AND THE FATHER

4 Three big questions

Whenever we think about the relation of the Son to the Father, there are three big questions that are not too far from the surface. The first of these is, **how much does Jesus reveal about God?** You'll remember that the prologue to John's Gospel ends, in John 1.18, 'No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known'. Precisely because the Son has a unique relationship to the Father, a relationship that stretches back before creation and into eternity, he is able to make the Father known, to exegete him. The apostle Paul would tell the Colossians, that '[the beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins], is the image of the invisible God' (Col 1.15). The writer to the Hebrews put it this way, 'He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature' (Heb 1.3). Jesus makes God known. He is our only point of access to the Father (Jn 14.6). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself tells us, 'All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him' (Mtt 11.27).

But how much does Jesus reveal about God? His character? His purposes for the world? Certainly those things. He speaks the words his Father gave him and does the works his Father prepared for him to do (Jn 8.28; 5.36). But does he show us even more? In the way he relates to the Father while on earth, in what he teaches about his Father and the words he says to his Father, does he reveal to us something essential to the nature of God? Does he reveal that personal relationships lie at the very heart of who God is, that God really is 'the Father' because Jesus really is 'the Son'? When we deal with Jesus are we actually dealing with God as he really is, or instead just with a mask for our benefit?

The second question is **how much does Jesus reveal about us?** He became like us in every way — Hebrews says, 'he had to be made like his brothers in every respect' (2.17). He shares our flesh and blood and he bears the conditions of our lives, under the shadow of sin and death. He knew what it means to be tired and persecuted and tempted, abandoned and abused. And yet he consistently lived as one who trusted his heavenly Father implicitly. How much can we look to the life of Jesus, his character and his actions as well as his words, as a pattern for human life and relationships? Paul could, of course, point the Philippians to the attitude of Christ Jesus as one which should shape our relation to each other in humility and service (Phil 2.5–8). He would call on the Corinthians to 'be imitators of me as I am of Christ' (1 Cor 4.16). But there is only 'one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim 2.5). There are ways in which he must be distinguished from us.

The third question is **how do we distinguish between what is temporal and what is eternal** when we look at Jesus? His love and compassion reflects the love and compassion of the Father. It is the perfect expression in time and space of the heart of God. 'God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5.8). But can we assume everything that Jesus does or says, or every attitude he displays is a reflection of the eternal? What about when he is hungry? God is never hungry in eternity. What about when he is tired? God is never tired in eternity. What about when he bleeds and suffers? God is never harmed or injured by anything he has made. And if those things are merely temporary and reflect his accommodation to us rather than who he really is, how do we judge what else fits in that category and what does not? But the danger here is that once we start separating out the temporal and the eternal like this, have we not called into question the reality of God's revelation of himself? Is God, as he has shown himself in the life and ministry of Jesus, really God as he really is. Another way of asking that is to ask whether the God of the

economy of creation and redemption is the same as the God of eternity — is the economic trinity the essential trinity and vice versa?⁹ The answer to these questions needs a lot of hard thinking in the light of all that the New Testament has to say about Jesus.

So: can we move from speaking about Jesus to speaking about God as he really is? Can we move from speaking about Jesus to speaking about us as human beings? And at any particular point, is what we see in Jesus something just for his earthly life and ministry or is it reflective of who he is alongside the Father and the Spirit in eternity? These are three questions worth asking when thinking about the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ.

5 Three big concepts

As well as three big questions, there are three big concepts which help us clarify our thinking when it comes to the Triune God. Each of them is captured in a technical word or phrase which is often used by theologians. The first is that the Son is every bit as much God as the Father is. That is the phrase 'of one being with the Father', or the Greek word, *ὁμοούσιος*. One of the greatest theologians of all times, Athanasius of Alexandria, once wrote that the Son is everything the Father is, except being Father. Which means there is complete and absolute *equality* between the Father and the Son. The Son is worshipped every bit as much as the Father is. The obey the Son is to obey the Father. When Jesus saves us it actually is God who saves us. Jesus put it this way to Philip, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14.9). Whatever else we say about Jesus must not stand in contradiction to this truth. He is 'of one being with the Father'. Just in passing, that huge concept is what the Arian controversy in the fourth century was all about.

The second big concept is that of mutual indwelling. In the same conversation with Philip I've just mentioned, Jesus asked 'Don't you believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?' (Jn 14.10). Elsewhere we hear Jesus say, 'I and the Father are one' (Jn 10.30). This is the meaning of another Greek word used for centuries when talking about the Trinity, *περιχώρησις*. And the point here is that there is complete and absolute *unity* between the Father and the Son. You cannot separate the Father from the Son. You can indeed distinguish and speak of the work of the Father and the work

⁹ K. Rahner, *The Trinity* (trans. J. Donceel; Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1970), 22.

of the Son. But you cannot separate the Father from the Son when you speak like that. The Son always does the work of the Father. The Father always draws people to the Son because it is his plan from all eternity to put all things under his feet (Eph 1.10; 1 Cor 15.27), to have every knee bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord (Phil 2.10–11).

So the Son is as much God as the Father is. And the Son is inseparable from the Father, always perfectly united to him. And the third concept is that he is 'God from God'. In other words, there is an *order* in the relation between the Father and the Son which is irreversible and which does not undermine what we have just said. The Son is sent from the Father, as Jesus repeatedly testified, but the Father is never sent by the Son. The Father has put all things in subjection under the feet of the Son in 1 Corinthians 15.27, but in the end 'the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all' in 1 Corinthians 15.28. The Greek word used to describe this is *τάξις*. While there is perfect equality in the relation of the Father and the Son, that relation is not symmetrical, it's not reciprocal nor interchangeable.

They're the three big concepts of the doctrine of the Trinity: the Son is of one being with the Father (perfect equality), the Son and Father (and the Spirit) mutually indwell one another (inseparable unity), and the relations of Father, Son and Spirit are ordered or asymmetrical.

6 The evidence of Jesus' life

Now all of this is borne out when you look at the evidence of Jesus' life, isn't it? Jesus does what only God can do. He heals with a word (Mk 5.34), he raises the dead (Jn 11.43), he silences the demons (Mk 1.25), he walks on water (Mtt 14.25), he stills the storm (Mk 4.39), he forgives sins (Mk 2.5). At point after point those who saw and heard him were forced to ask, 'Who is this?' (Mk 4.41 Lk 7.49; 9.9; Jn 4.29) He comes in fulfilment of God's ancient promises, that he would deliver his people, that he would be their shepherd, that he would undo the damage of sin and remake all things. He is the one who exercises the authority of God on earth. He is the one who speaks the words of God on earth. He is, as the angel said to Joseph right at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel, 'God with us' (Mtt 1.23).

And yet at point after point Jesus insists he is only speaking the words the Father has given him to speak (Jn 14.10) and doing what the Father has given him to do (Jn 10.25). He repeatedly spoke of being sent by the Father (Mtt 10.40; Mk 9.37; Lk 10.16; Jn 4.34). And at the end of Matthew's Gospel, in the Great Commission, when he speaks of all authority on heaven and on earth as his, he insists 'all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me' (Mtt 28.18). He is always the loving, obedient and faithful son of his Father. He refers everything to the Father. He draws people to himself so that through him they might come to the Father (Jn 14.6). And at every point he is the beloved Son of the Father who perfectly does the Father's will — at his baptism, throughout his ministry, on the Mount of Transfiguration as he heads towards Jerusalem, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the cross.

7 The evidence of an eternal relationship

Yet when we consider the questions I mentioned a few minutes ago, we still need to ask, how much of this ordered relationship between the Father and the Son is just something for Jesus' earthly life? What evidence is there that this is true of God's eternal triune life? Is the Father–Son relation the same in eternity?

I've already mentioned 1 Corinthians 15 and what will happen at the end, which is surely an indication of something beyond simply Jesus' earthly ministry in Palestine. But if we consider the well-known words of Philippians 2 a little more closely we can see that the decision to make himself nothing, to take the form of a servant, to be born in the likeness of men, is a decision made in eternity by the one who is, in eternity, in the form of God. I'm sure you'll remember the words:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God — or better *because* he was in the form of God [this is what God is actually like, this is a quintessentially God-like thing to do], did not count equality with God a thing to grasped [or held on to], but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. (Phil 2.5–7)

When did he not count equality with God a thing to be held on to? In eternity. When was the decision made to follow the Father's sending and come into the world from the womb of the virgin? In eternity. When was he committed to obedience, yes, even

obedience? In eternity. The submission of the Son to the Father's will — not at all coerced submission, not at all domination, not at all a reflection of inequality — is something that is seen in eternity. And, I'll make a little more of this in a minute, Paul describes the one who does all this as 'Christ Jesus'. He doesn't restrict that name to the earthly ministry of Jesus — not always.

Now there is more we really should say on this, of course. Putting it this way can sound dangerously like suggesting there are three entities with three wills in God and we would need to guard against that. There is, in all eternity, only one God and only one divine will. But we do need to consider that the names 'Father' and 'Son' are not just arbitrary. They are names Jesus himself uses. Not just 'Son of Man' or 'Son of God' but 'the Son' (Jn 8.35–36; 14.13; 17.1). Not just 'our Father' or 'our Father in heaven' but 'my Father' (Mtt 10.32; 11.27; 18.19; Jn 8.54) and 'the Father' (Jn 10.15, 29; 12.49; 14.10). And if there is something especially appropriate about using the language of 'Father' and 'Son', then it becomes important to think through what it means for this one to be, from all eternity, the Son of the Father and not just another Father. That's what the Creed captures with the little phrase 'eternally begotten of the Father' and that's what Mike Ovey has helpfully explored in his little book *Your Will Be Done*.¹⁰ There is an eternal order between the Father and the Son that does not jeopardise in the slightest their perfect equality, because it is not in the slightest tainted by our selfish, sinful notions of domination and control or demeaning servitude.

III. TEN IMPORTANT STATEMENTS

Many of you will know that I made my own tiny contribution to the blog debates earlier in this year. I posted on the question at the heart of the debate and promised to post a second time in the near future. Months have gone by and the second post is still only in draft. A few other things got in the way, I'm afraid. But in the interim I have been able to communicate directly with Carl Trueman and Aimee Byrd and seek to explain that the way they had written had unwittingly caused some collateral damage. People who would stand with them against domestic abuse dressed up as headship, and victimhood dressed up as submission, and who would uphold the full equality of the Father and the Son and the Son's eternal generation, have been

¹⁰ M. J. Ovey, *Your Will be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (Latimer Studies 83; London: Latimer Trust, 2016).

lumped together with the extremists simply because they see asymmetry in the relation of the Father and the Son — The Father is always the Father and the Son is always the Son; there are not two Fathers or two Sons. The Father sends the Son but the Son never sends the Father. The Son does the works of his Father, the Father does not do the works of the Son. And yet the Son seeks the glory of the Father and the Father seeks the glory of the Son. They share one being and one character and one glory.

As I've drafted the second post, I began with what I consider ten important statements. And I thought I'd end with those this morning (since they sum up much of what I have been saying):

1. **There is never any excuse or justification for domestic abuse.** Such abuse is always sinful and a betrayal of Christ as well as our marriage partner (whether the abuser is a man or a woman).
2. **The biblical doctrine of headship is sourced in and shaped by Christ's headship of the church.** What does biblical headship look like? 'Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Eph 5.25). It is emphatically not absolute rule or domination and it does not demand subservience. Headship means taking the initiative in service in a self-sacrificial way.
3. **There is nothing in Scripture that requires a woman simply to endure violence from her husband.** It is pastorally irresponsible, and involves a gross misuse of biblical teaching, to suggest that this is what submission entails. While separation is a serious course of action which should never be taken lightly, it may be the only way to protect the vulnerable spouse and any children of the relationship. The violent spouse needs to be held accountable for their actions which violate the gentle love and self-sacrificial care which are meant to characterise marriage.
4. **Biblical complementarianism does not depend upon an analogy from the eternal intratrinitarian relations.** The biblical teaching in Genesis 1–3, Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 11, etc. provides sufficient and appropriate grounds for complementarianism. That does not mean that we should conclude the two are entirely unrelated, especially given our creation in the image of God. However, if an analogy from the relation of the trinitarian persons is to be drawn, we should be very wary of going beyond the limited confirmatory role of

demonstrating that equality of being and value on the one hand, and a permanent, irreversible and non-interchangeable order of relationships on the other, are not mutually exclusive, at least not always and necessarily mutually exclusive. Nor do they necessarily involve a hierarchy of value or authority. Yet the analogy does not itself establish biblical complementarianism nor does biblical complementarianism require it.

5. **The Son really is the Son, he is not a second Father.** The Son is not the Father under a different name. That would be the ancient heresy of modalism or Sabellianism. Nor is the Son simply a 'repetition' of the Father (that's essentially the same error). We must neither confuse the persons nor separate them, but we can (and must if we are to be true to the teaching of Scripture) distinguish between them. As Mike Ovey, drawing on Athanasius, Hilary and others, has recently argued, much of the debate revolves around the question of what it means for the second person of the Trinity to be 'the Son'. What is entailed in the true sonship of the divine Son? Yet no trinitarian theologian of whom I am aware has ever denied that the Son really is the Son and not a second Father.
6. **The Son is 'eternally begotten' of the Father.** This statement in the Creed faithfully reflects the teaching of Scripture (Mic 5.2; Jn 1.14, 18; 3.16, 18; Acts 13.33; Heb 1.5; 5.5; 1 Jn 4.9; 5.1, 4). The Father always exists as Father and the Son always exists as Son. Yet the Son is Son not by creation or adoption but by this eternal relation of being. The Son is distinguished from the Spirit in this way as well: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father while the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.
7. **The Son is 'of the same essence' as the Father.** From eternity he shares equally in being, glory, honour and worship. There is no sense in which the Son is inferior in being to the Father, just as there is no sense in which the Spirit is inferior to the Father and the Son. The decision in eternity not to 'count equality with God something to be grasped' (Phil 2.6), was predicated on an eternally existing equality of being and honour. Jesus spoke of how 'the Father and I are one' (Jn 10.30; 17.11, 22). The Son is everything the Father is except Father.
8. **God is as he reveals himself to be.** When we deal with God in Christ, here in the economy of creation and redemption, in time and space, we are still dealing with God as he actually is. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14.9),

Jesus told Philip, based on the truth that 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (Jn 14.10–11). There is a distinction to be maintained between the immanent trinity and the economic trinity. One is not collapsed into the other and we must take into account God's decision to accommodate himself to our understanding. Yet Karl Rahner's axiom still holds: the immanent trinity is the economic trinity and vice versa. We are not dealing with a different God but the very same God who inhabits eternity. If there is no identity between the immanent and economic trinity in this sense, then revelation is an illusion and our assurance of salvation evaporates.

- 9. Precision is important but has its limits.** We need to be very careful to distinguish what pertains to the incarnate Son by virtue of his humanity and what can be said eternally of the second person of the Trinity. The Son is eternal but his human nature is assumed in time, taken from the womb of the virgin as she was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. He has always been the Son, but by virtue of the incarnation bears the Messianic titles 'Christ', 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man'. Sometimes the use of these very titles indicates that what is being taught in a particular passage in the New Testament applies to the Son in his incarnate life (which, though transformed in the resurrection still continues, since he has not discarded his humanity). Yet in even these cases, the context is critical for understanding exactly what is being taught. So Paul's use of the name 'Christ Jesus' to denote the one who 'did not count equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant' cautions us against being too prescriptive in our use of language.
- 10. The doctrine of the Trinity is not to be used as a pawn in some other game.** The doctrine of the Trinity is a confession about the being of God. Of course, if God is like this then there are consequences and implications for those created in his image and living in his world. Yet a utilitarian approach to this doctrine always runs the risk of distorting it. The agenda in exploring the doctrine of the Trinity is a clearer knowledge of God.