

# Is there order in the Trinity?

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*This is the first in a two part series responding to recent theological challenges to the doctrine of eternal functional (or relational) subordination (EFS or ERS). This doctrine has been under sustained attack, especially in the light of its use to support the argument for an appropriate order of equals that might apply in relations between men and women in the home and in the church. It has also been under attack, it must be admitted, because of overstatement and a lack of precision in some of its advocates.*

*In this post I want to explore the strictly theological question of whether this doctrine inevitably involves a drift into the subordinationist heresy associated with Arius. This is the most common theological objection to the doctrine. In the next post I want to explore a more recent charge: that the doctrine compromises the revelation of God as Trinity in another way, namely through undermining the genuine incarnation of the Son.*

To suggest that within the divine Trinity the Son is in any sense less than the Father is to fall into heresy. Subordinationism, the teaching most often associated with the early fourth-century Egyptian priest Arius, was early recognised as biblically deficient, theologically confused and pastorally disastrous. It did manufacture a false view of God and so can rightly be described as idolatrous. Arius' 'son' was subordinate *in being* to the Father. But, as Athanasius wrote in response, the Son is every bit as much God as the Father is: 'And so, since they are one, and the Godhead itself one, the same things are said of the Son, which are said of the Father, except His being said

to be Father' (*Orationes* III.4). As the Athanasian Creed (sadly not written by Athanasius) puts it, 'In this Trinity none is afore, nor after another; none is greater or lesser than another'. This is a confession disciplined by God's self-revelation in Scripture: 'I and the Father are one' (Jn 10.30); he 'did not count equality with God something to be grasped' – note the antecedent to 'he' in this text is 'Christ Jesus' (Phil. 2.5–6). It is a confession no less urgent and vital to Christian faith in the twenty-first century as it was in the fourth century.

However we speak about the triune God, we must insist that we are speaking about one God, undivided in being, undivided in his action in the world. There is neither division nor hierarchy in the being of the one triune God.

We must also affirm, while holding them in the closest possible relation, a distinction between the eternal being of God and his self-revelation in the economy of creation and salvation. The relation of God in himself and God as he is towards us is, however, more than just extremely close. When we deal with God in Christ, we really are dealing *with God*. Care must be taken not to drive a wedge between the eternal or immanent Trinity and the revealed or economic Trinity. Otherwise confidence in God's self-revelation will be undermined – how could we be sure this is how God really is? To use the words of one recent contribution to the discussion, how could we be sure that these were more than just 'roles adopted by the persons to accomplish our redemption'? Yet at the same time we must avoid a simple transfer of all we see of God in Christ to the eternal Trinity. An obvious example would be the

hunger or tiredness of Jesus. The triune God is never hungry and never tired, but God as he has truly revealed himself in the *incarnate* Son does grow hungry and tired, he bleeds and dies. The limits of our understanding are not far from us here, since we cannot isolate Jesus' humanity from his divine nature in order to secure this distinction between the eternal and the economic. He is the one person who is both fully God and fully man.

However we speak about the triune God, we must not collapse the economic Trinity into the ontological Trinity just as we must not separate them. God is as he reveals himself to be.

The incarnation of the Son provides us with direct access to God. He is 'God with us'. He truly makes himself known (Jn 1.18). His words are the words of God. His activity is the activity of God. How you respond to Jesus is how you respond to God. In truth, we have no other access to the Father (Jn 14.6). We cannot approach God around, behind or apart from Jesus. Yet Jesus is God the Son having taken to himself a genuine, full human nature. So while we cannot divide the person into the natures — it is the person of Jesus Christ who bleeds and dies not just a part of him — we must be alert to the particularity of the incarnation and avoid too quickly concluding that an action or a pattern of action is *necessarily* a reflection of the eternal triune life of God. The Son is always the Son, the one sent rather than the one doing the sending, the one who delights in the love and will of the Father — which love and will he shares because of the oneness of the divine being — but he is not always the

*incarnate* Son. That cannot be said without undermining the reality of God's good work in creating time and space, and more particularly, the Spirit's work in overshadowing the virgin and perfecting in her womb the personal union of humanity and divinity in Christ.

All of this has implications for contemporary discussion of 'eternal functional subordination'. Fundamentally it warns of the care that must be taken in any appeal to the eternal life of God as an inference from God's involvement in the economy. Of course, such an appeal can and must be made. After all, in the prayer in which Jesus speaks about the glory he shared with the Father 'before the world existed' and of how the Father loved him 'before the foundation of the world', he also says 'As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world' and 'that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you' (Jn 17). The humility Paul enjoins upon the Philippians is modelled on the humility of Christ Jesus whose decision not to count equality with God something to be grasped was quite obviously an eternal decision that resulted in time in the assumption of the form of a servant (Phil. 2). But any such appeal needs explicit exegetical warrant to make it and a little more theological precision than is usually the case. We can readily admit that illegitimate appeals from human relations to the eternal triune relations have been made by both sides of the debate over men and women in society, in the home, and in the churches. Egalitarians have protested that such appeals by some complementarians sound like the subordinationist heresy. Some complementarians suspect that the egalitarian

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

But there is another factor which needs to be taken into account. While superiority and inferiority, hierarchy in the sense of increasing value or importance or authority, is ruled out by the clear biblical witness to unity, indivisibility and equality within the Godhead, is there not still a sense in which there is an asymmetrical order of relation that does not negate any of these truths? A related question would be how consistent are the divine 'processions' with the divine 'missions'? Is the eternal begetting of the Son an appropriate grounding in the being of God for the sending of the Son into the world to save sinners (by being born of Mary no less)? Is the eternal procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son an appropriate grounding in the being of God for the donation of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost? Could the Father or the Spirit just as well have been incarnate as the Son? Could the Son or the Father just as well have been sent into the world to indwell believers as the Spirit? Is there something about their eternal intratrinitarian relations which makes it thoroughly appropriate that God in each person should relate to the world in this way? [As an aside, I've always been rather partial to this line from John of Damascus: 'We have learned that there is a difference between begetting and procession, but what the manner of this difference is we have not learned at all.' *De Fide Orthodoxa* I.8]

The biblical revelation makes clear that the filial relation of the Father and the Son was not just a temporary phenomenon. John's Gospel, in particular, speaks of the pattern of relation between the Father and the Son. In John 5 we read:

So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing'. (vv. 19-20)

The very name 'Son' carries with it a correlation to 'Father', since we are bound to ask 'son of whom?' The divine will flows from the Father to the Son rather than in the other direction, precisely because he is the Father. Paternity, filiation and Sonship are eternal realities which need to be taken seriously and which impact how Jesus operated in his earthly ministry. Once again it was Athanasius and those who aligned themselves with the Nicene Creed who argued that while God was not always creator, he was always Father: 'It would be more godly and true to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name God from his works alone and call him Unoriginate' (*Orations*, I.14). The Word did not just become a Son in order to redeem us. He took on our humanity in order to redeem us. He was always the Son. And the relation of the Father and the Son was always the relation of Father to Son.

It is worth looking at the other end of time and eternity as well. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul writes of how at the end Christ 'delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and authority and power' (v. 24). Is this to be taken as simply the final act within the economy? After all, at this

point Paul uses the term 'Christ' or 'Messiah' rather than 'Son'. But just a few verses later we read this.

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (v. 28)

Paul is most certainly not suggesting an inequality between the Father and the Son. He is not suggesting that the Lordship of the Son is dispensable or that his Sonship is a temporary phenomenon. But the change of terminology from 'Christ' to 'Son' is not simply stylistic either. There is something about the final act of the eschaton, all put under the feet of Christ and then brought to the Father by the Son, that is indicative of their eternal relationship as Father and Son. The other-person-centredness of the triune persons has a particular shape or direction.

One of the great dangers in this debate is that of name-calling. Other agendas (especially positions on the interchangeability or otherwise of the roles of men and women in family and congregational life) keep intruding and even when this is not explicit they are not far in the background. This name-calling might take the form of describing opposing views as Arian or Sabellian or even attempting to apply the ancient distinction between the Nicene Christians (who espoused 'of the same substance' to describe the relation of the Father and the Son) and Homoian Christians (who espoused 'like' as a more reasonable alternative). In the debates over the last ten years people have been too quick to relegate those with whom they disagree to the category of 'heretic' or 'would-be heretic' or 'dangerously close to being a heretic'. The

atmosphere is too charged and very little of that charge has actually come from a focussed interest in trinitarian theology!

Another danger lies in the term 'subordination' itself. While it would not be difficult to show that the term has been used by orthodox Christians from the earliest period and including stalwarts of modern trinitarian theology like Karl Barth, it is too easy to confuse 'subordination' and 'subordinationism'. It is too easy not to ask the question 'What kind of subordination do you mean?' before rushing to the conclusion that the person using the term is actually espousing 'subordinationism'. Though it is a mouthful, perhaps 'asymmetrical relational order' might be a better expression. In other words, there is an order in the relationship between the Father and the Son (we do not speak of two 'brothers', the Father and the Son are not interchangeable, etc). Perhaps not. But it does seem important to affirm as strongly as possible *both* the absolute equality of being between the Father and the Son (and the Spirit!) and an order between them that confirms and in a sense explicates that equality. The Father eternally begets the Son, not the other way around. The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (yes, I am theologically committed to the Filioque clause in the Creed; and yes, I know that the Creed does not use the word 'eternally' at that point).

Any attempt to argue from the intratrinitarian relationships to a position on the roles and relational dynamics of men and women in the home and in the church needs particular care. Undoubtedly, in my view, the Trinity provides a



background model of how equality and differentiation can exist together. I am even prepared to argue that the Trinity provides some ground for believing that the free embrace of headship and submission does not have to be oppressive or abusive nor need it involve a hierarchy of value (and yes, more work would need to be done than I have done here to identify and define 'headship' as the complement of 'submission'). Yet there are very significant differences which need to be taken into account as well. A man and a woman are two different people, with different personalities, different centres of consciousness, and different wills. Yet the triune God is one God, the persons are 'of one substance' with each other, and there is one divine will. The best that can be done here is to speak of an analogy, but I would resist the suggestion that trinitarian theology alone *necessitates* one position or the other on the relationships and roles of men and women. For that we need to look very carefully at the biblical texts which specifically treat those relationships and roles and hear what God has to say to us there.

My purpose in this post has simply been to begin to explain why I for one would demur from any judgment that eternal relational subordination necessarily involves 'reinventing the doctrine of God', departing from orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, heresy or even idolatry. My own conviction is that it indicates an important strand of the biblical witness to God, recognised down through the ages by orthodox Christians who all would recoil from any hint of 'subordinationism'.