

# “The Father Is Greater Than I”

## Exploring Biblical Subordination

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### **Abstract:**

In the spirit of biblical theology, what follows divides roughly into two halves: the first part presents the biblical evidence for the subordination of the Son to the Father and the latter contains a discussion of the theological implications. After briefly considering the titles “Father” and “Son,” I explore the standard approach to explaining how the Son is ontologically equal to the Father in the face of so many texts that seem to say otherwise: the economic Trinity model. Drawing on the work of Wayne Grudem, I show how the economic Trinity fails to account for subordination texts that apply prior to and after Jesus’ human career. After exploring Grudem’s case for permanent functional subordination, I present Keith Yandell’s case for why necessary role subordination necessitates ontological subordination. Assuming both Grudem and Yandell are correct, I consider the only apparent solution left—ontological subordination. To do so, I offer preliminary analyses of the standard coequality proof texts, demonstrating that they are either misunderstood or ambiguous with respect to ontological equality. I conclude by summarizing the theologies that ontological subordination eliminates and makes available before presenting some of the advantages of adopting this view.

### **Biblical Evidence for the Son’s Subordination to the Father**

Before addressing the theological considerations raised by subordination texts, we will begin with Scripture itself. Instead of classifying subordination texts into artificial categories, we will observe them in their native canonical environment, allowing them to speak to us on their own terms. Only then, once we’ve allowed the biblical authors to define what kind of subordination they have in mind, can we begin to wrestle with the theological implications.

#### **Old Testament**

Let’s begin with the Hebrew Bible. Messianic prophecies can depend on the eye of the beholder and his or her hermeneutical approach. Furthermore, most of them do not bear on our inquiry. Consequently, I’ll limit myself to just a few broadly recognized messianic prophecies that will serve as representative flavor of what the Old Testament (OT) anticipated about the subordinate role of the Messiah to the one who would send him.

In the most alluded-to verse in the New Testament (NT), we find Yahweh saying to David’s Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool” (Ps 110.1). As is typical for messianic prophecies, God devises the plan and sees it through. Yahweh tells the Messiah to sit until his enemies are defeated for him. Once this happens Yahweh “sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter” and commands him “Rule in the midst of your enemies!” (Ps 110.2). The reader has no question who is the planner, initiator, and executor here. Yahweh issues the commands, empowers the Messiah to rule, and makes him “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Ps 110.4). In another messianic Psalm, the Davidic king reports God’s decree, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage...” (Ps 2.7-8). Once again, Yahweh initiates and carries out his plan while the Son obeys him by asking for the nations.

Perhaps no OT prophecies are more pertinent to this topic than the four servant songs of Isaiah. In the first song (Isa 42.1-4), Yahweh chooses, upholds, delights in, and puts his Spirit upon his servant (Isa 42.1). The second one (Isa 49.1-6) has Yahweh calling him “from the womb,” naming him, making his mouth like a sharp sword, hiding him, and ordaining that through his servant “I will be glorified” (Isa 49.1-3). The servant recognizes that Yahweh formed him “from the womb to be his servant” and says, “my God has become my strength” (Isa 49.5). Likewise, in the third song (Isa 50.4-9), the Lord Yahweh initiates and empowers his servant with “the tongue of those who are taught” (Isa 50.4). The servant says, “Yahweh has opened my ear and I was not rebellious” (Isa 50.5). God helps him and vindicates his servant so he will not suffer disgrace or shame (Isa 50.7-8). The roles are clear: God ordains, and his servant fulfills.

Still, it is not until the fourth and most extensive servant song that God’s role as authoritative initiator and the servant’s as willing subordinate find their fullest expression (Isa 52.13-53.12). Marred in his appearance, despised, rejected, bearing our griefs, pierced for our transgressions, oppressed, afflicted, silent like a lamb led to the slaughter, the servant suffers heroically and voluntarily in submission to God. For it was “the will of Yahweh to crush him” and “Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53.10, 6). Throughout these songs the authority structure couldn’t be clearer. We find no hint of equality between lord and servant—in fact the whole point of those titles conveys just the opposite.

Our last OT text to consider is Daniel’s vision of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man (Dan 7.1-28). Due to the royal imagery, this vision is particularly relevant to our topic of inquiry. Daniel sees the Ancient of Days take his seat on a throne of fiery flames with wheels of burning fire and a stream of fire going out before him (Dan 7.9-10). Myriads upon myriads stand as “the court sat in judgment and the books were opened” (Dan 7.10). This scene elicits awe at God’s antiquity, purity, power, and, most of all, authority to judge. Next, God passes judgment, resulting in the destruction of his enemies (Dan 7.11). Then, Daniel encounters a new figure, “one like a son of man” who is presented before the Ancient of Days (Dan 7.13). The text continues:

Daniel 7.14

And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

Although the Son of Man receives a kingdom over all peoples with eternal dominion, these are all conferred realities. The Son of Man does not already possess them, nor does he win them in battle. Rather, he receives them. The Ancient of Days is the clear superior here, who plans to establish justice in the world, chooses the Son of Man to execute his will, endows him with the requisite authority, and commissions him to do the work. Jesus understood this when he said, “And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man” (John 5.27). The Son of Man is a figure with immense and unrivaled authority, but this is not innate or a consequence of his nature, but a derived authority bestowed upon him by the supreme source of all authority.

Although we could examine several other OT texts,<sup>1</sup> what we have already gleaned from these few is sufficient. Repeatedly, Yahweh is the supreme one who authors the plan, assigns the roles, and empowers the players—especially the Messiah—to carry out his will. As we broach the NT, we come with a sense of inequality between Yahweh and his anointed one.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Ps 45.6-7; 2 Sam 7.14; 1 Chron 17.11-14; Is 9.7.

## The Synoptic Gospels

Right from the beginning of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus submits to baptism “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3.15), an act God responds to with the words, “You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1.11). Then God’s Spirit, that had descended in the form of a dove, drives him into the desert, where Satan tempts him (Mark 1.12). It’s interesting to see how the devil focuses his aim. In the first two temptations, he attempts to get Jesus to prove he is the Son of God by performing a miracle or forcing God to send angels to catch him (Matt 4.3, 6). This angle of approach is telling. Why does he seek to place doubt in our Lord’s mind about his identity as God’s Son? He must have perceived a vulnerability here. Then, in the third temptation, he requests that Jesus “fall down and worship,” an act Jesus understands as only properly given to God (Matt 4.9). Like any faithful Judean, he responds, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matt 4.10). These two episodes portray a human being uniquely chosen and equipped to embark on a sacred mission. One who both humbly submits to baptism and remains the loyal Son even in the face of devilish temptation.

As his ministry goes on, Jesus continues in his role as obedient Son by rising early in the mornings for prayer with God (Mark 1.35). In fact, he customarily “withdrew to desolate places and pray” (Luke 5.16; Matt 14.23). Nowhere was this more pronounced than in Gethsemane, where we encounter Jesus in agony on his face before God, crying out, “Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14.36). Jesus does not want to go through the pain, suffering, and death that he knows is in the Father’s plan. Nevertheless, he willingly subordinated his own desires to what God wanted as the quintessentially obedient Son.

Additionally, the Synoptic Gospels repeatedly portray Jesus asking questions that indicate he had limited knowledge. He asks the crowd “Who touched me?” when the woman with the issue of blood becomes well (Mark 5.31). Another time he spits on the eyes of a blind man and, laying his hands on him, asks, “Do you see anything?” (Mark 8.23). To this the man replies, “I see people, but they look like trees, walking” (Mark 8.24). After this, Jesus lays his hands on his eyes again and he sees clearly. At Caesarea-Philippi, he asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” and “Who do you say that I am?” (Mark 8.27, 29). Lastly, in his Olivet Discourse, Jesus says, “Concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13.32). Now, since the Father knew who touched Jesus, what the partially healed blind man saw, what people thought of Jesus, and the timing of his return, we can’t deny an inequality of knowledge between Father and Son.

Throughout the Gospel narratives, people interact with Jesus in a way consistent with his subordination to God. When Jesus inaugurated his ministry in his hometown they asked, “Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us?” (Matt 13.55-56). Perhaps we should not find it surprising that those who did not follow him thought this way. However, Peter, who believed Jesus to be the Messiah, took it upon himself to pull him aside and rebuke him (Mark 8.33). Would Peter have done that to the Father? Over and over people treat Jesus as if he’s subordinate to God. Those present at Jairus’ house laugh at him (Mark 5.40), the Pharisees say, “He is possessed by Beelzebul” (Mark 3.22), people on the street think he’s John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets (Matt 16.14). Even at his triumphal entry, the crowds say, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee” (Matt 21.11).

Even more important than the way others thought about and treated him, the words of Jesus about himself provide us great insight into how he related to the Father. To begin with, his inaugural Nazareth sermon outlined his ministry as doing the bidding of the Lord’s Spirit to preach the gospel, proclaim liberty, heal the

blind, free the oppressed, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4.18-19). Jesus came "not to be served but to serve" (Mark 10.45). He said, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father" (Matt 11.27) and "Whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (Matt 10.40). When at last the Son of Man comes, he "is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father" (Matt 15.27). These kinds of statements show us that Jesus believed the Father who sent him had authority over him. Still, no saying in the Synoptics compares to when Jesus responded to the rich man who hailed him, "Good teacher" with "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone" (Mark 10.18). Although later theologians claimed Jesus was challenging this unbeliever to accept his deity, it's much more likely, as William L. Lane argues, that he was "directing attention away from himself to God, who alone is the source and norm of essential goodness."<sup>2</sup> Robert H. Stein agrees: "Jesus is contrasting God's absolute goodness to his own, which was subject to growth."<sup>3</sup> Reading it this way leaves little doubt for Jesus' self-understanding. He didn't think of himself as God's equal in rank or character.

Another interesting statement occurred when James and John requested that Jesus reserve the highest positions of authority in his kingdom for them. He replied, "To sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father" (Matt 20.23). The reader is not at all surprised to see Jesus turn them down, but for him to say he lacked the authority to grant the request is rather shocking. After all, he's the king. What is more, the timeframe for this is not his earthly ministry, but when he reigns as Israel's Messiah on the last day. Jesus understood that the Father assigned to him a kingdom (Luke 22.29) and would give him "all authority in heaven and earth" (Matt 28.18). But, even then, in his glorified state, he will accept the leadership recommendations that his Father has prepared.

Towards the end of his ministry, a scribe had asked Jesus what the first and great commandment was. Jesus replied with the *Shema*, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one..." (Mark 12.29). When the scribe replied, he recognized Jesus was talking about someone other than himself. He said, "You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him" (Mark 12.32). Why didn't Jesus add himself to the *Shema* here? He was apparently fine with letting the man go on believing that someone other than he was the only God. We find a similar inequality when Jesus said slander against him was forgivable, but blasphemy against "the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matt 12.32). If they are coequal, why does the Son have less honor than the Spirit here?

## The Gospel of John

John contains more texts about the Son's subordination to the Father than any other book of the Bible. We begin by noticing the astonishing fact that more than forty times, Jesus claimed to be the one sent by the Father.<sup>4</sup> Now, it's true that an inferior can send a superior or equals can send each other, but typically, especially in the Ancient Near Eastern culture, the sender is superior to the one sent. For example, when the centurion wanted an audience with Jesus, he did not come in person, but sent a servant. He did not send another centurion of equal status, much less a superior officer (Matt 8.5-9). No, he sent someone with a lower status to carry out his wishes. This is the natural implication of sending language. And Jesus wasn't shy about using this kind of language repeatedly and without qualification. In fact, Jesus explicitly endorsed the stereotype of a sender's superiority when he said, "[A] servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (John 13.16). As plentiful as this sending motif is, we have even stronger and more explicit statements of the Son's subservient role to the Father in this Gospel.

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<sup>2</sup>William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 365.

<sup>3</sup>Robert H. Stein, *Mark*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 470.

<sup>4</sup>John 3.34; 4.34; 5.23, 24, 30, 36, 37, 38; 6.29, 38, 39, 44, 57; 7.16, 18, 28, 29, 33; 8.16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9.4; 10.36; 11.42; 12.44, 45, 49; 13.16, 20; 14.24; 15.21; 16.5; 17.3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20.21.

Jesus himself regularly recognized his Father's superiority throughout the Gospel of John. I counted twenty-four such declarations where Jesus confessed subordination to his God.<sup>5</sup> Jesus constantly deferred to what God wanted him to say.<sup>6</sup> He did not come up with his own ideas to share with others; he said, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (John 7.16). Also, the Father decided what works Jesus would do and then empowered him to do them.<sup>7</sup> Jesus never claimed his deeds were his own, but recognized, "The Father who dwells in me does his works" (John 14.10). He always submitted to God's will.<sup>8</sup> In fact, he said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work" (John 4.34). What a striking statement this is! His very sustenance was doing God's will. What's more, three times over, he explained that he was impotent on his own.<sup>9</sup> He said, "I can do nothing on my own" (John 5.30). Could he have been clearer? He was not the source; he was tapping into God's plan, God's power, and God's wisdom throughout his ministry.

Furthermore, Jesus wasn't the one who decided that he would come and rescue humanity.<sup>10</sup> He said, "I came not of my own accord, but he sent me" (John 8.42). Jesus' redemptive work both in his ministry and on the cross was all God's idea (John 3.16). Because Jesus always did God's will, spoke God's words, and performed God's works, he could say, "Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in him who sent me. And whoever sees me sees him who sent me" (John 12.44-45). This was not a claim to be God, but a claim to be like God. As young children reflect their parents' mannerisms, so Jesus looked like God.

Even more striking is Jesus' bold and unqualified confession, "The Father is greater than I" (John 14.28).<sup>11</sup> How can we claim Jesus was equal with God if he, himself, said they weren't? Jesus' followers understood him to be a human being uniquely chosen, commissioned, empowered, and authorized by the God of Israel. That's how Jesus portrayed himself and that's what they believed as a result.

Even after the resurrection, Jesus retained his submissive posture toward God. When Mary encountered the risen Jesus, he told her, "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'" (John 20.17). Although we might expect this to be the moment when Jesus asserted his equality with the Father, he continued to humbly recognize—even in his immortalized state—that he had a God. Further, his God was their God—the Father.

## Acts

As we turn to the Book of Acts, we note that what the perspective has changed. No longer is Jesus on earth teaching and performing miracles. Now he is in heaven, exalted and glorified. He had already received the authority commensurate with one sitting at God's right hand. Even so, we observe a remarkable consistency with the Gospels in how Acts speaks of the Father as supreme and the Son as subordinate. For example, when Jesus' disciples asked about the destruction of the temple and the coming of the Son of Man, he told them he didn't know when that would happen. Now, in his resurrected state, they asked if it was the time for restoring the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1.6). Whether or not he was privy to this information now, he didn't say, but he made it clear that the timing "the Father has fixed by his own authority" (Acts 1.7).

In Peter's Pentecost sermon, God is the one who empowers, plans, and decisively acts through Christ. Jesus was "a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him"

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<sup>5</sup> John 3.34-35; 4.34; 5.19, 30; 6.38; 7.16-17, 28; 8.28-29, 38, 42; 10.18, 25, 29, 32, 37-38; 12.44-45, 49-50; 14.10, 24, 28, 31; 17.4, 7-8; 20.17.

<sup>6</sup> Jesus spoke what God wanted him to say/teach: John 3.34; 7.16; 8.28, 38; 12.49-50; 14.10, 24; 17.7.

<sup>7</sup> Jesus did the works God wanted him to do: John 10.25, 32, 37; 14.10; 17.4.

<sup>8</sup> Jesus did God's will: John 4.34; 5.30; 6.38; 8.29; 14.31.

<sup>9</sup> Jesus could do nothing on his own: John 5.19, 30; 8.28.

<sup>10</sup> Jesus did not come of his own accord: John 7.28; 8.42.

<sup>11</sup> God is greater than all, including Jesus: John 10.29; 14.28.

(Acts 2.22). His death was “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2.23) and it was God who raised him from the dead (Acts 2.24). Even when he comes to speak of Jesus’ ascension and subsequent outpouring of the Spirit, Peter speaks in the passive voice: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this” (Acts 2.33). The Father exalted the Son and gave him the promise of the Spirit so that he could pour it out on those who believe. Then Peter’s sermon climaxes with, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2.36).

Likewise, Peter’s second sermon after the healing of the lame man recognizes God’s role as the primary actor in foretelling “by the mouth of all the prophets, that his Christ would suffer” (Acts 3.18), in sending “the Christ appointed for you” (Acts 3.20), in “raising up his servant” to the Jewish people (Acts 3.26), in resurrecting him from the dead (Acts 3.15), and in “restoring all the things about which God spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets” (Acts 3.21). Still, these statements pale in comparison to when Peter said, “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified his servant Jesus” (Acts 3.13). Now, calling Jesus “servant” may fit nicely in his earthly ministry, but Peter is talking about Jesus in his current glorified state. Even as elevated and powerful as Jesus is at God’s right hand, Peter can still call him God’s servant. What’s more, in the next chapter, Peter and the apostles prayed for boldness and twice more they called him “your holy servant Jesus” (Acts 4.27, 30).<sup>12</sup>

Paul’s manner of speaking about the Father and the Son is right in line with Peter in his Acts speeches. Consistently, God is the active one who “brought to Israel a Savior, Jesus, as he promised” (Acts 13.23), and the one who “raised him from the dead” (Acts 13.30, 34, 37). To God alone, Paul credits making “the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17.24), whereas Christ is the one God appointed and by whom “he will judge the world” (Acts 17.31).

### **Romans through Philemon**

The epistles of Paul are even more explicit. In fact, his regular mode of describing salvation makes it clear that God is the active one who, “by,” “through,” or “in” Christ, works to save (Rom 3.25-26; 8.3).<sup>13</sup> Christ’s death demonstrates God’s love for us (Rom 5.8). It is God’s will (Gal 1.4; Eph 1.5, 9) that set in motion the plan to work through Christ as the instrument to bring reconciliation: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Cor 5.19). When he expresses gratitude, Paul gives thanks “to God through Jesus Christ” (Rom 7.25; Eph 3.20). When he blesses, he says, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 1.3). When he prays, he petitions “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1.17). When he gives glory, it’s to “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15.6; Eph 3.21). However, Christ is “a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness...in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy” (Rom 15.8-9). Once again, it’s all about God. Of course, Christ is important and indispensable, but everything Christ does Paul credits to God for his glory. Thus, the benediction, “to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen” (Rom 16.27). Nevertheless, Christ is “the image of God” (2 Cor 4.4), the “firstborn of all creation” (Col 1.15), and the “one mediator between God and men” (1 Tim 2.5).

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<sup>12</sup> See also Peter’s third sermon where he says, “The God of our fathers raised Jesus” and “God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior” (Acts 5.30, 31). Also compare to Peter’s summary sketch of Jesus to Cornelius as one God anointed the Holy Spirit and power to heal those oppressed by the devil (Acts 10.38), how God raised him from the dead (Acts 10.40), chose the witnesses to whom Jesus would appear (Acts 10.41), and how their proclamation included that God had appointed Jesus as judge of the living and the dead (Acts 10.42).

<sup>13</sup> Throughout the NT, we find “by Christ” or “by Jesus” or “by the Lord” five times, “through Christ” and “through Jesus” twenty times, and “in Christ” or “in Jesus” an astounding 98 times. Although these prepositions aren’t conclusive in themselves, they fit with the motif of God acting by, through, and in his subordinate.

Three times Paul compares Christ to Adam (Rom 5.12-21; 1 Cor 15.21-22, 45-49). Once he seems to call Christ “an angel of God” (Gal 4.14). Would anyone question if Adam or an “angel” is subordinate to the Father? Also, Paul’s normal mode of talking about the resurrection of Christ is through passive verbs, i.e. “Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father” (Rom 6.4). Even after Christ’s resurrection, “the life he lives he lives to God” (Rom 6.10) and he “lives by the power of God” (2 Cor 13.4). Christ did not return power and authority to himself at the ascension, but it was God who “put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church” (Eph 1.22; cf. Phil 2.9). When the regeneration of the Holy Spirit happens, it is because “he [God our Savior] poured out [the Holy Spirit] on us richly through Jesus Christ” (Titus 3.6). Even in the eschaton, when all people bow to Jesus and confess him as Lord, it’s “to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2.11). When our Lord returns to resurrect the dead, Paul still sees God as the active agent: “through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thess 4.14).

When Paul lists out the common ground for the Ephesians, he mentions one body, one Spirit, one hope, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4.5-6). Considering that the “one Lord” refers to the Son, it is telling that Paul excludes him from the supreme statements he makes about the Father. Even in heaven, “Christ is God’s” (1 Cor 3.23) and “the head of Christ is God” (1 Cor 11.3). Bruce Ware notes, “1 Cor 11.3 offers a truth-claim about the relationship between the Father and Son that reflects an eternal verity.”<sup>14</sup> Paul makes this explicit when he says:

1 Corinthians 15.24, 27-28

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power...For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. 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.

In the end Christ will put everything in subjection to God—including himself. Lastly, 1 Cor 8.6 presents an important distinction by saying all things are “from” and “for” God, while all things are “through” Jesus. Although subtle, Paul’s choice of prepositions shows how he sees the subordinate role of the Son to the Father.

## Hebrews

In the first-century sermon known to us as Hebrews, the Son is “the radiance of the glory of God” (Heb 1.3) whom God made “perfect through suffering” (Heb 2.10). “He learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5.8). Like John, Hebrews echoes the Son’s mission when it says, “I have come to do your will, O God” (Heb 10.7). The portrayal is of an obedient Son who grew tremendously during his human life. Docetism would never survive a thorough reading of this epistle. Far from a dispassionate and disconnected avatar, “Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence” (Heb 5.7). This Jesus is who he is because of his suffering, growth, and tears. He truly can “sympathize with our weaknesses” because he, “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4.15).

Once we get into the theology of Hebrews, it’s clear that as God made the old covenant through Moses, he also made the new covenant through “Jesus, the mediator” (Heb 12.24). He continues to carry out his mediatorial role in his heavenly ministry. Still, “Christ did not exalt himself to be made high priest, but was appointed by him [God]” (Heb 5.5). The Son serves as “a minister in the holy places,” “at the right hand of

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce Ware, “Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles,” in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 22.

the throne of the Majesty in heaven” (Heb 8.2, 1). While in heaven, “he always lives to make intercession for them,” i.e., “those who draw near to God through him” (Heb 7.25). According to Wayne Grudem, the word for intercession, ἐντυγχάνω (*entunchano*), implies subordination. It means, “to bring requests and appeals on behalf of that person to a *higher authority*, such as a governor, king, or emperor.”<sup>15</sup> While there, he is “waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet” (Heb 10.13). Note the passive voice here. The Father is the one who will bring about the subjection of the Son’s enemies (cf. Ps 110.1).

## 1 Peter through Jude

These seven letters contain the fewest texts about subordination. Nevertheless, we do see God as the recipient of “spiritual sacrifices” made “through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2.5). A couple of chapters later, Peter prays that “in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 4.11). Once again, God is the source who bestowed honor and glory on Jesus (2 Pet 1.17). John says it in his customary Johannine way, “[He] sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4.14). Lastly, Jude’s benediction expresses subordination. Instead of equal glory and majesty to the Father and the Son, he writes, “to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority” (Jude 25).

## Revelation

The book begins, “The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants” (Rev 1.1). The order is clear. God is the source and Jesus is the messenger. The Son is “the faithful witness” (Rev 1.5), “the beginning of God’s creation” (Rev 3.14), and the lamb (Rev 19.7; cf. John 1.29, 36). Christ’s work “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (Rev 1.6). By his blood he “ransomed people for God” to be “priests to our God” (Rev 5.9-10). When speaking of ruling the nations, he says, “I myself have received authority from my Father” (Rev 2.27; cf. 3.21). Amidst the exalted portrayals of Christ in Revelation, he still calls the Father “my God” an impressive five times in two verses (Rev 3.2, 12). In the end, when the kingdom finally arrives, our world becomes “the kingdom of our Lord and his Christ” (Rev 11.15; cf. 12.10).

## Summary

Going through the Bible systematically helps us grasp the sheer volume of texts that teach the Son’s subordination. This is not just in the Old Testament or the Gospel of John, but throughout Scripture. As we now turn to begin considering the various theological options available to us, we must not forget that Scripture is primary. Even if that means we end up holding an unpopular belief, we cannot allow ourselves to conform Scripture to our theology. We must adjust our theology to the Bible and not the other way around. The simple truth is that the Bible clearly and repeatedly expresses the subordination of the Son to the Father. The Father planned salvation, commissioned his Son, authorized him as his agent, empowered him with miraculous powers, guided him in his ministry, provided him the words to speak, instructed him to give his life, raised him from the dead, elevated him to his right hand, poured out the spirit through him, appointed him a priest to intercede in his heavenly ministry, and will one day send him back to restore our world. The Father is the supreme authority who directs his subordinate Son to do the work of redemption. From the Son we see a loyal and loving heart, willing to obey his Father even when it costs everything. He provides the quintessential model for what humanity can be when totally dependent on God.

## Implications of the Titles “Father” and “Son”

Before delving into the deeper theological waters of the economic Trinity, it is important for us to explore the two terms by which we know God and his anointed one. One is Father and one is Son. In the culture of the time, such a designation implied an inequality of authority, with any father typically understood to be superior

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<sup>15</sup> Wayne Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father,” in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), 247, emphasis in original.



to his son. Grudem writes, “In the biblical world, there were no commendable examples of a son not being subject to his father or not deferring to the leadership role that still belonged to the father, even when the son had grown to adulthood.”<sup>16</sup> Jesus could easily have called God his friend, his neighbor, his fellow worker, or his twin brother—ideas that would imply equality and that were readily available in the culture. Now, it is certainly true that in typical biological scenarios, a son is ontologically like or even of the same substance as his father. Was Jesus claiming to be on God’s ontological plane of existence by calling him Father? Or was he saying that the Father begot him—the Father is his source of being? Or was he merely saying that the Father was his superior? We will have to keep these options in mind as we proceed.

Sadly, it is beyond the scope of this little essay to take on the topic of begetting or generation, much less the full-blown doctrine of eternal generation. Not only is the doctrine complex, but it’s also, as Ware notes, “highly speculative and not grounded in biblical teaching.”<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Thomas McCall and Keith Yandell express “worries that the venerable doctrine is grounded upon a misinterpretation of Scripture, that it is hopelessly mired in obscurity, and that it perhaps even entails ontological subordinationism.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, William Lane Craig rejects any doctrine of eternal generation because it “enjoys no clear scriptural support and threatens to introduce an objectionable ontological subordinationism into the doctrine of the Trinity.”<sup>19</sup> I’m inclined to agree with Ware, McCall, Yandell, and Craig about the classic doctrine of eternal generation. However, I’m also aware that theologians have developed numerous theories to deal with these criticisms and we simply don’t have the space here to do business with them. So, leaving eternal generation out of our discussion, we press on to consider the standard move to affirm both the Son’s subordination and equality with the Father.

## The Economic Trinity: A Silver Bullet?

Owing to a smattering of texts that imply equality<sup>20</sup> between Jesus and God, most trinitarians reject subordinationism—the notion that the Son just is subordinate to the Father. But this leaves us with a quandary: on the one hand the Son is said to be equal to the Father and, on the other, we have scores of subordination texts, clearly expressing inequality. The standard solution to relieve this tension is to claim that the many statements about the Father’s superiority and the Son’s obedience relate to the temporary situation of Jesus’ career on earth. Prior to his coming, they say, the Son was coequal with the Father and the Spirit. After he returned to heaven, he was once again coequal. It was only those thirty or so years of his sojourn among us that necessitated an apparent inequality.

Theologians call this the economic Trinity because it relates to how God manages roles within his household.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Father, Son, and Spirit agreed that the Son would become incarnate, carry out his ministry, and save humanity before returning to his celestial glory. Alister McGrath offers the following description:

The “essential” or “immanent” Trinity can be regarded as an attempt to formulate the Godhead outside the limiting conditions of time and space; the “economic Trinity” is the manner in which the

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<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, 231.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 162.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas McCall and Keith E. Yandell, “On Trinitarian Subordinationism,” *Philosophia Christi* vol. 11, no. 2 (2009): 350.

<sup>19</sup> William Lane Craig, “Is God the Son Begotten in His Divine Nature?” *TheoLogica* vol 3, no. 1 (2019):22.

<sup>20</sup> See below, “Texts Used to Teach Coequality of the Father and Son,” for a list of such texts as well as suggestions on how to interpret them.

<sup>21</sup> Economy derives from two Greek words: *οἶκος* (*oikos*) “house” and *νέμω* (*nemo*) “to manage.”

Trinity is made known within the “economy of salvation,” that is to say, in the historical process itself.<sup>22</sup>

Gilbert Bilezikian explains it this way:

Because there was no order of subordination within the Trinity prior to the second Person’s incarnation, there will remain no such thing after its completion. If we must talk of subordination it is only a functional or economic subordination that pertains exclusively to Christ’s role in relation to human history.<sup>23</sup>

Those who affirm the *kenosis* theory would even go so far as to claim that the Son actually emptied himself of his divine abilities while sojourning among us. However, most theologians would go no further than saying the Son veiled his divinity and voluntarily refused to exercise his divine prerogatives.

Regardless of which side one takes on *kenosis*, incarnation theory makes it possible to affirm the Son’s temporary subordination to the Father for the purpose of salvation. For example, when Jesus said, “The Father is greater than I,” he was referring to his functional role by virtue of his incarnation. So, even though the Father was greater at the time, this situation was merely a temporary exigency. Furthermore, Jesus was not speaking of his being or ontology, but of his function as the incarnate Son. Although the Father is functionally greater, they both share the same nature so they remain ontologically equivalent. Depending on our perspective, the Son is both equal with the Father and not equal with him at the same time, but in different senses.

But is the economic Trinity solution robust enough to counter all the subordination texts we’ve reviewed? If this incarnational solution to the riddle is correct, we should find texts expressing the Son’s inferior status only during his earthly life. Yet, as we’ve already seen, this is far from the case. Here are a number of verses that fall outside that period.

*The Son Was Subordinate to the Father, Who Unilaterally Predestined Redemption, Including Christ’s Role*

Romans 8.29

those whom he [the Father] foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son

Ephesians 1.4–5

he [the Father] chose us in him before the foundation of the world...he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ

Ephesians 1.9–11

according to his [the Father’s] purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time...having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will

Ephesians 3.9, 11

the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things...according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus

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<sup>22</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 244.

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 190-1.

2 Timothy 1.9

who saved us and called us to a holy calling...because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began

1 Peter 1.20

He [the Son] was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you

The Father foreknew that he would have a people, that they would be conformed to the image of his Son, and that they would become his adopted children. He worked everything out in Christ in accordance with his purpose and the counsel of his (singular) will. This eternal plan was kept hidden for ages until it was realized through Christ. Over and over, we find the Father as the planner and initiator who works through his Son to execute his eternal will for humanity. This aligns quite nicely with the many times that Jesus said, especially in the Gospel of John, that he did not come on his own initiative. More than forty times, he claimed the Father sent him and that he was merely doing his Father's will. In light of these Scriptures about predestination, we cannot limit the subordination of the Son to his earthly ministry since even before he came, the Father had already decided to accomplish redemption through his Son. We find no evidence of a pre-creation council between members of the Trinity.

*The Son Continues to Be Subordinate to the Father in His Priestly Role at God's Right Hand*

Hebrews 7.25

he is able to save...those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them

Romans 8.34

Christ Jesus...is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us

1 Timothy 2.5

For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus

To be a priest is to mediate between the people and God. Biblically speaking, priests always have less authority and status than the God they serve. Furthermore, as we've already seen, the word "intercede" implies the superiority of the one receiving intercession over the intercessor. Since Jesus is presently in the role of high priest, he necessarily remains subordinate to the Father in his heavenly ministry. Likewise, the roughly two dozen times that Scripture says Jesus is at the right hand of God demonstrate his subordinate heavenly rank. "To sit at the LORD's right hand," writes Grudem, "is not a position of equal authority...But it is a position of authority *second only* to the LORD...not in the place of ultimate authority, for he is still at the Father's right hand and still subject to the authority of the Father."<sup>24</sup> To be sure, Jesus' current heavenly authority is "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion," but it remains secondary to the Father who elevated him to that status (Eph 1.21).

*The Son Continues to Depend on the Father and Submit to His Authority*

Romans 6.10

For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God

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<sup>24</sup> Grudem, "Biblical," 248, 250, emphasis in original.

2 Corinthians 13.4

For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God...

1 Corinthians 3.23

and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's

1 Corinthians 11.3

...the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband, and the head of Christ is God

Revelation 1.1

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants

As Jesus repeatedly claimed, he depended on the Father for everything in his earthly ministry. But did this change after his ascension? Is Christ now *a se* or is he still contingent? These texts indicate not only that the Son lives for the Father, but that the Father's power continues to enable him to live. Murray Harris writes, "Christ's risen life is sustained 'because of God's power.'"<sup>25</sup> Additionally, God continues in his headship role over Christ. Lastly, when the Son brings revelation to John on Patmos, it's clear that the Father originated the message and that Jesus served as courier.

*The Son Will Be Subordinate to the Father in Bringing the Future Kingdom*

Psalms 2.8

Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession

Psalms 110.1–2

The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." The LORD sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your enemies!

Matthew 20.23

To sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father

Hebrews 10.12–13

...he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet

Revelation 2.26–27

...to him I will give authority over the nations...even as I myself have received authority from my Father

The Son's right to rule is derivative. He receives it from the Father and will bring it fully to bear when he returns to consummate his kingdom. As we can see from these messianic prophecies, this was all established prior to Christ's earthly ministry. What's more, they will be fulfilled after his time on earth. If the Son has returned to his coequal status in every way, why do these prophecies sound like he will play a subordinate role in conquering the nations? When that crucial moment comes, which Jesus said, "the Father has fixed by his

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<sup>25</sup>Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 915.

own authority” (Acts 1.7), then God will make his Son’s enemies a footstool and set his king on Zion (Ps 2.6).

*The Son Will Remain Subordinate to the Father in Eternity*

Philippians 2.10–11

...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father

1 Corinthians 15.24–28

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power...For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. 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.

When finally, God brings about the end, every knee will bow to Christ and confess him as Lord. At first glance, such a grandiose sign of allegiance and subservience will serve to elevate the Son, putting him on par with the worship the Father receives. However, even this devotion and submission to the Son indirectly brings glory to the Father. This makes sense if the Father remains superior for all eternity, both elevating his Son and enjoying glory as people honor Jesus. Our second text is more explicit. For it says plainly that the Son “will also be subjected to him” (1 Cor 15.28). This clearly refers to the eternal state, not some temporary stop along the way in the history of redemption. Thus, the Son will be permanently and eternally subordinate to the Father.

In summary, the Bible contains dozens upon dozens of texts that clearly and repeatedly say the Son is subordinate to the Father. The economic Trinity theory says that only in the Trinity’s work of redemption do we find functional subordination. Now, some may want to extend the economic Trinity to include redemption and creation, but not only would this be an *ad hoc* attempt to rescue a theory without biblical warrant, but it also would fail to solve the problem. The Father’s eternal plans occurred prior to creation, the Son’s heavenly ministry began after his earthly work was done, and the Son’s ultimate subjection to the Father will happen after he returns and continue into eternity. Thus, the economic Trinity idea is not sufficient to adequately answer the many subordination texts we find in Scripture. Even so, that doesn’t mean ontological equality is off the table. But before discussing the other options, we need to first distinguish between the different types of subordination.

## Four Types of Subordination

To clarify our ensuing exploration of subordination, I present Mark Edwards’ taxonomy, which I have altered slightly for our purposes here.<sup>26</sup>

1. economic: the Son played a temporary subservient role in redemption
2. axiological: the Father has a permanent higher rank than the Son
3. etiological: the Father is the cause of the Son’s existence
4. ontological: the Son’s substance, nature, or essence is inferior to the Father’s

Nearly all trinitarians are comfortable with the Son’s economic subordination as I explained above. It’s clear that the Father sent the Son and that the Son obeyed the Father throughout his mission on earth. Some, like

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Edwards, “Is Subordinationism a Heresy?” *TheoLogica* (2020): 69-70.

Grudem and Ware, push for level two subordination—that the Father has always had and will always have a superior rank to the Son (at least in the role each plays throughout eternity). Grudem himself has argued that the “temporary submission view is incorrect” and that “God the Father has eternally had a role of leadership, initiation, and primary authority among the members of the Trinity, and that the Son has eternally been subject to the Father’s authority.”<sup>27</sup>

Others, like Jacob Arminius, would also affirm level three subordination on account of their theory of eternal generation.<sup>28</sup> Is the Son contingent in any sense or is he completely *a se*<sup>29</sup> like the Father? Though most would balk at etiological subordination, a few can see the Son as eternally dependent on the Father for his existence and yet retain ontological equality.

However, when we come to level four subordination, suddenly the list of trinitarian defenders shrinks to zero. Of course, plenty have made the leap from trinitarian to non-trinitarian precisely because of incredulity about the ontological equality of the Son with the Father. Nonetheless, such a move is off the table for the great majority of trinitarian thinkers.

Owing to these complexities, a startling number take intellectual refuge under the umbrella of mystery—a move that appears humble *prima facie*. However, upon closer inspection, punting to mystery is arrogant, since those who hold it not only claim they themselves cannot possibly understand their own theological commitments, but that, in fact, no one can.<sup>30</sup> Now, to be sure, I would not presume to know the innerworkings of God apart from what he has revealed about himself. The question is not whether we can hold God’s transcendent nature in our little minds, but whether the Father has revealed himself as both superior to the Son and ontologically equal. And, if so, which Trinity theory works best? In our next section we’ll see how this dispute has played out between trinitarians who are willing to clearly articulate their views and put them to the test.

## Eternal Functional Subordination Implies Ontological Subordination

In 2008, Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware (eternal subordinationists) debated Keith Yandell and Thomas McCall (temporary subordinationists).<sup>31</sup> Both before and after the debate the participants published several important articles arguing their respective positions. These articles and those by Kevin Giles, Philip Cary, Craig Keener, and several others came together in the book *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?* (edited by Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House). Those who followed this internal debate within evangelicalism know that the real focus was not intra-trinitarian roles, but gender roles within Christian marriages.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Grudem, “Biblical,” 224.

<sup>28</sup> “For Arminius, being autotheos necessarily involves possessing divine essence from no one else, which may be said only of the Father...Arminius considered the communication of the divine essence to the Son in his generation to preclude being *a se* even strictly with respect to his essence.” Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism & the Aseity of the Son* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 119.

<sup>29</sup> The term *a se* is Latin, meaning “from himself.” God does not depend on anyone or anything for his existence. He has always existed without a cause of his existence and requires no external help to continue existing. We refer to this property as divine aseity.

<sup>30</sup> For a trenchant examination and rebuttal to such appeals to mystery, see chapter 8 of Dale Tuggy, *What Is the Trinity* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Trinity Debate: Ware-Grudem vs. McCall-Yandell: “Do relations of authority and submission exist eternally among the persons of the Godhead?” Carl F. H. Henry Center for Theological Understanding, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Deerfield, IL, October 9, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ySFrG3mOp5o> and <https://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2008/10/trinity-debate-ware-grudem-vs-mccall-yandell/>.

<sup>32</sup> Those on the side of eternal subordination hold that as Father and Son are of the same nature with the Father having headship and the Son submitting, so should the husband have the headship and his wife submit—a view called complementarian. Others on the side of temporary subordination reject the analogy, affirming a husband’s and wife’s equal roles within marriage—a view called egalitarian.

Notwithstanding this application of one's Trinity theory, in what follows I will limit my attention solely on theology proper.

Yandell and McCall argued in their debate and in their subsequent articles that affirming subordination beyond level one inevitably leads to level four (ontological subordination). As soon as we broach level two, they say, the slippery slope takes us right down to four. On the contrary, affirming just level one (economic subordination) does not require a permanent state, so it does not lead to ontological subordination. Grudem and Ware, however, believe one can affirm level two subordination while also holding to ontological equality between Father and Son. Grudem's illustration is helpful:

[I]n the organizational structure of Phoenix Seminary where I teach, I am subordinate to the authority of the seminary board, the president, and the academic dean. But I am no less a human being than they are, and I am no less valuable in God's sight.<sup>33</sup>

I can see how we could plot function and ontology on two separate axes, rather than recognizing one as determining the other when it comes to contingent beings. However, when we get to the category of God, the supreme source of all substance and authority, this analogy breaks down. In the seminary's hierarchy, we are not dealing with eternal realities. The dean and the professor are temporarily in a functional hierarchy. However, if the dean and the professor were eternal beings who always existed in such a hierarchy, wouldn't we ask why? Eternal relationships don't happen because one day someone decided to pursue business administration, and another went for a Th.D. No, eternal relations cry out for an explanation. And that explanation will lead us to questions of nature—ontology. A second problem with this analogy is that God's eternal supremacy means that he is *a se*. He depends on no other to assign him a role. Unlike temporary relative authority between seminary faculty, for God, the roles just are.

On this point, Yandell raised an important question: is the Son's permanent subordination to the Father necessary or arbitrary? If it is not necessary, then God reduces to a contingent being, losing his property of aseity. All participants in the debate consider such an outcome to be disastrous and perhaps even blasphemous. The other possibility is that the Son is necessarily subordinate to the Father. However, if this is true, and it's not due to the economic actions of Father and Son, then on what basis do we find such a hierarchy? In other words, apart from function, what is left? Ontology. Norman Geisler put it this way, "[F]unctional subordination in the Godhead...is not just temporal or economical; it is essential and eternal."<sup>34</sup>

Here is a little proof that will help explain why necessary subordination in role leads to ontological subordination.<sup>35</sup>

1. The Son has the property of subordination to the Father in all possible worlds
2. If the Son has this property in every possible world, then this is a necessary property
3. If the Son has this property necessarily, then the Son has it essentially
4. The Son has this property necessarily and essentially (from 1, 2, 3)
5. The Father does not have this property in all possible worlds
6. The Father does not have this property necessarily or essentially (from 5, 2, 3)
7. If the Son has an essential property that the Father does not have, they cannot have the same essence
8. The Son has this property essentially while the Father does not (from 4, 6)
9. Therefore, the Father and the Son are not of the same essence (*homoousios*) (from 7, 8)

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<sup>33</sup> Grudem, "Biblical," 225.

<sup>34</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, vol 2 (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 2003), 291.

<sup>35</sup> I've adapted this from McCall and Yandell's article, "On Trinitarian Subordinationism," *Philosophia Christi*, vol. 11, no. 2 (2009), 355.

Yandell and McCall drive home their point with the following conclusion:

Thus there is no way around the conclusion: NRS [Necessary Role Subordination] entails *ontological subordinationism*—if the Son has an A-quality nature, the Father has an A+-quality nature. But of course ontological subordinationism is not an account of the doctrine of the Trinity. It is nothing other than a rejection of that doctrine.<sup>36</sup>

Watching the debate between Gruden-Ware and Yandell-McCall, I found myself agreeing with both sides. Grudem's biblical case was inescapable, which is probably why the other side never bothered to touch it. However, Yandell's logical case was just as ironclad, resulting in the awkward position of subordination within the Trinity leading to subordinationism over against the Trinity. But what if both sides were right? What if in a rare combination of Scripture and logic, the truth of the pre-Nicene theology just began to peep through?

We are left with very few options:

1. We keep ontological equality and affirm Scripture's clear teaching on permanent subordination over against logic's clear conclusion that permanent subordination entails ontological subordination
2. We keep ontological equality and affirm logic's clear conclusion that permanent subordination entails ontological subordination over against Scripture's clear teaching on permanent subordination
3. We let go of ontological equality and affirm both Scripture's clear teaching on permanent subordination and logic's clear conclusion that permanent subordination entails ontological subordination

The Bible plainly and repeatedly teaches the permanent superior authority of the Father over his Son. This necessarily results in an ontological inequality between the Father and Son. The solution seems obvious. Let's rid ourselves of the unbiblical ὁμοουσιος (*homoousios*) baggage that has dogged systematic theologians for centuries and affirm the clear implication of reason: the Father is greater than the Son not *qua* man but *in toto*. Once we do so, we see that God did not condemn us to choose between reason and revelation. In fact, the two work together as interdependent sources of truth. As soon as I raise the possibility of thoroughgoing subordinationism, I can imagine the retort: "What about 'I and my Father are one' or Philippians 2.6 or John 1.1?" Indeed, many Christians have taken these texts and several others like them to teach that the Son is ontologically equal to the Father. But is that really what they say? Did second-temple, first-century Jews write in terms of ontology? To this we will turn our attention in the next section.

## Texts Used to Teach Coequality of the Father and Son

Sadly, in an article of this length, I cannot possibly offer a thorough exegesis for every text that apologists claim affirms trinitarian coequality. But I would be remiss if I did not at least offer a few remarks on some of the most salient before concluding. At the outset I admit that this selection is somewhat *ad hoc*. Nevertheless, I have listed out several key texts and groups of texts that commonly serve as the corner stones upon which to build the doctrine of ontological equality of the persons of the Trinity.

1. John 10.30  
I and my Father are one.

This is probably the most common text to point to when thinking about ontological equality. However, the idea that the Father and Son are one in essence is completely foreign to the context of this statement. Jesus

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*



has been talking about his role as the good shepherd—the one who protects the sheep so that “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (John 10.28). Then Jesus talks about how his Father cares for the sheep such that “no one is able to snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10.29). Then he says, “My Father and I are one.” How are they one? They are one in caring for and protecting the sheep. Ontology is just not in view here, although subordination is. For Jesus had said, “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all” (John 10.29). Thus, the Father is the source and giver and Jesus is the receiver who willingly takes care of his Father’s sheep. They are functionally one with respect to protecting the sheep.<sup>37</sup> Surely, Jesus did not have ontological unity in mind.

## 2. Philippians 2.6

Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped

Rivers of ink have been spilled to exegete Philippians 2.6-10, the *Carmen Christi*, not least because of debate over two important words: ἄρπαγμός (*harpagmos*) and μορφή (*morphe*). English translations render *harpagmos* either “a thing to be grasped” (ESV) or “something to be used to his own advantage” (NIV). Did Jesus already have equality with God and refuse to take advantage, or did he refuse to reach for equality with God at all? Back in 1971, Roy W. Hoover made a case that *harpagmos* meant “something to take advantage of” or “something to use for his own advantage,” implying that Jesus already had equality with God.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, subsequent research in 2016 by Michael Wade Martin found a slew of counterexamples that undermined Hoover’s conclusion. Martin writes that the language of Philippians 2.6 “does not speak positively or negatively to the matter of possession—hence the whole debate over whether Christ possessed ‘equality with God’ cannot be settled by appeal to the phrase.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, the issue comes down to theological presupposition.

Like *harpagmos*, the word *morphe* has also been a battleground for interpretation. Although exegetes sometimes claim that “being equal with God” stands in for “the form of God” anaphorically, Denny Burk has demonstrated the two phrases are grammatically independent. He writes, “[I]t is grammatically possible to regard ‘form of God’ and ‘equality with God’ not as synonymous phrases, but as phrases with distinct meaning.”<sup>40</sup> So we should not use “being equal with God” to define *morphe*. Granting this, a bewildering list of possibilities remain, including “οὐσία [being], δόξα [glory], *kabod* [glory<sup>41</sup>], condition/status, form of appearance, bodily appearance, *Daseinsweise* [mode of existence<sup>42</sup>],...the Adamic εἰκών [image],”<sup>43</sup> and “one’s inherent character or quality.”<sup>44</sup> Since the next verse, Phil 2.7, presents a parallel expression *morphēn doulou* (form of a slave), we should judge candidates by how well they fit both contexts. Since a slave has no specific outward appearance (or ontology) and God himself is invisible (Col 1.15; 1 Tim 1.17), *morphe* here cannot

<sup>37</sup> Christ also said to the Father that his disciples could “be one just as we are one” (John 17.11, 22).

<sup>38</sup> Roy W. Hoover, “The *Harpagmos* Enigma: A Philological Solution” *The Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 1 (1971): 118. N. T. Wright’s 1986 article popularized the equality argument when he said, “the views of all the other scholars...in the current debate are undercut at a stroke” by Hoover’s philological analysis. N. T. Wright, “ἄρπαγμός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5–11,” *JTS* 37 (1986): 339.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Wade Martin, “ἄρπαγμός Revisited: A Philological Reexamination of the New Testament’s ‘Most Difficult Word.’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 1 (2016): 175, 194.

<sup>40</sup> Denny Burk, “On the Articular Infinitive in Philippians 2:6: A Grammatical Note with Christological Implications,” *Tyndale Bulletin*, 55.2 (2004), 273-274.

<sup>41</sup> כְּבוֹד (*kabod*) can mean heaviness, burden, riches, reputation, importance, glory, splendor, distinction, honor, and testimonial (HALOT 2:457).

<sup>42</sup> Ernst Käsemann glosses *Daseinsweise* “the sphere in which one stands and which determines one like a field of force.” Ernst Käsemann, “A Critical Analysis of Philippians 2:5-11,” *Journal for Theology and the Church*, vol. 5 (1968), 61.

<sup>43</sup> Michael Wade Martin and Bryan A. Nash “Philippians 2:6-11 as Subversive ‘Hymnos’: A Study in the Light of Ancient Rhetorical Theory,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 66, no. 1 (April 2015), 114-115.

<sup>44</sup> I-Jin Loh and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, UBS Translator’s Handbooks, Accordance electronic ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1977), paragraph 44345.

refer to the typical Greek meaning, “form, outward appearance, shape”<sup>45</sup> (*pace* Markus Bockmuehl).<sup>46</sup> Thus, we are left to procure a secondary meaning that fits with both God and a slave. I contend that since God (or a god) and a slave are at the extreme ends of the status hierarchy in the Greco-Roman world, something like “status” or “rank” fits best.<sup>47</sup> But, even if I’m mistaken, it’s important to note what Phil 2.6 doesn’t say. Gerald Hawthorne and Ralph Martin write:

Apparently the author of the hymn did not wish to say outright that Christ was *θεός*, “God,” as older scholars would lead one to believe (not even Harris, *Jesus as God*, argues thus). The verb translated “was” (*ὑπάρχων*) is a widely used substitute in Hellenistic Greek for *εἶναι*, “to be” (BDF §414), and it could easily have been followed here by a predicate noun such as *θεός*, “God” (cf. Gal 1:14; 2:14). But it is not. “Neither did the author mean to say by it that Christ was “the form of God,” as Paul said of the husband that he was *εἰκὼν καὶ δόξα θεοῦ ὑπάρχων*, “the image and glory of God” (1 Cor 11:7). For the author did not write *μορφή θεοῦ*, “form of God,” but *ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ*, “in the form of God,” as if the form of God were a sphere in which Christ existed.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, Philippians 2.6, though a tempting text for both sides to seize upon, cannot itself determine the question of subordination. It does not provide a sure footing upon which to build a case for coequality or subordination.<sup>49</sup>

### 3. John 5.18

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God

This parenthetical narrative explanation can be taken in two ways. Was this what John, the author, thought Jesus was doing? Did John believe Jesus was “breaking the Sabbath?” Did John believe Jesus was “making himself equal with God?” No, this was the view of Jesus’ antagonists that John reports here. They wanted to kill him because (1) they thought he was breaking the Sabbath and (2) they considered him calling God his own Father to be making himself equal with God. Setting the question of the Sabbath to the side, we only need to read the next verse to find out what Jesus meant by calling God his own Father. He said, “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” (John 5.19). He couldn’t be clearer here. He is not making himself anything. He is obediently following his Father’s lead as a subordinate Son. R. V. G. Tasker explains, “[T]his expression was understood by his listeners in the way the Rabbis usually understood it. A man who acted independently of God, or who rebelled against God’s judgments, was said to be placing himself on an equality with God.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus did not do this and we should not think John believed that either. Thus, to interpret John 5.18 as a proof-text for the Son’s equality with the Father is to side with Jesus’ unbelieving critics over against Jesus’ own explanation in John 5.19.

### 4. John 1.1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God

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<sup>45</sup>BDAG, s.v. “μορφή,” 659.

<sup>46</sup> Bockmuehl argued that *morphe* pertained to “the beauty of his eternal heavenly appearance.” Markus Bockmuehl, “The Form of God’ (Phil 2:6) Variations on a Theme of Jewish Mysticism,” *The Journal of Theological Studies*, vol. 48, no. 1 (April 1997), 21.

<sup>47</sup> Ralph Martin: “Christ’s ‘original’ position vis-à-vis God. He was the ‘first man,’ holding a unique place within the divine life and one with God. This sense of ‘condition’ would fit the meaning required in verse 7b. He who was in the beginning...at God’s side...chose to identify himself with men and to accept the human condition, ‘in the form of a servant.’” Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, vol. 43 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 113.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 110.

<sup>49</sup> Even if Phil 2.6 taught the equality of the Son with the Father, that equality could just as well be functional as ontological.

<sup>50</sup> R. V. G. Tasker, *John, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 87.

Although many of us are used to reading “Son” for “Word” right from the beginning, this is not what the prologue says. In fact, the “Word” or “word” does not become flesh until verse 14. This is when we see “his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (John 1.14). Thus, the exegete has at least five possibilities: (1) the word is a circumlocution for God in action, like his wisdom or spirit,<sup>51</sup> (2) the Word personifies God’s attribute of speaking,<sup>52</sup> (3) the Word refers to a preexistent though subordinate being,<sup>53</sup> (4) the Word refers to someone who is ontologically God though distinct in person, and (5) the Word just is God the Father. John 1.1c reads, “καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος” (*kai theos en ho logos*), “And the word was God.” By neglecting to include the definite article before *theos*, John allows for a range of interpretive possibilities. George Beasley-Murray points out: “καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος; θεός without the article signifies less than ὁ θεός.”<sup>54</sup> Thus, John 1.1c could just as well provide proof of subordination as equality. For example, Origen of Alexandria, himself a native Greek speaker born in the late second century, said, “God who is over all is ‘the God’ and not simply ‘God’...everything besides the very God, which is made God by participation in his divinity, would more properly not be said to be ‘the God,’ but ‘God.’”<sup>55</sup> For Origen, writes Joseph Trigg, this “grammatical construction...confirmed his evaluation of the Son’s lesser divinity.”<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the argument that the Word/word was in the beginning could mean that he/it was eternal or simply that he/it existed a finite period prior to creation like the sons of God in Job 38.7. Thus, with so many interpretive options available, we cannot claim John 1.1 indisputably teaches ontological equality. Once again, this argument will need to rest on a surer foundation.

#### 5. Creation texts applied to Jesus: John 1.3; Colossians 1.16; Hebrews 1.2, 10-12

Some apologists have made their case for coequality of the Son with the Father based on the former’s participation in creation. Two kinds of beings occupy our universe, they say. A huge divide separates creator and creation. If one is on the creator side, then that one must be God. Commenting on one such text, R. C. H. Lenski writes, “Already this shows that the Son is true God, unabridged and not subordinate to the Father.”<sup>57</sup> Notwithstanding those who argue these texts do not teach that the Son was involved in the Genesis creation,<sup>58</sup> even if the Son was the instrument through whom the Father created our world, it still

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<sup>51</sup>Craig Keener points out that “John alludes to the Old Testament and Jewish picture of God creating through his preexistent wisdom or word. According to standard Jewish doctrine in his day, this wisdom existed before the rest of creation but was itself created.” Craig Keener, *John*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: New Testament, vol. 2A, ed. Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 8. John Lightfoot provides some examples from Jewish literature: “*The Word of the Lord*, doth very frequently occur amongst the Targumists, which may something enlighten the matter now before us. ‘And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet the Word of the Lord.’ ‘And the Word of the Lord accepted the face of Job.’...Genesis 26:3, instead of ‘I will be with thee,’ the Targum hath it ‘And my Word shall be thine help.’ So Genesis 39:2, ‘And the Lord was with Joseph’: Targ. ‘And the Word of the Lord was Joseph’s helper.’ And so, all along, that kind of phrase is most familiar amongst them.” John B. Lightfoot, *A Commentary on the Gospels from the Talmud and Hebraica*, Accordance electronic ed. (Altamonte Springs: OakTree Software, 2004), paragraph 3414. See also James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> For a parallel see Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24 where God’s wisdom speaks in the first person. Andreas Köstenberger provides helpful background: “Both psalmists and prophets portray God’s word in close-to-personified terms (Ps. 33:6; 107:20; 147:15, 18; Isa. 55:10–11).” Andreas Köstenberger, “John,” in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 421.

<sup>53</sup> Although often dismissed out of hand, one can render John 1.1c, “and the Word was a god” as an early Coptic manuscript has it. See Patrick Navas, *Divine Truth or Human Tradition* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2011), 330. Additionally, the NET points out, “Colwell’s Rule is often invoked to support the translation of θεός (*theos*) as definite (“God”) rather than indefinite (“a god”) here. However, Colwell’s Rule merely *permits*, but does not demand, that a predicate nominative ahead of an equative verb be translated as definite rather than indefinite.” W. Hall Harris, eds. *The NET Bible Notes*, 2nd ed., Accordance electronic ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2019), paragraph 73807.

<sup>54</sup>George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, vol. 36 of Word Biblical Commentary. 2d (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 10.

<sup>55</sup> Origen of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 2.15, 17, trans. Ronald E. Heine in *The Fathers of the Church* series, vol. 80, ed. Thomas P. Halton (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 98-99.

<sup>56</sup> Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 99.

<sup>57</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 340.

<sup>58</sup> See Jeff Deuble, *Christ before Creeds* (Latham, NY: Living Hope International Ministries, 2021); Kegan A Chandler, *The God of Jesus* (McDonough, GA: Restoration Fellowship, 2016); Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (Lanham,

wouldn't follow that such participation makes him ontologically equal with the Father. Why couldn't the Father create the Son and then create the world through him? We know the sons of God were there when God laid the foundation of the earth (Job 38.4, 7). Additionally, when God said, "Let us make man in our image," (Gen 1.26) Michael Heiser notes, "What we have is a single person (God) addressing a group—the members of his divine council."<sup>59</sup> Now if the Son was one of these beings, perhaps the chief among them, he would both be created and creator.

6. Only God does X; Jesus does X; therefore, Jesus is God

Some apologists still use this argument though it is the least wieldy and easiest to refute. For example, only God forgives sins; Jesus forgave sins; therefore, Jesus is ontologically God. The problem with this argument is that it fails to account for God's preference to delegate authority. God authorized Jesus to forgive sins, so Jesus forgave them. As Matthew put it, "When the crowds saw it, they were afraid, and they glorified God, who had given such authority to men" (Matt 9.8). In turn, Jesus authorized his disciples to do the same when he said, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them" (John 20.23). Now, we wouldn't say that they are gods too, would we? As it turns out many of God's properties are transferable when he's empowering someone to perform miracles, speak on his behalf, or otherwise carry out his will. Function does not necessitate ontology.

7. *Theos* texts applied to Jesus: Isaiah 9.6; John 1.1; 20.28; Romans 9.5; 2 Thessalonians 1.12; Titus 2.13; 2 Peter 1.1; Hebrews 1.8; 1 John 5.20

"Explicit references to Jesus as 'God' in the New Testament," writes Christopher Kaiser, "are very few, and even those few are generally plagued with uncertainties of either text or interpretation."<sup>60</sup> Brian Wright offers more clarification:

No author of a Synoptic Gospel explicitly ascribes the title *θεός* [*theos*, "God"] to Jesus. Jesus never uses the term *θεός* for himself. No sermon in the book of Acts attributes the title *θεός* to Jesus... And possibly the biggest problem for NT Christology regarding this topic is that textual variants exist in every potential passage where Jesus is explicitly referred to as *θεός*.<sup>61</sup>

Other scholars such as William Barclay,<sup>62</sup> Raymond Brown,<sup>63</sup> and Jason BeDuhn<sup>64</sup> have expressed a similar lack of confidence in these verses. I do not have the space here to work through each of these.<sup>65</sup> But, even if we grant that all of them call Jesus God, that does not necessitate ontological equality since Moses was called God (Exod 7.1; cp 4.16), so were the judges (Exod 21.6; 22.8-9), the divine council (Ps 82.1, 6), and Satan (2 Cor 4.4). Jesus himself recognized the secondary sense in which individuals could be called Gods/gods

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MD: International Scholars Publications, 1998); Mark H. Graeser, John A. Lynn, and John W. Schoenheit, *One God & One Lord*, fourth ed. (Martinsville, IN: Spirit & Truth Fellowship International, 2010); Eric H. H. Chang, *The Only True God* (Charleston, SC: Christian Disciples Church, 2017).

<sup>59</sup> Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press 2015), 39-40.

<sup>60</sup> Christopher B. Kaiser, *The Doctrine of God: A Historical Survey* (London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1982), 29.

<sup>61</sup> Brian J. Wright, "Jesus as *θεός*: A Textual Examination," in *Revisiting the Corruption of the New Testament*, ed. Daniel B. Wallace (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2011), 229-231.

<sup>62</sup> "[O]n almost every occasion in the New Testament on which Jesus seems to be called God there is a problem either of textual criticism or of translation. In almost every case we have to discuss which of two readings is to be accepted or which of two possible translations is to be accepted." William Barclay, *Jesus as They Saw Him*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 21.

<sup>63</sup> Raymond Brown, *Jesus: God and Man* (NY: Macmillan Publishing, 1967).

<sup>64</sup> Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003).

<sup>65</sup> For a non-ontological take on Hebrews 1.8 and John 20.28, see Sean Finnegan, "Jesus Is God: Exploring the Notion of Representational Deity," presented at the *One God Seminar*, June 2008, published on Restitutio, January 2016, available at <https://restitutio.org/2016/01/11/explanations-to-verses-commonly-used-to-teach-that-jesus-is-god/>. See also Restitutio.org.

because they carry out his word (John 10.34-36). Once again, we are left without a solid ground on which to build a doctrine of ontological equality.

## Conclusion

We began with the biblical evidence for subordination. After examining dozens upon dozens of texts, it's easy to "be surprised," along with Mark Edwards, "that the equality of the Son and the Father became an all but universal dogma despite the silence, or some would say the explicit resistance, of the Scriptures."<sup>66</sup> The story of how coequality supplanted the Son's subordination to the Father is a question for church history, and therefore beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, in our limited quest to survey the biblical data we have found overwhelming evidence of the Son's subordination to the Father. We considered the theological explanations available to rescue ontological equality from so many difficult texts. We saw that the economic Trinity strategy failed not only for lacking biblical grounding, but also because of the many subordination texts prior to and after the incarnation. We considered the concept of permanent subordination in rank within the Trinity and found that eternal subordination logically implied ontological subordination. Lastly, we examined the major texts and groups of text that apologists depend on to build a biblical case for ontological equality and found in each case that they either didn't actually demonstrate ontological equality, or they depended on *a priori* interpretive commitments and could just as easily fit with a subordinationist position. Thus, I conclude that ontological subordination is the best explanation of the Father's relation to the Son.

If this thoroughgoing subordination is right, the following views cannot stand:

1. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as equal sharers of the same *ousia* (Athanasius of Alexandria)
2. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as modes or faces of the same person (Sabellius of Rome)

Nevertheless, several other theological models are compatible with our conclusion:

1. The Father as the supreme deity while the Son and Spirit are lower eternal deities (Origen of Alexandria)
2. The Father as the supreme deity while the Son is a lower deity who came into being prior to the creation of the world (Arius of Alexandria)
3. The Father as the supreme deity while the Son is human, coming into being at his birth (Photinus of Sirmium)

I leave it to the reader to decide which aligns best with Scripture or if some other way of putting together the data makes more sense.

Now, some may inveigh against me on the ground that I have demolished the majestic edifice of the traditional "God the Son" interpretation, leaving behind a weaker, less compelling Jesus in the rubble. Though I sympathize with how difficult it is to change something so foundational, I also see several major advantages for a subordinate Son. The first is the banishment of the awkward doctrine of impeccability, which teaches Jesus could not have sinned owing to his divine nature. Such a view makes a mockery of the devil's temptations and Christ's heroic resistance to his wiles (Matt 4.1-10; Luke 4.1-13). But, if Jesus could have sinned, how much more impressive is this Messiah? He was hungry from fasting for forty days, yet he refused to turn the stone to bread; he was eager for people to believe in him, yet he would not make a public spectacle by throwing himself off the temple; he hoped in his messianic destiny, yet he resisted the offer to receive all the kingdoms of the world. Such a Jesus is an inspiring example to his followers, but only if he

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<sup>66</sup> Edwards, 83.

<sup>67</sup> I suspect that whoever takes on that research project will agree with Edwards and fail to "find much evidence that subordinationism is even an anomaly, let alone an aberration from the biblical or conciliar norm." *ibid.*, 69.

genuinely felt those temptations in his bones. “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4.15). However, if he was ontologically equal to the Father, how could he feel the force of these or the myriad of other temptations he had thrown at him? What great victory is there when we know that not only is God unable to sin, but “God cannot be tempted with evil” either (Jas 1.13)?

Secondly, this subordinate Jesus teaches us the way of humility. He’s not merely playing out a temporary role, all the while enjoying an absolute confidence born from his divine nature and his perfect inner harmony with the Father and the Holy Spirit. No, this Jesus was limited. He too could only “see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor 13.12). Like Abraham before him, he humbled himself in faith, trusting in God’s promise to vindicate him when the time came. Over and over he consciously and deliberately put his Father’s will over his own in joyful voluntary obedience. As Dustin Stewart writes, “[The] Son cuts the figure of a decidedly anti-Promethean hero, refusing to steal the fire that he will, as it turns out, receive as a gift or a reward.”<sup>68</sup> Jesus did not go about as the supreme deity in disguise, exercising herculean self-control every time he wanted to know what people were thinking or smite some angry interlocutor with pestilence. That is not the Jesus of the Gospels. No, this Jesus humbly depended on God for everything, not merely as a teaching aid for his disciples, but because he genuinely needed to for himself.

Thirdly, a subordinate Jesus prefigures for us what life will be like for us in eternity. He does not temporarily dip down, veiling his infinite deity, holding it a secret in his innermost being. His career begins lower (depending on which Christology we have in mind) and ends in exaltation. We do not have a picture of restoration, but of elevation. When Paul describes Jesus’ climactic promotion to God’s right hand, he never mentions that he received back what was rightfully his before. No, Christ remains the passive recipient throughout, who simply receives everything from his superior (Eph 1.20-22). Even in his exaltation, when he receives worship, God remains the ultimate recipient of glory (Phil 2.9-11)

Christ’s career on earth is characterized by humility and trust and it results in God vindicating him and exalting him. So it is with his followers. He promised his disciples that they too would “sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (Matt 19.28). To those who willingly serve his interests, he will say, “Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities” (Luke 19.17). Just like Jesus constantly humbled himself to the Father and received rewards, we too can submit to the Son and become elevated in the eschaton. Jesus said, “who[ever] keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations” (Rev 2.26). However, if the Son began as an ontological equal with the Father, he could never be elevated beyond where he started and that would result in a false pattern for his followers.

In conclusion, the subordinate Son is not only the better fit biblically and theologically, but it also is the most compelling for Christian living. Notwithstanding the pedigree of the traditional tale of the supreme God himself coming down to rescue unworthy humans, the subordinate Jesus presents a better example to follow and, in my opinion, a more compelling hero. Furthermore, so many of the tensions lift like so much fog in the morning sun. We no longer must confess a being who is at once limited and unlimited, mortal and immortal, ignorant and omniscient, tempted and untemptable, impotent and omnipotent, fully human and fully God. We can instead stay close to the text of Scripture and confess the Jesus whose glory is found in his tenacious and voluntary obedience to the Father. Oh, how the Church today could benefit from this example! Rather than seeing ourselves as those owed the world, we humble ourselves to do God’s will, knowing that in due time he will exalt us.

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<sup>68</sup> Dustin D. Stewart, “Paradise Regain’d on Socinian Time” *Religion & Literature* vol. 45, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 187.

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