

5. Robert Letham, "Eternal Generation in the Church Fathers," in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John B. Starke (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 122.

6. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 1234, but see note 5 above.

7. Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 162.

8. Author's note: After I finished this presentation, Dr. Ware spoke. He began by saying that he had changed his mind and went on to tell the several hundred evangelical theologians present that he now endorses the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son because he now recognizes it has good biblical support. It seemed to me as if the air had been sucked out of the room. He did not mention me, but as the only evangelical who has written a book on the doctrine of the eternal generation, I am thankful he is now convinced he had been in error and needed to apologize to the evangelical community for leading it to reject a foundational element in the doctrine of the Trinity. Dr. Grudem later gave the fourth lecture in the session. He too indicated that he now believes the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son and that he would be correcting his *Systematic Theology* upon its next revision.

9. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251–52, 1234; idem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 239–40; idem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), 210–13.

10. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 266.

11. Bruce A. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority and Submission among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead," *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 49.

12. See the full account of this phenomenon by the complementarian theologian Roderick Durst, *Reordering the Trinity: Six Movements of God in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015).

13. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251–52.

14. George Knight III, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

15. See further Kevin Giles, "The Genesis of Confusion: How 'Complementarians' Have Corrupted Communication," *Priscilla Papers* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 23–24.

16. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 50, 65. In this book time and time again Dr. Ware speaks of the "supremacy" of the Father and often of his "priority" and "preeminence" in the Godhead. For him the divine persons are not "co-equal" as orthodoxy with one voice asserts.

17. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 51.

18. Kyle Claunch, "God Is the Head of Christ: Does 1 Corinthians 11:3 Ground Gender Complementarity in the Immanent Trinity?," in *One God*, 88.

19. Claunch, "God Is the Head of Christ," in *One God*, 88.



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## Language, Logic, and Trinity: A Critical Examination of the Eternal Subordinationist View of the Trinity

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For the past two decades, evangelical theologians have debated over one specific aspect of the relationship between members of the Trinity. One group insists that the Father is eternally the supreme member of the Trinity, necessarily and always possessing authority over the Son and the Holy Spirit, who are thus subordinate to him. The other view contends that the Son eternally possesses equal authority with the Father, but that for the period of his earthly ministry, he voluntarily became subject to the Father's will. Similarly differing views are held regarding the authority of the Holy Spirit, although the discussion has not dealt extensively with the status of the third person. Both parties agree that all three persons are fully deity, and thus equal in what they are. Biblical, historical, philosophical and theological arguments have been presented on both sides, without reaching agreement. Whether or not the subordination itself is eternal, some have begun to wonder whether the debate over it might be.

Perhaps what is needed to cut the Gordian knot is a different approach. In their book, *That Used to Be Us*, Thomas Friedman

and Michael Mandelbaum argue that one of the skills that will be necessary in the global environment into which we are increasingly moving is critical thinking.<sup>1</sup> Paradoxically, the wave of postmodernism makes critical thinking unpopular, but it has seldom been more needed. Although popular postmodernism is rampant on college campuses and in general culture, objective thinking is gaining influence not just in the natural sciences but also in the humanities.<sup>2</sup> The aim in this article is to apply the methods of critical thinking to the view that the second person of the Trinity is eternally functionally subordinated to the Father. The intention here is not to be neutral, but to be as fair and objective as possible.<sup>3</sup> I will focus primarily on the writings of Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem, and especially their most recent contributions to the debate.

### A. A Rhetorical Issue

It is common practice in politics to attempt to gain an advantage in an argument by the way the issues are stated or the positions are

labeled. For example, the two sides in the abortion debate label themselves “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” The attempt is to take a term or issue that most people favor and attach it to a position that is more disputed. It is the attempt to win one argument by representing it as another argument that is already settled.

Rather than labeling the two positions “complementarian” and “egalitarian,” a more accurate pair of terms would be “hierarchical complementarian” and “egalitarian complementarian.” The two positions do not really differ on whether the first person and the second person perform differing but complementary roles, but on whether the complementation is horizontal or vertical. Despite Grudem’s contention that the complementarian/egalitarian terminology is well established through usage, this misdirects the focus of the argument regarding the relationships between men and women.<sup>4</sup> The same is true of the discussions of the Trinity. The issue is not whether the Father, Son and Spirit have differing roles, but rather whether there is a superiority/inferiority relationship of authority. While the subordinationists’ use of the term “complementarian” may designate a group of persons who have taken that name, its denotation is quite different.<sup>5</sup>

## B. A Practical Issue

Scripture writers frequently develop doctrinal expositions in connection with practical issues (for instance, Phil 2:5–11). This issue similarly has definite practical implications, one of the most important of which is to whom Christians should pray: to the Father only, or also to the Son and the Spirit? Ware says that we should pray only to the Father, and that one of the reasons we do not is that we do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity correctly.<sup>6</sup> This seems to be saying that what I call the gradational view of the authority relationship implies praying only to the Father. The argument could then be stated as:

If the Father is supreme we should direct our prayers only to him.

The Father is supreme.

Therefore we should direct our prayers only to him.

This is an instance of the argument termed “affirming the antecedent,” and it is a valid argument, so that if both premises are true, the conclusion is also true. This type of argument is a two-edged sword, however. It appears that the NT contains prayers to the Son (Acts 7:59–60, 2 Cor 12:8–9, Rev 22:20). Unless these were not really prayers or those praying them were in error and praying improperly, it is not true that prayer should only be directed to the Father. It is notable that these are identified as prayers, and that they were accepted rather than corrected. If, therefore, it is in order to pray to the Son, then the argument looks like this:

If the Father is supreme we should direct our prayers only to him.

It is not true that we should direct our prayers only to the Father.

Therefore, it is not true that the Father is supreme.

This is an instance of denying the consequent, and it is also a valid argument.

Grudem does not teach that prayer should only be directed to the Father.<sup>7</sup> If, however, as he asserts, the Father is the one who initiates action, such as sending the Son the first time, then should not Grudem logically hold the same position on prayer as does Ware? If the Son came the first time because the Father sent him, and the authority relationship remains unchanged, should we not pray to the Father to send the Son the second time? If so, the argument leads to the same unfortunate conclusion we have already seen.

## C. Metaphysical Issues

1. *Qualities of the Persons.* One of the vigorously contested issues concerns whether the eternal necessary subordination of the Son to the Father implies not merely a functional subordination but an ontological subordination as well. Tom McCall and Keith Yandell argued the latter at length in the 2008 debate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School on subordination in the Trinity.<sup>8</sup> Briefly put, their contention is that if the Son is eternally and necessarily functionally subordinate to the Father, then it is part of his very nature, and he is not *homoousios*, or of the same nature, with the Father.

Ware and others have responded by drawing a distinction between predicates of the essence of the triune God or “attributes,” and predicates of each of the individual persons of the Trinity, which they term “properties.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, although the Father has the inherent quality of supremacy or authority over the Son (and the Holy Spirit) and the Son has a quality of always being subordinate in authority (or always submitting to the Father, as they prefer to put it) and neither has these qualities of the other, that does not mean they have different essences, because each of the three equally and wholly shares in or possesses the same essence.

At least two major observations need to be made about this statement. The first is to note that a subject may possess a quality in two ways. It either has that quality necessarily (independent of any variable), or it has it contingently (dependent on the presence of some variable). Second, an attribute or quality that is possessed contingently is called an accidental quality, and one that is possessed necessarily is called an essential quality. In other words, an essential quality is inseparable from something being what it is, while an accidental quality can be absent without affecting the true nature of something. In Grudem’s and Ware’s view, these qualities of supremacy and submission cannot or could not have been otherwise.<sup>10</sup> They are inherent in being the two different persons of the Trinity. On the conventional philosophical understanding, however, these are essential qualities or attributes. On the contrasting view, the supremacy/submission qualities are accidental, dependent upon one person having become incarnate as a human being in the space-time universe.

The eternal subordination view thus seems to say that the Father has an essential attribute that the Son does not have, and the Son has an essential attribute that the Father does not

have. From the perspective of modern philosophy, the essential attributes possessed by a subject constitute its essence. Philip Gons and Andrew Naselli try to get around this similarity of root meanings by restating it as “fundamental” qualities.<sup>11</sup> Even that relabeling will not solve the problem however, for that means that the two persons are *fundamentally* different. In a recent article, Paul Maxwell seeks to slip between the horns of the dilemma by suggesting a third class of property, namely relational.<sup>12</sup> This, however, confuses relations with properties, which in this case have since the middle of the twentieth century been generally agreed are modal properties.<sup>13</sup>

One might infer that the three persons do not share the same essence, but rather there are three equal essences. Grudem and Ware are careful to avoid saying that. Part of the problem here is that their conception of the relationship between essence or being and attributes is not completely clear.<sup>14</sup> Nor is their understanding of the relationship between the divine will and divine actions fully lucid. This will emerge later in our discussion of function and ontology.

Ware has suggested that I and some others are charging him and those who hold this view with implicitly holding to some sort of Arianism, and has called for a retraction of that charge.<sup>15</sup> Actually, I am not accusing them of theological error, but of logical error, and unfortunately, laws of logic are notoriously difficult to enforce. If indeed the view of eternal and necessary subordination of authority logically implies subordination of essence and one rejects the subordination of essence, then either one must reject the subordination of authority, or rebut the claim of logical implication. In my judgment they have not yet done the latter successfully.

2. *Differentiation of Persons.* An additional key argument that Ware and Grudem advance is that eternal functional subordination is essential to the differentiation of the persons of the Trinity. Otherwise, Grudem says, “They would no longer be Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but rather Person A, Person A, and Person A.”<sup>16</sup> This leads to the ominous conclusion: “This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed.”<sup>17</sup> This seems to be a claim that different roles are essential to differentiation of persons and that different roles require a superiority/subordination relationship. There is a hidden premise here: “to have differing roles is to have roles of superiority/inferiority of authority.” That suppressed premise needs to be extracted and argued for, or the conclusion does not follow logically. It may be true, but it cannot be established by this argument otherwise.

Another way of putting it is to make explicit the tacit argument that Grudem is advancing:

The Son is numerically distinct from the Father.

If something is numerically distinct from another, it must be qualitatively distinct.

Therefore, the Son is qualitatively distinct from the Father.

The problem is that Grudem has assumed, but not argued, the second premise. To do so, however, would lead him back into the problem of essential difference that we have already described.

There is an additional problem here. Is differentiation of persons really dependent on differing roles (which we may note, must, on this view, be eternal and necessary)? In the above-mentioned debate at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Ware subscribed to the principle of the identity of indiscernibles.<sup>18</sup> That principle, however, has been disputed, particularly by Max Black<sup>19</sup> (and appears not to apply in the area of quantum mechanics<sup>20</sup>). Ware and Grudem, it seems, need to argue for this principle in a way that rebuts the criticism of Black and others. As their statements stand, they depend on an unargued assumption.

3. *Definitions of Metaphysical Concepts.* What appears to be needed is complete definition of such concepts as being and essence. Thus, surprisingly, Grudem agrees that “when one person of the Trinity is acting, it is also true, in some sense that we only understand very faintly that the entire being of God is acting,”<sup>21</sup> yet rejects the idea that “any action done by one person is also done by the other two persons.” This seems to contend that there are actions of the entire being of God that are not thereby actions of each of the persons. My difficulty in understanding this view may stem from my lack of conceptual empathy with Ware’s and Grudem’s metaphysic. If so, I would appreciate their elucidating their use of substance, essence, being, person, attributes and properties, as well as of time and eternity, since they seem to hold at different points that God is timeless and that he is endlessly temporal. Otherwise, this approach seems to substitute a label for an elucidation of its meaning.

4. *Function and Ontology.* It would also be helpful for the eternal subordinationists to elaborate their conception of the relationship between function and ontology. To suggest that there can be necessary and permanent differences of function by two subjects without asking what this presupposes ontologically appears to be similar to the functional Christology found in biblical theologians such as Oscar Cullmann.<sup>22</sup>

5. *Nature of Religious Language.* Finally, it would be helpful if Ware and Grudem were to articulate their theory of religious language. They have spoken of the analogical nature of the terms Father and Son. To invoke the concept of analogical language, however, is not the answer, but the question—namely, how much of the term used is univocal, or to put it more popularly, what portion of the analogy is to be taken literally, and to what extent? This is especially important, since both have appealed to the anthropomorphic nature of language about God in their arguments against open theism.<sup>23</sup>

## D. Logical Issues

1. *Assumptions in Statement of Opposing View.* This argument has potentially another interesting feature. Grudem says, by way of refuting my view and that of others, “If all three persons do every action in the same way, then there is no difference at all between the persons.”<sup>24</sup> The italics are his, and are a crucial part of his assertion. I am not aware of having said that the three persons do every action *in the same way*, and Grudem does not document it. If I have, I want to correct that statement. If I (and others who hold my position) have not said that, then Grudem’s analysis of our position must be somewhat as follows:

If all three persons do every action, they do them in the same way.

All three persons do every action.

Therefore, all three persons do every action in the same way.

From there, the discussion would proceed to the identity of indiscernibles argument. For the conclusion to follow, both premises must be true, and he has failed to prove the first premise.

This tendency to leave unstated and unargued premises can also be seen with respect to the first person of the Trinity sending the second into the world. Here the argument seems to be:

If the first person of the Trinity sent the second person into the world, he alone made the decision to do so.

The first person of the Trinity sent the second person into the world.

Therefore the first person alone made the decision to send the second person into the world.

The first premise, however, is assumed, not argued. We really do not know how that decision regarding the incarnation was made, nor who made it. Grudem and Ware have apparently not considered the alternative suggested by B. B. Warfield, namely that this was the result of a covenant among the three persons.<sup>25</sup>

2. *Misdirected Criticism.* Another tendency also deserves attention. The aspect of an argument that Grudem criticizes is frequently not the point that the opponent is making. We have noted this in connection with the issue of whether all persons participate in divine actions in exactly the same way. He also responds to the contention that the sending of the second person of the Trinity was the work of all three by pointing out that the Son never sends the Father, for example. But I am not asserting that. It would appear that Grudem has inserted a premise: "If all persons of the Trinity are involved in all actions attributed to one, then each action attributed to any person in relation to any other person must be reciprocal." That may be true, but it has not been argued.

This tendency also occurs in a rather conspicuous way in his response to my discussion of the significance of the title "Son." I had mentioned that "Son" is used of Jesus in other forms than "Son of God," and that "Son of God" is not even Jesus's most frequently used expression. Of this Grudem says, "Are the only things that are true in the New Testament the things that are mentioned most frequently? Surely Erickson cannot mean this. But then, what is the point of bringing up 'the New Testament says other things more frequently' as an argument?"<sup>26</sup>

Grudem is correct in saying that this is surely not what I mean. Perhaps I can make my argument clearer. The point is not primarily frequency of reference. The broader point I was making was that the title "Son of God" does not necessarily carry the heavy significance that Grudem and Ware have rested upon it. Other terms are used of and by Jesus, including "Son of Man" and "Son of David." While Jesus and John used "Father" and "Son" frequently, Paul preferred "God, Lord, and Spirit," to "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." Focusing upon the frequency of usage diverts attention from the major point

here, thus constituting what I call "an irrelevant truth," or what are sometimes called "weapons of mass distraction."

3. *Circular Reasoning.* One of Ware's arguments illustrates another principle. He asserts at length that the first person of the Trinity must eternally have authority over the second person because of the names Father and Son respectively. He says,

Without question, a central part of the notion of 'Father' is that of fatherly authority. . . . To fail to see this is to miss one of the primary reasons God chose such masculine terminology generally, and here the name 'Father' particularly, to name himself. If the Father is the eternal Father of the Son, and if the Son is the eternal Son of the Father, this marks their relationship as one in which an inherent and eternal authority and submission structure exists.<sup>27</sup>

If I correctly understand the argument here, it is that the use of the term Father carried in that patriarchal culture the meaning of authority, so that the application of that term to the first person of the Trinity means the Father eternally has authority over the Son. But how do we know that this is the correct meaning of the term Father? That seems to stem from the statement in 1 Cor 11:3, the husband is the head of the wife, as the Father is of the Son, "head" being interpreted by them as meaning having authority over.<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere, the authority of human fathers in the family is extended to their children. In other words, the argument seems to be something like this:

We know that the Father has authority over the Son because the term "father" applied to humans carries the idea of authority over their families.

We know that human fathers are to have authority over their families because they are to relate to them as the first person of the Trinity relates to the second (and third) members of the Trinity.

This appears to me to be a case of circular reasoning, and a rather tight circle indeed. In that judgment I may be mistaken, but if so I would appreciate a demonstration of why these arguments are not circular.

4. *Refutation and the Square of Opposition.* Grudem's argument here and at several other points also must be evaluated in light of the traditional square of opposition. The *contrary* of "All S is P" is "No S is P." The *contradictory* of "All S is P" is "Some S is not P." To disprove a universal statement does not require that every instance be opposed. Rather, only one negative instance is required. Grudem, however, seems to think that anyone opposing his view must demonstrate that every relevant scripture reference supports the opposing view. Moreover, he attempts to show that every consideration supports his view, using language like "No single text or biblical teaching anywhere in Scripture. . . . Every biblical text on this question."<sup>29</sup> This leads, it seems to me, to some rather forced and strained interpretations, a sort of cruel and unusual punishment of the biblical text.

Upon closer scrutiny, Grudem seems in several cases to be saying that there is a possible alternative interpretation to the

simpler one. He then feels justified in following that interpretation. Such a move must be warranted, however. One must offer evidence that one interpretation is more adequate than the other. One cannot move from “T is conceivable” to “T is confirmed as true” simply by assertion or by repetition of the statement. That would be what I term “rhetorical alchemy,” and this procedure is no more effectual than were the efforts of the ancient alchemists to convert a base metal, such as lead, into a precious metal, gold. This tendency can also be seen in Ware’s writings; consider, for example, one of his articles, where references such as “is it not obvious,” “clearly,” “does it not make sense,” “the obvious point,” and “does it not stand to reason” appear twenty-eight times, without supporting arguments.<sup>30</sup>

There is a third type of relationship within the square of opposition. “Some S is P” and “Some S is not P” are subcontraries, and may both be true. In that case, however, a different type of consideration, inductive logic, enters into deciding which statement to believe or act upon.

5. *Inductive Logic and Verification.* A closer examination of the nature of inductive logic may prove informative. In any dispute between rival theories, whether in history, physics, biblical interpretation or any other discipline, evidence can be cited on either side of the debate. In inductive argument, I do not consider it necessary to demonstrate that every instance of potentially relevant evidence supports my view. Of course I do not believe that contradictories can both be true. To my limited and fallible understanding, however, some texts may seem to support one view more strongly, some are ambiguous, and other texts appear to support the alternative view more definitely. I must continue to study these texts, holding to the view that has more support, but be prepared to change my conclusion if, in my estimation, the balance of evidence shifts.

6. *Cumulative Effect.* Finally, bear in mind also that many of the subordinationists’ conclusions draw on a whole chain of assertions. In such procedures, the probability of the premises are not merely added, but multiplied. Thus in a chained argument where each link is 70% probable (a generous assumption), if the conclusion follows from two steps, it is 49% probable, if three steps, 34.3% probable, if four, 24.01% probable. Viewed this way, many of the assertions are far less probable than their advocates assert.

## E. Exegetical Issues

1. *Insertion of Meaning.* Let us now turn to an analysis of some of the exegetical arguments, which Ware and Grudem advance in large number. One of the most significant is the text of Phil 2:6–8: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped [or “held on to”], but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (NIV 1984).<sup>31</sup> This, at least on the surface of it, seems to indicate that the Son became obedient by becoming incarnate. Grudem, however, says that this refers

to a new kind of obedience that Jesus entered into as the God-man, an ‘Incarnational’ obedience that was

consistent with the eternal pattern of obedience that he had shown to the Father for all eternity. Neither of these texts [the other being Ps 2:7] explicitly says that the Son for the first time became obedient. Neither text says that the Son had not previously been obedient to the Father.<sup>32</sup>

I am unable to find in these biblical texts any statement to the effect that this was “a new kind of obedience.” Grudem should show us that *from the text*. Interestingly, in the Philippians passage, the “form” (*morphē*) that is contrasted with the “form of God” (*morphē theou*) is the “form of a servant” (*morphēn doulou*). This was something that on a plain reading of the text seemingly was acquired by becoming incarnate. It was not only “human” (*anthrōpos*) but also “servant” (*doulos*) that the second person became in the incarnation.

This is not the only place where Grudem inserts a meaning into the text that is neither overtly stated nor implied. He says that “at Jesus’s baptism (Mark 1:11) and again at Jesus’s transfiguration (Mark 9:7), then again at the resurrection (Acts 13:33), God declared that a new aspect of sonship had begun, one in which Jesus as the God-man was now relating to God as his Father. This does not mean that the eternal Son of God was *not* Son prior to this time. . . .”<sup>33</sup> His treatment of Heb 5:8, “he learned obedience,” is similar. The problem I have with these statements is that I cannot find such an assertion in the texts cited.

2. *Lexicography.* Another exegetical problem comes with the meaning that Grudem attaches to the word “intercede” (*entugchanō*) in Heb 7:25 and Rom 8:34:

The verb that both passages use is significant: To ‘intercede’ (*entugchanō*) for someone means to bring requests and appeals on behalf of that person to a higher authority, such as a governor, king, or emperor (cf. Acts 25:24, which uses the same verb to say that the Jews ‘petitioned’ the Roman ruler Festus). Thus Jesus continually, even today, is our great high priest who brings requests to the Father who is greater in authority.<sup>34</sup>

Grudem’s argument here requires the meaning of bringing a request to a person of higher authority. Of the lexicons by Bauer,<sup>35</sup> Abbott-Smith,<sup>36</sup> Thayer,<sup>37</sup> Moulton and Milligan,<sup>38</sup> Liddell and Scott,<sup>39</sup> and Louw and Nida,<sup>40</sup> none specifies that meaning. Grudem seems to be contending that the usage in Acts 25:24, where the one addressed is a higher authority, determines its meaning elsewhere.<sup>41</sup> Since the work of James Barr,<sup>42</sup> however, that approach must be seriously tempered, as Doug Moo has more recently pointed out.<sup>43</sup> Some other support for Grudem’s assertion is needed.

Even such documentation also must be closely scrutinized. In attempting to deal with the problematic prophetic reference to the coming Messiah as “everlasting Father” in Isa 9:6, Grudem appeals to a note on the verse in the *ESV Study Bible*, the general editor of which is Wayne Grudem.<sup>44</sup>

3. *Selective Utilization of Relevant Passages.* We should also observe that Grudem and Ware have omitted certain texts that

do not fit their theory. For example, in Heb 1:10, God, speaking to the Son, seems to credit the latter with creation, “In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands” (NIV). They do not deal with this passage. Nor do they comment on the apparent equivalence of “the love of Christ” (Rom 8:35), and “the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39), or several similar passages arguing for the unity of divine action.

4. *Indexical Reference.* One further case may yield some broader hermeneutical insight. The statements in which Jesus refers to “my Father” are made *during the time* of his earthly ministry. The eternal functional subordinationists, however, construe these texts as indicating that the relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity was the same prior to the incarnation as it was at the time that Jesus spoke these words. In many cases, that is assumed rather than argued. Grudem claims that the first and second persons of the Trinity were “Father” and “Son” (with the meaning he attributes to those terms) before the incarnation because those terms are used in statements referring to activities of the two persons prior to the incarnation.<sup>45</sup> This, however, fails to take account of “indexical reference.” In this context, that means that statements about an earlier period frequently employ terminology in use at the time the statement is made. For example, it was true in 2016 that “President Obama worked as a community organizer on the south side of Chicago.” That does not assert, however, that he was president of the United States at the time that he was a community organizer, only that he was president at the time the statement was made.<sup>46</sup> This can be seen with respect to biblical place references, for example, “They advanced against the Canaanites living in Hebron (formerly called Kiriath Arba) and defeated Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai. From there they advanced against the people living in Debir (formerly called Kiriath Sepher)” (Judg 1:10–11 NIV). In prophetic references, such as Ps 2:7, the same principle applies, although the sequence is reversed, using the name that readers at the time referred to will understand.

5. *Nature of Language Used.* The language used in describing what is unseen is phenomenal and anthropomorphic language, drawn from present experience to convey meaning of what is not experienced. Was Jesus intending a literal expression of what they could not experience? Did the first and second persons of the Trinity address each other as “Father” and “Son” prior to the incarnation? Perhaps the former is true, but that must be argued.<sup>47</sup> If we follow Grudem’s argument to its logical conclusions, was Jesus, not simply during his time on earth but also in eternity, unaware of the time of his second coming (Matt

24:36, Mark 13:32)? Was he capable of being tempted (Matt 4) prior to the incarnation (cf. James 1:13)?

6. *Extension of Interpretive Principle.* One test of a method is to apply it to other similar cases. One of Grudem’s arguments for the eternal relationship of Father and Son is Jesus’s choice of the term “Father”: “But if intimacy and identical authority were all that Jesus intended to indicate, he could have spoken of ‘my friend in heaven’ or ‘my brother in heaven’ or even ‘my twin in heaven.’ But he did not. He spoke of ‘my Father in heaven.’”<sup>48</sup> There is a silent premise in this argument as well, which I reconstruct, subject to correction, as something like, “If Jesus could have used a different term but did not, then the difference between the term he did use and the one he might have used is emphasized.”

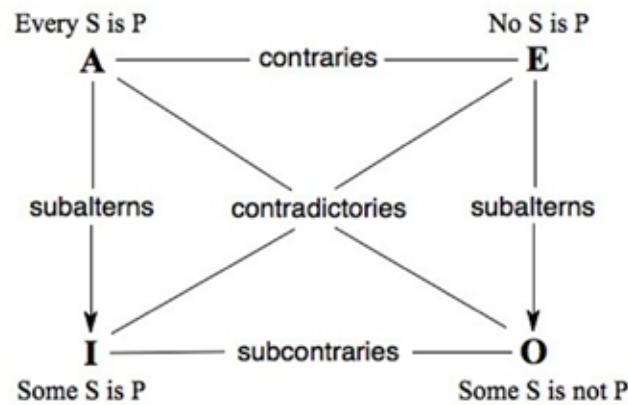
Now suppose we draw a parallel something like this: If Jesus’s statement, “my Father and your Father” (John 20:17) is taken to convey an eternal relationship, what about “my God and your God” in that same verse, and “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” in Matt 27:46? If the first person of the Trinity is eternally the second person’s god, and in the same way that he is the god of the disciples, what does that say of the ontological status of that second person? If equality of essence but subordination of authority was all that Jesus intended to indicate, he could have spoken of “my supervisor” or “my guide” or even “my advisor.” But he did not. He spoke of “my God, my God!” If Jesus’s reference to his Father indicates an eternal superiority/inferiority relationship of distinction, does his reference to his god indicate a similarly eternal relationship?

## F. Theological Issues

The position taken by this theology on the relationship between the Father and the Son has several broader theological implications.<sup>49</sup>

1. There is a tendency toward tritheism. The sharp separation between the three persons and the rejection of the idea that the works of God are the works of all three persons means that there are three separate wills of the three persons, and thus that there are actually three persons. Grudem and Ware have contended that the view they are opposing tends towards modalism, the view that God was one but played three different roles at different times, but that judgment follows from the position from which it is made.<sup>50</sup>

2. There is a tendency toward impassibility. This is the view that God is not affected by anything that happens in his creation, or in an extreme form, that God has no emotions. While the claim that Christian theology displays a corruption of the biblical revelation by Greek philosophy has been greatly exaggerated, in recent





years evangelicals have acknowledged that this has occurred at some points. Ware himself has called for a redefinition of the doctrine of divine immutability because of this.<sup>51</sup> Theologians such as John Feinberg have rejected the traditional conception of impassibility as well.<sup>52</sup> Again, the charge of patripassianism is made from the perspective of impassibility.

3. The significance of the incarnation is diminished. On the Ware-Grudem view, Jesus took on human form and the limitations thereof, but there really was no surrendering of equality of authority. His subordination to the Father had always been true of him.

4. The significance of the exaltation is similarly reduced. Jesus did not reassume equality of authority with the Father. The ascension becomes primarily a change of location, rather than of status.

## Summary and Conclusion

The instances cited above are only examples of numerous arguments for eternal functional subordination of the Son that contain significant logical fallacies, of both the formal and informal varieties. Many of the arguments are enthymemes, resting on unproven and unacknowledged assumptions. In other cases, the arguments seem ad hoc in nature. Until these problems are clarified and resolved, the case for eternal subordination must be considered dubious at best.

## Notes

1. Thomas L. Friedman and Maurice Mandelbaum, *That Used to Be Us: How America Fell Behind in the World it Invented and How it Can Come Back* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 139. By contrast, in a 2011 Gallup poll regarding the most important reason for getting education beyond high school, only 1 percent said, “to learn to think critically.” (Cynthia English, “Most Americans See College as Essential to Getting a Good Job.” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/149045/Americans-College-Essential-Getting-Good-Job.aspx>.) Accessed April 20, 2017.

2. See a series of articles by Patricia Cohen under the general title, “A New Enlightenment:” “The Digital Revolution,” *The New York Times*, November 19, 2010: C1; “Analyzing Literature by Words and Numbers,” *Ibid.*, December 3, 2010: C1; “In 500 Billion Words, New Window on Culture,” *Ibid.*, December 16, 2010: C1. Also, Elizabeth Blackwell, “The Data Renaissance,” *Weinberg Magazine*, Fall/Winter, 2016: 20–25. Tragically, when the cultural turn becomes more pronounced, students studying today on many college campuses may find themselves unprepared for the world in which they live. Crispin Sartwell, “The ‘Postmodern’ Intellectual Roots of Today’s Campus Mobs,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 25–26, 2017: A3.

3. Ware seems to confuse impartiality with neutrality. Bruce A. Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*? A Response to Millard Erickson and Tom McCall,” in *One God in Three Persons*, ed. Bruce A. Ware and John Starke (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 238. We certainly want judges, referees, umpires and other arbiters to be impartial, that is, not to favor one side over the other. We do not, however, want them to be neutral, for that would mean they would never make any rulings, thus negating the value of having such arbiters at all.

4. Wayne Grudem, *Countering the Claims of Evangelical Feminism: Biblical Responses to the Key Questions* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2006), 13–15.

5. I have attempted to bypass this issue by the use of “gradational authority” and “equivalent authority.” Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 17–18.

6. Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 18.

7. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 380–81.

8. The debate, sponsored by the Carl F. H. Henry Center, took place at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, Illinois, on November 6, 2008.

9. Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?” 242–43. In most philosophical discussions, “attributes,” “properties,” “qualities,” and “predicates” are considered synonyms.

10. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 21.

11. Philip R. Gons and Andrew David Naselli, “An Examination of Three Recent Philosophical Arguments against Hierarchy in the Immanent Trinity,” *One God in Three Persons*, 201.

12. Paul C. Maxwell, “Is There an Authority Analogy Between the Trinity and Marriage? Untangling Arguments of Subordination and Ontology in Egalitarian-Complementarian Discourse,” *JETS* 59, no. 3 (September 2016): 564.

13. For elaboration, see the following articles: Francesco Orilia and Chris Swoyer, “Properties,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/properties/>. Teresa Robertson and Philip Atkins, “Essential vs. Accidental Properties,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/essential-accidental/>. Fraser MacBride, “Relations,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relations/>.

14. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 177–80. Ware, *One God in Three Persons*, 42.

15. Ware, “Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?” 237–47.

16. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (Sisters: Multnomah, 2004), 433.

17. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251.

18. In brief, the principle says that no two distinct things have all of the attributes of each other.

19. Max Black, “The Identity of Indiscernibles,” *Mind, A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy* LXI, no. 242 (April 1952): 153–64.

20. Steven French and Michael Redhead, “Quantum Physics and the Identity of Indiscernibles,” *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 39, no. 2 (June 1988): 233–46.

21. Wayne Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments about the Trinity,” in *One God in Three Persons*, 24.

22. Oscar Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 3–4. For an exposition and evaluation of this type of theology and the functional philosophy underlying it, see Millard J. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 243–73.

23. E.g., Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000), 84–86.

24. Grudem, “Doctrinal Deviations,” 24.

25. Benjamin B. Warfield, “Trinity,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), V:3021.

26. Wayne Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene: Wipf and Stock), 235.
27. Bruce A. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority and Submission among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead," *The Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 44–45.
28. Ware, *Father Son and Holy Spirit*, 72.
29. "Grudem, "Biblical Evidence," 260.
30. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles."
31. In these verses, the NIV 1984 is closer to the Greek text than the NIV 2011 is.
32. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence," 242.
33. Grudem, "Doctrinal Deviations," 30.
34. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence," 247. Italics his. In the original, the verb is in Greek characters; it is here transliterated in accordance with *Priscilla Papers* style.
35. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 270.
36. G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953), 157.
37. Carl Ludwig Willibald Grimm, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testament*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., tr., rev. and ed. Joseph Henry Thayer (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1955), 219.
38. James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 219.
39. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), 489.
40. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, ed. Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 408.
41. The issue is not whether the word *can* bear that meaning, but rather whether it *must* mean that here.
42. James Barr, *Semantics of Biblical Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

43. Douglas Moo, *We Still Don't Get It: Evangelicals and Biblical Translation Fifty Years After James Barr* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014).
44. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence," 237–38.
45. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence," 232–35.
46. Since presidents retain that title even after leaving office, that statement will always be true, although the statement "Barack Obama is president of the United States" was true from January 20, 2009 to January 20, 2017 (noon Eastern Standard Time in each case), but no longer is.
47. Many of Grudem's texts purporting to show that the Father had supreme authority over the Son even prior to the incarnation appear to depend upon a radical assertion of Rahner's Rule regarding the identity (qualitatively) of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity, but that can yield some unwanted consequences.
48. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence," 228.
49. For a more complete discussion of these theological issues, see Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*, 195–225. The entire book elaborates on the issues in this article.
50. John Calvin indicates that he had not only been accused of Sabellianism (a version of modalism), but even of Arianism. John Calvin, "To Simon Grynee," *Letters of John Calvin*, ed. Jules Bonnet (Boston: Little, Brown, 1860), I:54. Peter Caroli, who made the charges, was condemned by the Synod of Lausanne.
51. Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *JETS* 29, no. 4 (December 1986): 431–46.
52. John Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 277.



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Some Trinity theories understand the "persons" to be selves, and then try to show that the falsity of monotheism does not follow. (See section 2 below.) But a rival approach is to explain that these three divine "persons" are really ways the one divine self is, that is say, modes of the one god. Because God in the Bible is always portrayed as a great self, at the popular level of trinitarian Christianity one-self thinking has a firm hold. Liturgical statements, song lyrics, and sermons frequently use trinitarian names ("Father", "Son", "Jesus", "God", etc.) as if they were interchangeable, co-referring terms, referring directly or indirectly (via a mode) to one and the same divine self. The heart of the gender debate has become the heart of the Trinity debate: can a person (human or divine) be equal in essence and necessarily subordinate in role to another person?3 Complementarians insist that women are necessarily subordinate to men in their roles (in the contexts of marriage and the church) while being equal to men in essence. Egalitarians argue that such a claim defies simple logic.4 Complementarians turn to the relationship between the Father and the Son, in which they find an analogy that seems to refute the egalitarians'™ objection: the Son is eternally and necessarily u in the doctrine of the Trinity, the property of each member that identifies the Persons of the Godhead in relation to each other. The term indicates the internal dynamics of the three Persons among themselves. *sensus plenior*. a term used in Biblical interpretation for the view that there is meaning to Scripture passages beyond what was originally intended by Biblical writers and that this meaning emerges through the life and experience of readers. *subordinationism*. These positions were rejected by the Council of Constantinople. Subordinationist views appeared in Arianism and writers such as Origen. You might also like Religion 131 Exam 1.