

Eternal Subordination of the Son: Arianism Past and Present

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For the past thirty years, a debate on the doctrine of the Trinity has sharply divided conservative evangelical theologians in the United States, Australia, and Britain.¹ A significant and vocal group of these theologians argues that the Son and Holy Spirit are equal in being to the Father but eternally subordinate to the Father in authority and function. This debate has arisen not because of questions about the Trinity but because of the increasing support and advocacy for women's ordination among Baptists, Anglicans, and Lutherans. For this reason, the contemporary argument for the Son's eternal subordination never stands alone as a trinitarian teaching, as a particular insight into the mystery of the Holy Trinity, but is found only among those arguing against women's ordination. This way of using the doctrine of the Trinity to address theological disagreements is a distinguishing characteristic of twentieth-century trinitarian thought and belongs to the broader social-trinitarian movement of our day, which, as this paper will show, departs in significant ways from the Nicene tradition of the church.

When it comes to a scripturally faithful confession of the Trinity, the twentieth century presents difficulties. During the twentieth century several theologians worried that Christians had become trinitarian in name only and were mere monotheists in practice. These theologians sought to correct the apparent irrelevance of the

¹ In this article, the following abbreviations are used:

- ACO² Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, ed. *Acta Conciliorum Oecumenicorum*, 2nd ser. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1984–2016.
- AE *Luther's Works, American Edition*. Vols. 1–30, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976; vols. 31–55, edited by Helmut Lehmann, Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–1986; vols. 56–82, edited by Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–.
- CCSL *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina*. 236 vols. Turnhout: Brepols, 1953–.
- CEECW Andrew Radde-Gallwitz et al., eds. *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*. 5 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017–).
- GCS *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller*. Leipzig: Hinrich, 1891–.
- PG Jacques-Paul Migne, ed. *Patrologiae cursus completus, series graeca*, 161 vols. in 166. Paris: Migne, 1857–1866.
- WSA *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. 45 vols. Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1990–.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

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doctrine of the Trinity for the church and for the life of the believer by putting the doctrine to work, by moving it from mere confession or theory to practice. The doctrine of the Trinity became for these thinkers the answer to various political, economic, ethical, and social concerns of the day. This was true for Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant theologians, for liberationist theologians, for feminists, and also for conservative evangelicals pushing back against these trends.

This broad social-trinitarian movement revises or departs from—depending on your perspective—the Nicene tradition in significant ways. For example, it thinks differently about the relation between nature (οὐσία or φύσις) and person (ὑπόστασις or πρόσωπον), blurring the distinction between the one who wills and the faculty of will, and thereby envisioning and promoting an alternative understanding of person or hypostasis than that confessed by the ecumenical councils of the church and taught by such figures as Augustine, Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, and the Lutheran dogmaticians.² When advocates of the eternal subordination of the Son construe their argument with women’s ordination, they align themselves with this broader twentieth-century social trinitarianism. That alone, of course, does not make them right or wrong—Scripture determines that—but it does provide helpful historical context for those encountering these arguments for the first time and should alert you to a possible misunderstanding of nature, person, and will.

The following essay has three parts. Part I provides an overview of the main advocates for the Son’s eternal subordination and shows especially how these writers have distorted a Nicene understanding of divine person or hypostasis. Part II presents a short summary of Nicene and anti-Nicene trinitarian theology in the second half of the fourth century. This section highlights the continuity between this new evangelical doctrine of the Trinity and the anti-Nicenes of the early church. Part III turns to exegesis. Doctrine proceeds from exegesis, from the inspired and inerrant word of God, and not from creeds, councils, fathers, or reformers; and yet, it is important to emphasize, the Lutheran reading of Scripture never stands apart from these faithful witnesses.

² Cf. Brian Daley, *God Visible: Patristic Christology Revisited* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 228:

John [of Damascus] shows . . . that we use the word “hypostasis” or “person,” like all other words, only “improperly” (καταχρηστικῶς)—or as Western medieval theologians would say, analogically—in speaking of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Unlike human hypostases, the “Persons” of the Trinity have no beginning in time to define their individuality, no personal accidents or differences of particular activity outside the divine being to mark them off from each other, in the way human individuals have such characteristics. Their differences lie simply in their internal relationships of origin or cause, and in their way of giving themselves one to another: “the mode of their existence.”

Both Luther and the Book of Concord make a similar point about the divine persons. See Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1519), in AE 27:205–206; AC I 4.

The final part of my paper focuses on two key passages used by proponents of eternal subordination: 1 Corinthians 11:3 and 1 Corinthians 15:28. What does Saint Paul mean when he says that God is the head of Christ? What does he mean when he says that the Son will be subjected to God so that God may be all in all? I will present the Nicene and anti-Nicene exegesis of these verses, show how our Lutheran fathers insisted on the Nicene reading of these passages, and explain how those advocating the eternal subordination of the Son in our day embrace the anti-Nicene and antitrinitarian reading that the church fathers and Lutheran dogmaticians opposed. My review of the history of interpretation on these verses aims to make a simple point: doctrine proceeds from exegesis. The Nicene fathers read these verses one way, their Arian opponents another way. Today we have conservative evangelicals, including some conservative Lutherans, claiming Nicene doctrine with Arian exegesis. That won't work. When the exegesis changes, the doctrine changes.

I. The Eternal Subordination of the Son

Although the current formulation of this teaching belongs to works written in the last thirty years, several major theologians throughout the twentieth century taught a version of the Son's eternal subordination. For our purposes, Karl Barth is the most relevant. For Barth there is in God both superiority and subordination, and this is true of theology proper.³ That is to say, the Son's obedience and subordination does not belong to the economy only (to the Son's assumption of human nature for us and our salvation) but to theology proper (to the eternal life of Father and Son).⁴ This means for Barth that the unity of Father and Son entails, as he puts it, "One who is obeyed and Another who obeys."⁵ He ends by stating that God's particular being, his inner order, his superiority and inferiority, his commanding and obeying, informs the relationship of husband to wife.⁶

Already we encounter two significant trinitarian assertions that indicate we are reading a twentieth-century author: first, Barth's construal of his trinitarian position

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4.1, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part One*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 195–204.

⁴ Barth understands the distinction between theology and economy as used by the fathers and the broader Nicene tradition but finds the distinction susceptible to the idea of a proper (theology) and improper (economy) mode of God's being. When it comes to the Son's incarnation, Barth insists that "He is in time what He is in eternity" (*Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:204), collapsing the distinction between theology and economy as used by the fathers and advocating, in his own way, Karl Rahner's rule on the immanent and economic trinity. See Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 22. For a critique of Rahner's rule, see Bruce Marshall, "Trinity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Theology*, ed. Gareth Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 183–203.

⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:201.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:202.

with the relation of husband and wife, and second, a peculiar and provocative way of thinking about divine personhood and the unity of the divine persons. Again, for Barth, the eternal unity of Father and Son entails one who is obeyed and another who obeys. To obey is to will the will of another. To posit an eternal obedience, one who is obeyed and one who obeys, requires two distinct wills.⁷ For the church fathers, however, will belongs to nature, whether we are talking about divine or human nature, and is exercised by the hypostasis or acting subject of that nature. To assert two wills is to assert two distinct natures. Many people today hesitate to affirm this patristic teaching, because it makes sense to them to align will with person and not nature. That such a position seems obvious to many in our day reflects a broader and perhaps unreflective indebtedness to late-modern philosophical assumptions about human agency and a corresponding unfamiliarity with the Nicene tradition as taught by the fathers and Lutheran reformers and confessed by the ecumenical councils of the church.

Why did the fathers and reformers think it so obvious that will belongs to nature and not person? Think of your children and particularly those things necessary for life that you did not *need* to teach them. The key word here is “need.” For example, you did not need to teach your children to see or to hear; nor did you need to teach them how to sleep, to hunger, or to thirst. So too you did not need to teach them to think or to will. These things are done by nature, by instinct, and therefore without instruction. Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus refer to these things as natural properties. John explains, “[N]atural properties are not taught [ἀδίδακτά εἰσι τὰ φυσικά], for no one learns how to think, or live, or be hungry or thirsty, or how to sleep. Nor do we learn how to will. Therefore willing is natural.”⁸ These natural properties are ἀδίδακτα for both Maximus and John, which means not merely that they are not taught but that they *cannot* be taught or learned.⁹ Again,

⁷ Barth was aware of the provocative position he advanced and rehearsed the difficulties of positing an eternal obedience along these same lines (*Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:195–196). He also acknowledged that his position goes further than Nicaea but, in his estimation, remains Nicene (*Church Dogmatics*, 4.1:200).

⁸ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 58, trans. and ed. Norman Russell (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2022), 193; cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Disputations with Pyrrhus*, trans. Joseph Farrell (Waymart, PA: St. Tikhon’s Monastery Press, 2014), 62 (= PG 91:292–293). Right before this John writes, “For we say that the wills and the energies are natural, not hypostatic. I am referring to the faculty itself of willing and acting by which he wills and brings about that which he wants and does. If we grant these to be hypostatic, we shall be obliged to say that the three hypostases of the Holy Trinity have different wills and different activities” (192). In other words, if we assign will to person, then we will be forced to say “three gods” as we say “three persons.”

⁹ Cf. Maximus, *Disputations with Pyrrhus*, p. 77 (= PG 91:304): “what is natural is not taught [ἀδίδακτα εἶναι τὰ φυσικά]. So, if natural things be not acquired through teaching, then we have will without having acquired it or being taught it [ἀδίδακτον δὲ ἔχουμεν τὸ θέλειν], for no one has ever had a will which was acquired by teaching. Consequently, man has the faculty of will by

you do not teach your child how to sleep; you teach your child when to sleep. So too you do not teach your child to will; you teach your child to will well. You do not teach your child to think; you teach your child to think rightly. The one who wills or thinks—namely, the person or hypostasis—does so according to the faculty of willing or thinking, which belongs to nature. This is why it is correct to say that natures do not will or think but persons will or think according to nature.¹⁰

For the Nicene tradition—by which I mean the pro-Nicene Greek and Latin church fathers, the neo-Chalcedonian theologians of the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils, and our Lutheran dogmaticians—this is all very obvious and, therefore, you count wills as you count natures. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, not three gods, one nature, not three natures. Therefore, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one indivisible will. Augustine regards this as such an important point that he emphasizes it in sermons, polemical works, and catechetical lectures. He preaches, “[J]ust as they [the Father and Son] have one substance, so too they have one will.”¹¹ In his debate with Latin Homoians, Augustine writes, “In terms of the Son’s divinity, the Father and the Son have one and the same will [*una eademque uoluntas*], nor can it be different in any way where the nature of the Trinity as a whole is immutable.”¹² Finally, in his catechetical lectures, Augustine teaches, “Father and Son have one will, because they have one nature. Indeed, it is not possible for the will of the Son to differ in the least degree from the will of the Father.”¹³ For Augustine, if you cannot affirm that Father and Son have one and the same will, then you cannot affirm that they have one and the same substance. To divide the will of Father and Son is to divide the substance and to posit two gods, one greater, one lesser. This is not a fine point of trinitarian theology for Augustine but is at the heart of a faithful confession of the indivisible unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and therefore belongs in sermons, polemical writings, and catechetical instruction.

nature.” Text cited in Cyril Hovorun, *Will, Action, and Freedom: Christological Controversies in the Seventh Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 156.

¹⁰ Cf. John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 59, pp. 198–199. John offers the following distinctions when it comes to the acts or activities that we do. If you substitute “will” for “activity” in the following example, you will understand the distinction between nature and person when it comes to the faculty of will, willing, and the thing willed. John writes, “[O]ne should note that activity (*ἐνέργεια*) is one thing and having a capacity for activity (*ἐνεργητικόν*) is another, and an accomplished act (*ἐνέργημα*) is another, and one who acts (*ἐνεργῶν*) is another. Activity, then, is the efficacious and essential movement of nature; that which has a capacity for activity is the nature from which the activity derives; an accomplished act is the result of the activity; one who acts is one who carries out the activity, namely, a hypostasis.” For a related point, see FC SD VIII 43 for Luther’s distinction between nature and person. See also Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 237.

¹¹ Augustine, *In Iohannis euangelium tractatus* 21.10 (= CCSL 36:218).

¹² Augustine, *Contra sermonem Arrianorum* VI, 6 (= CCSL 87A:194).

¹³ Augustine, *Sermo* 398.3–4 (= *De symbolo ad catechumenos*) (= CCSL 46:187).

Augustine's insistence on the indivisible nature and will of Father and Son means further that they have one power (*una virtus*), one authority (*una potestas*), and one majesty (*una maiestas*).¹⁴ Again, you count power and authority as you count will, for all belong to nature. Put another way, if you assert a difference between the power, authority, or will of Father and Son, then you must also assert a difference between their nature or substance. This is not merely the opinion of Augustine but the unanimous confession of the Greek and Latin Nicene tradition. The first anathema from the Fifth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 553 states, "If anyone will not confess that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have one nature or substance [μίαν φύσιν, ἥτοι οὐσίαν / *unam naturam sive substantiam*], that they have one power and authority [μίαν τε δύναμιν καὶ ἐξουσίαν / *unam virtutem et potestatem*], that there is a consubstantial Trinity, one Deity to be adored in three subsistences or persons: let him be anathema."¹⁵ Note particularly how these fathers clarify their confession of one nature or substance with the language of one power and authority. A similar confession is made at the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 680–681: "We proclaim that [the Trinity] has one natural will [φυσικοῦ θελήματος / *naturalis uoluntatis*], power [δυνάμεως/*uirtutis*], activity [ἐνεργείας/*operationis*], sovereignty, majesty, authority [ἐξουσίας/*potestatis*], and glory."¹⁶ So too John of Damascus, in his summary of Greek trinitarian thought, writes, "[T]here is one essence [οὐσία], one goodness [ἀγαθότης], one power [δύναμις], one will [θέλησις], one activity [ἐνέργεια], one authority [ἐξουσία], one and the same, not three similar to each other, but one and the same movement [κίνησις] of all three hypostases."¹⁷ Martin Luther makes the same point in his sermons to the faithful in Wittenberg. He preaches, "[The] being of the Father and of the Son [is]

¹⁴ Augustine, s. 215.8, in WSA 3/6:164 (= Patrick Verbraken, "Les sermons CCXV et LVI de Saint Augustin: *De Symbolo et De Oratione Dominica*," *Revue Bénédictine* 68 [1958]: 25). Augustine ends his comment, "So believing then in the divine Trinity and the threefold unity, take care, dearly beloved, that no one seduces you from the faith and truth of the Catholic Church."

¹⁵ In *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1990), 1:114. This repeats the first anathema from Justinian, *Edict on the Orthodox Faith*, in CEECW 4:337.

¹⁶ *Acts of the Third Council of Constantinople*, fourth session, "Letter of Agatho to Constantine IV," in CEECW 4:569 (= ACO², 2.1:58.28–29 [Greek], 2.1:59.26–61.1 [Latin]). Cf. Sophronius of Jerusalem, *Synodical Letter* 2.2.5, in Pauline Allen, *Sophronius of Jerusalem and Seventh-Century Heresy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), 80–81 (= ACO², 2.1:424–426 [Greek], 2.1:425–427 [Latin]): "For we know one principle of Godhead, one kingship, one authority [μίαν ἐξουσίαν / *unam potestatem*], one power [μίαν δύναμιν / *unam uirtutem*], one activity, one intent, one will, one dominion, one movement, . . . one lordship, one eternity, and whatever else of the one essence and nature in three personal hypostases is unitary and unaggregated." Sophronius' *Synodical Letter* was read aloud at the eleventh session of the Sixth Ecumenical Council.

¹⁷ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith* 8, pp. 80–81.

one—one will, one mind, one wisdom, one work, yes, one Godhead, and one thing.”¹⁸

The idea that will belonged to person and not nature is not new with the twentieth century but appears already in the patristic debates on the two natures of Christ. The anti-Chalcedonians of the seventh century who advocated monoenergism (the teaching of one faculty of activity in Christ the God-man) and monothelitism (the teaching of one will in Christ the God-man) did so, in part, because they thought that will belongs to person and not nature. For them there is only one will and one activity of the incarnate Word of God because there is only one person. Sergius of Constantinople, for example, insisted that two wills would mean two persons or two acting subjects. He contended that the Word is the ultimate subject of Christ’s human acts and, therefore, all his acts are divine acts.¹⁹ Maximus the Confessor regarded Sergius’ position as a new and more subtle version of Apollinarianism.²⁰ If the human acts of Christ are not truly human, then the nature assumed by the Word is not truly consubstantial with our nature, as taught in Scripture and confessed at Chalcedon. For Maximus the debate with the anti-Chalcedonians was a matter of salvation. As Gregory of Nazianzus had insisted, and which every major council of the seventh century repeatedly quoted, what Christ did not assume, he did not heal or save. If our natural human will needs saving, then it must be assumed by the incarnate Word. And, further, if that natural will is assumed by the Word, then it must function as a human will and will those things proper to its nature.²¹

¹⁸ Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John* (1530–1532), in AE 23:61. See also Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545), in AE 8:165. After citing John 5:17 and 5:21, Luther explains, “Making alive is the work of God alone. It takes place by God’s will and mercy. ‘Now just as the Father wants to be merciful and to make alive, so I, too, want this,’ says Christ. It is the same will and the same work. Nevertheless, there are three distinct Persons. Therefore Augustine was right when he said: ‘The external works of the Godhead are indivisible.’”

¹⁹ Sergius of Constantinople, for example, argues that it is impossible “for two wills to subsist at the same time in one and the same subject.” Sergius continues, “To put it clearly, just as our body is governed, and ordered, and subject to our intellectual and rational soul, so too in the case of Christ the Master his whole human constitution always and in every case was led by the Godhead of his Word and moved by God.” Sergius, *First Letter to Honorius*, in Allen, *Sophronius of Jerusalem*, 191 (= ACO², 2.2:542–544). Cf. Daley, *God Visible*, 217. Daley notes in particular Sergius’ new approach to Chalcedon and his shift in emphasis to divine acts to account for all that Christ does.

²⁰ The issue raised by Maximus concerns the *genus apotelesmaticum* (“category of effects”). Maximus, *Disputations with Pyrrhus*, pp. 115–116 (= PG 91:341): “Different actions have different effects [ἄλλης ἄλλο πράξεως ἀποτελεσμα], not one effect, as was demonstrated by the example of the sword being hardened by fire.” Text cited in Hovorun, *Will, Action, and Freedom*, 119. Martin Chemnitz reproduces these same points in his own discussion of the issue. See Chemnitz, *Two Natures of Christ*, 98–99 (example of iron and fire), 216 (explanation of ἀποτελέσματα), 233 and 238 (charge of Apollinarianism), and 239 (use of Gregory of Nazianzus’ rule).

²¹ Maximus the Confessor, *Opusculum* 7, trans. in Daley, *God Visible*, 219: “We must not, then damage the existence of his parts by taking away their natural capacity to will (θέλημα) and their essential activity (ἐνέργεια), on the pretext of keeping the union undamaged and letting it bind the

The fathers gathered at the Lateran Synod of 649, whose proceedings were influenced by Maximus and his mentor Sophronius, regarded this position of assigning will to person as “heinous” (ἀθέμιτος).²² So too the fathers gathered at the Sixth Ecumenical Council declared this position “bizarre and exceedingly profane” (*quod absurdum est et nimis profanum*).²³

Karl Barth’s understanding of divine unity is different than that of the church fathers and departs from the catholic patterns of speech used by Nicaea and Chalcedon and the faithful reception of these councils by Maximus and John of Damascus. Barth’s suggestion that an eternal obedience and subordination informs the unity of Father and Son, a unity that requires in some sense a distinction between the eternal will of the Father and the Son, was explicitly denounced by those gathered at the Sixth Ecumenical Council. They declared, “For who is so far removed from the light of truth that he would venture to say that our Lord Jesus Christ obeyed the Father according to his divinity, when he is equal to him in everything and in everything wills precisely what the Father wills?”²⁴ Barth’s provocative and noncatholic way of speaking becomes a point of emphasis for the proponents of eternal subordination in our day.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, several conservative theologians, mostly Baptists and Anglicans, but also a few conservative Lutherans,²⁵ insisted on the eternal subordination of the Son. Among Baptists the chief proponents are Tom Schreiner, Wayne Grudem, and Bruce Ware. All three contend that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal in being but unequal in authority and function. Tom Schreiner, an

elements into a hypostatic unit. For if we melt down two essentially distinct faculties of will, and two natural ranges of activity, and pour them together, as a whole from parts, into one synthetic will and one activity, it will clearly be a mythical creation, wholly strange and foreign to any fellowship with the Father or ourselves.” Alternative translation available in CEECW 4:508.

²² *Acts of the Lateran Synod*, fifth session, in CEECW 4:527 (= ACO², 1:344).

²³ “Letter of Agatho to Constantine IV,” CEECW 4:571 (= ACO², 2.1:69).

²⁴ “Letter of Agatho to Constantine IV,” CEECW 4:577 (= ACO², 2.1:77). The idea of the Son’s obedience before the incarnation resembles a position taken by the Latin Homoians in the *Sermo Arrianorum*. Augustine responded to this anonymous work and reproduced a copy of it at the beginning of his response. These Arians write, “We Christians believe that he [i.e., our Savior] said all these things because the Father commanded him and the Son obeyed. We state and prove that the heretics [i.e., the Homoeousians] are refuted and trapped by their own statements. For if he humbled himself, this humility of his proves his obedience, while the obedience shows that the one towers above and that the other stands beneath and in subjection.” The authors continue by citing Phil 2:8 and emphasizing that the Son obediently humbled himself. They end with a question: “why did he obey when commanded before he assumed flesh?” Augustine responds with bewilderment: “I do not know where they get the idea that ‘the Son obeyed’ a command ‘before he assumed flesh.’” See *Sermo Arrianorum* 34 and Augustine’s *Answer to the Arian Sermon XXXVIII*, trans. Roland Teske, in WSA 1/18:137 and 168.

²⁵ See note 49 below.

accomplished New Testament scholar at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, states this position with clarity:

The Son willingly submits Himself to the Father's authority. The difference between the members of the Trinity is a functional one, not an essential one. Such an interpretation is confirmed by 1 Corinthians 15:28: "When [Christ has subjected all things to Himself], then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all." Paul did not see such subjection of the Son to the Father as heretical because the Son was not essentially inferior to the Father. Instead, He will subject Himself voluntarily to the Father's authority. The Son has a different function or role from the Father, not an inferior being or essence.²⁶

Schreiner thinks that a difference in function does not entail a difference in being or nature. This seems obvious to him because, as he explains, men and women differ in function but not in being. Once again we encounter the correlation of human persons and divine persons. For Schreiner, moreover, will belongs to person, not nature, and this philosophical assumption allows him to say that the Son willingly or voluntarily submits himself to the Father. The difference in wills corresponds to the difference in person, not nature. Thus, for Schreiner, there is a functional or personal difference between the Father and the Son, such that the Son eternally submits to the Father's authority, but not an essential difference, because they are equal in divinity. Whatever you make of Schreiner's argument, at the very least you must acknowledge that it is a new way of talking and thinking about nature and person and the unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. More to the point, it is a way of speaking that departs from the Nicene tradition of the church, explicitly advocating what the ecumenical councils of the church regarded as heinous, absurd, and utterly profane.

Wayne Grudem, the most widely read conservative theologian of our day, whose *Systematic Theology* has sold over a million copies, offers a similar presentation of the Trinity. He writes, "[T]he role of commanding, directing and sending is appropriate to the position of the Father," and "the role of obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us is appropriate" to the Son.²⁷ Although Grudem uses peculiar terms, the Nicene fathers can express this point when discussing the economy or the incarnation of our Lord. Grudem, however, does not mean that. For him, the Son is eternally under the "authority" of the Father and

²⁶ Thomas Schreiner, "Head Coverings, Prophecies, and the Trinity: 1 Corinthians 11:2–16," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991), 120.

²⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 250–251.

subordinated in role or function. He writes, “[A]uthority and submission between the Father and the Son, and between the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit, is a fundamental difference (or probably *the* fundamental difference) between the persons of the Trinity.”²⁸ This is not language you will find among the church fathers, the medieval schoolmen, or Lutheran reformers.²⁹ The difference between the persons of the Trinity, according to the Scriptures and the reception of those Scriptures by the Nicene tradition, pertains only to the distinguishing characteristics or hypostatic properties of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Athanasian Creed rehearses this in plain terms: the Father is not made nor created nor begotten—which is to say that the Father is unbegotten; the Son is begotten of the Father; and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. That alone, according to Scripture, marks the fundamental difference and unique threeness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For Grudem, however, the fundamental difference pertains to will, to the Son’s obeying and doing as the Father commands, directs, and sends. Once again, we encounter a new definition of nature and person that departs from the Nicene tradition and ecumenical councils of the church.

Finally, Bruce Ware, professor of systematic theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argues that the Son is “equal in being, eternally subordinate in role.”³⁰ For Ware, there is an eternal relationship of authority and obedience grounded in the eternal relations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Ware writes,

An authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three Persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority . . . [and] the Son submits to the Father just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence.³¹

²⁸ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 47.

²⁹ Cf. Martin Luther, *The Three Symbols or Creeds of the Christian Faith* (1538), in AE 34:220: “Thus these words teach us impressively that Christ is one single true God with the Father, equal to him in all things and without any difference, except that he is of the Father, and the Father is not of him.” For a longer explanation of this same point, see Martin Luther, *Last Words of David* (1543), in AE 15:303.

³⁰ Bruce Ware, “How Shall We Think about the Trinity,” in *God Under Fire: Modern Theology Reinvents God*, ed. Douglas Huffman and Eric Johnson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 270.

³¹ Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 21.

Ware, like Schreiner and Grudem, conceives of the divine persons in modern terms, confusing nature and person and positing a difference in will and authority. Like Schreiner and Grudem, Ware does not think the difference in will means a difference in essence, because will pertains to person and not nature. Three persons means three wills for Ware.

Grudem and Ware insist so strongly on this difference of will that they not only reject the doctrine of inseparable works but declare that no one in the history of the church has ever taught this doctrine. Despite their claim, the insistence that the external works of the Trinity, the works *ad extra*, are undivided, meaning they belong equally and inseparably to the divine persons, is a point of broad agreement among the church fathers. This theological commonplace, referred to as Augustine's rule by the medieval schoolmen and Lutheran reformers, confesses that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work as they are according to their indivisible nature, power, and will. Grudem and Ware disagree and insist on the divided works of the Trinity. Grudem writes, "Even more troubling is the tendency of the evangelical feminists" (so he refers to his opponents) "to claim that any actions taken by any person in the Trinity is an action of all three persons in the Trinity."³² Again, for Grudem, to say that "the actions of any one person of the Trinity are the actions *not just of the whole being of God, but of every person of the Trinity . . .* is to deny what is taught in literally hundreds of passages of Scripture that speak of different actions carried out by different members of the Trinity."³³

Bruce Ware also insists on the divided works of the Trinity. He writes, "[T]hough the Father is supreme, *he often* provides and works through his Son and Spirit to accomplish his work and fulfill his will." Again, Ware writes, "[T]hough the Father is supreme . . . *he chooses* to do his work in many cases through the Son and through the Spirit *rather than unilaterally*."³⁴ For Ware, the Father chooses to work and fulfill his will through the Son and the Spirit but he does not have to do this. Ware continues, "It is not as though the Father is unable to work unilaterally, but rather, *he chooses* to involve the Son and the Spirit."³⁵ This, of course, could be the case only if the Father's will differed from the Son's will and the Spirit's will and thus their nature and power were divided.

Why is it important to confess the inseparable work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Our dear Martin Luther answers this question directly: "For if I ascribe to each Person a distinct external work in creation and exclude the other two Persons

³² Wayne Grudem, "Doctrinal Deviations in Evangelical-Feminist Arguments," in *One God in Three Persons*, eds Bruce Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 19.

³³ Grudem, "Doctrinal Deviations," 21–22.

³⁴ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 55.

³⁵ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 57.

from this, then I have divided the one Godhead and have fashioned three gods or creations. And that is wrong.”³⁶ The different answers given by Grudem, Ware, and Luther make it clear that we are dealing with different doctrines of the Trinity. One doctrine stands in continuity with the Nicene tradition of the church; the other doctrine stands in continuity with the anti-Nicene theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries and the antitrinitarians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

II. Nicene and Anti-Nicene Trinitarianism

Arianism developed in two distinct ways in the second half of the fourth century. On the one hand, it became more explicit about the Son’s otherness from the Father, as argued by figures like Aetius and Eunomius. On the other hand, it became more subtle by affirming the Son’s likeness and subordination to the Father, as confessed by the Homoiousians and Latin Homoians. These subtler Arians emerged from the council of Sirmium in 357. The bishops gathered at that council rejected Nicaea and all unscriptural language. They issued a statement of faith that Hilary of Poitiers dubbed “the blasphemy of Sirmium.”³⁷ Several responses to Sirmium followed. Basil of Ancrya and George of Laodicea argued for a middle position between Nicaea and Sirmium (357). They confessed that Father and Son were not same-in-substance (*ὁμοούσιος*) but shared a likeness of substance (*ὁμοιούσιος*). Note how they describe the eternal relation of Father and Son. Both Basil and George argue that the Father acts with “supreme authority” (*αὐθεντικῶς*) and the Son “subordinately” (*ὑποურγικῶς*) and that this conveys their likeness in substance rather than sameness.³⁸ For Basil the creed from Nicaea obscured this difference between the “authority” (*ἐξουσία*) of Father and Son.³⁹ Epiphanius, who preserves these writings for us, labelled Basil and George “semi-Arians.”⁴⁰

The Latin Homoians confronted by Ambrose and Augustine were not half-hearted semi-Arians but stood proudly and resolutely in the tradition of Sirmium (357). Palladius of Ratiaria, opposed by Ambrose and condemned at the council of Aquileia in 381, argued that the Father alone possessed “a unique and supreme

³⁶ Martin Luther, *The Last Words of David* (1543), in *Martin Luther’s Basic Exegetical Writings*, ed. Carl L. Beckwith (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 446; cf. AE 15:302. Cf. Abraham Calov, *Apodixis Articulorum Fidei* (Wittenberg: Meier, 1699), 99–100; Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 5.1, trans. Edmund Hill, in WSA 3/12:101: “The Father does not do anything separately without the Son, any more than the Son does anything separately without the Father; inseparable charity, inseparable unity, inseparable majesty, inseparable authority, in line with these words which he laid down himself: *I and the Father are one* (Jn 10:30).”

³⁷ Hilary of Poitiers, *De Synodis* 10 (= PL 10:487).

³⁸ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.9.5 (Basil) and 73.18.4–5 (George) (= GCS 37:279–280 and 290–291).

³⁹ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.11.9–10 (= GCS 37:283–284).

⁴⁰ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 73.1.5 (= GCS 37:268).

authority” and that the Son does only what the Father commands him to do.⁴¹ Nearly forty years later Augustine encountered these same arguments. In the fall of 419 he wrote a detailed response to an anonymous Arian sermon (*Sermo Arrianorum*) that had been sent to him. That anonymous sermon insisted that the Son acts only at the will and command of the Father. These Arians appealed to John 5:19 and John 16:13 to show the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father’s authority and the Holy Spirit’s subordination to the Father and the Son.⁴² To say these sorts of things, insisted Augustine, is to posit a greater God and lesser God, and that is called paganism.⁴³

Augustine frequently mocks his Arian opponents for their carnal-minded and childish ways of reading Scripture. These Arians, insisted Augustine, made the Son nothing more than an apprentice in the workshop of the Father.⁴⁴ For Augustine and the Nicene tradition of exegesis, a tradition received and taught by our Lutheran reformers and dogmaticians and by the early Missouri Synod, the verses from the Gospel of John do not convey subordination but rather the eternal relation of the divine persons.⁴⁵ The Son does nothing “from himself” (John 5:19) because he is not from himself but eternally begotten from the Father. Similarly, the Holy Spirit speaks nothing “from himself” (John 16:13) because he eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.⁴⁶ This scriptural language safeguards the unique oneness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the very mystery of the Holy Trinity. To say otherwise—to say, for example, that the Son does something by himself and apart from the Father—would divide the nature, power, and will of Father and Son. And as Luther puts it, that’s wrong.

The views promoted by Basil, George, Palladius, and the *Sermo Arrianorum*, views rejected by Ambrose and Augustine, among others, are the views insisted

⁴¹ Palladius, *Apologia* 346r (= *Scolies ariennes sur le concile d’Aquilée*, ed. Roger Gryson, Sources Chrétiennes 267 [Paris: Cerf, 1980], 312).

⁴² *Sermo Arrianorum* 20 and 31, trans. Roland J. Teske, in WSA 1/18:135–136.

⁴³ Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 18.4.

⁴⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Sermon* 126.9 and 135.4; Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 18.5 and 20.9.

⁴⁵ Cf. Georg Stoeckhardt, “Der moderne Subordinationismus in Licht der Schrift,” *Lehre und Wehre* 40, no. 3 (March 1894): 71–72. Note particularly Stoeckhardt’s quotes from Quenstedt. Both Stoeckhardt and Quenstedt repeat Augustine’s reading of John 5:19 and 16:13. For Augustine’s reading of these verses and the reception of his reading by Thomas Aquinas, the Lutheran reformers, and the Lutheran dogmaticians, see Carl L. Beckwith, “Trinity and the Bible,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 87, no. 1 (January 2023): 17–20.

⁴⁶ Augustine, *Answer to the Arian Sermon*, XXIII, 20; WSA 1/18:159: “In accord with this, ‘the Holy Spirit does not speak on his own,’ because he does not come from himself, but proceeds from the Father. So too, the reason that *the Son can do nothing of himself* is that he too does not come from himself.” See also Augustine, *In Johannis Evangelium Tractatus* 20 (John 5:19) and 99 (John 16:13).

upon by Schreiner, Grudem, and Ware. Regrettably, this teaching on the eternal subordination of the Son is not merely the view of a few misguided theologians. These same views appear throughout the *ESV Study Bible*, which is the product of ninety-five biblical scholars, representing nearly twenty denominations, gathered together by the general editor, Wayne Grudem, and the theological editor, J. I. Packer.⁴⁷ The publisher reports that over one million copies of this book have been sold.

The translators of the ESV mistranslate several verses on the eternal relation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by adding the word “authority” (e.g., John 7:17, 8:28, 12:49, 14:10, and 16:13). For example, according to the Greek, Jesus says in John 16:13 that the Holy Spirit “will not speak from himself” [οὐ γὰρ λαλήσει ἑαυτοῦ]; the ESV, on the other hand, states that the Holy Spirit “will not speak on his own *authority*.” Similarly, Jesus states in John 12:49, according to the Greek, “For I have not spoken from myself [ὅτι ἐγὼ ἐξ ἑμαυτοῦ οὐκ ἐλάλησα], but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment, what I should say, and what I should speak.” The ESV has Jesus say “For I have not spoken on my own *authority*, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.” Why would the ESV add the word “authority” to these verses when the Greek does not? The answer is provided in the *ESV Study Bible*: “Not . . . on my own *authority* indicates again that the supreme authority in the Trinity belongs to the Father, and delegated authority to the Son, though they are equal in deity.”⁴⁸ Equal in deity means equal in nature; authority [ἐξουσία/*potestas*] and power [δύναμις/*virtus*] belong to nature, as confessed by the ecumenical councils of the church, by Augustine, by John of Damascus, and by our Lutheran fathers. For the *ESV Study Bible* the Father and the Son are both equal and unequal in nature. That’s either a subtler form of Arianism or nonsense or both.

⁴⁷ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 54–55:

Part of the revealed mystery of the Godhead is that the three persons stand in a fixed relation to each other. . . . It is the nature of the second person of the Trinity to acknowledge the authority and submit to the good pleasure of the first. That is why He declares Himself to be the Son, and the first person to be His Father. Though co-equal with the Father in eternity, power, and glory, it is natural to Him to play the Son’s part, and find all His joy in doing His Father’s will, just as it is natural to the first person of the Trinity to plan and initiate the works of the Godhead and natural to the third person to proceed from the Father and the Son to do their joint bidding. Thus the obedience of the God-man to the Father while He was on earth was not a new relationship occasioned by the incarnation, but the continuation in time of the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father in heaven.

⁴⁸ *ESV Study Bible*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 2050. Note the word “again” in the explanation. This teaching appears throughout the *ESV Study Bible*. See the notes for John 3:35, 5:19, 14:28; Matt 28:18; Mark 10:40; Acts 2:33; 1 Cor 11:3 and 15:28; and Eph 1:4.

III. Exegesis and Doctrine

Although the Latin Homoians of Augustine's day used John 5:19 and 16:13 to show the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father and of the Holy Spirit to the Son, many advocates of this position in our day focus on 1 Corinthians 11:3 and 1 Corinthians 15:28. Here is how one theologian advocating for the Son's eternal subordination explains these two verses:

Even though [the Son] is in all ways equal to the Father and in no way inferior to the Father, he is nevertheless utterly subordinate to the Father. Thus as St. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 11:3, God the Father is the head of Christ the Son, even as Christ is the head of every human husband and every human husband is the head of his wife. In 1 Corinthians 15:25–28, Paul goes so far as to say that the Son is not just subordinate to the Father until the resurrection of the dead on the last day but will be forever subordinate to the Father, so that God the Father may be all in all. Christ's relation as Son to his Father is therefore characterized by his subordination to the headship of the Father.⁴⁹

These same sentiments appear in the *ESV Study Bible*.⁵⁰ How do the church fathers and our Lutheran fathers read these verses?

1 Corinthians 11:3

Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Theodoret of Cyrus all report that the Arians in their day used 1 Corinthians 11:3 to show the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father.⁵¹ Ambrose's explanation of this verse was later repeated by nearly all our Lutheran fathers. Ambrose focuses on the particular words used by Paul. The verse refers to the economy, to the incarnation of the Son, and not to the eternal relation of the Son to the Father. That is why Paul uses "God" and not "Father." Ambrose explains, "Therefore according to the human condition, 'God is the head of Christ.'"

⁴⁹ John W. Kleinig, "The Ordination of Women and the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity," in *Women Pastors? The Ordination of Women in Biblical Lutheran Perspective*, ed. Matthew C. Harrison and John T. Pless (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 223. This statement was removed from the third edition of *Women Pastors?*.

⁵⁰ On 1 Cor 11:3, see *ESV Study Bible*, 2206: "The head of Christ is God indicates that within the Trinity the Father has a role of authority or leadership with respect to the Son, though they are equal in deity and attributes (see notes on John 5:19; 14:28; 1 Cor 15:28)." On 1 Cor 15:28, see *ESV Study Bible*, 2214: "Jesus is one with God the Father and equal to the Father in deity yet functionally subordinate to him, and this verse shows that his subjection to the Father will continue for all eternity."

⁵¹ Cf. *Ekthesis Macrosthichos* (344) in Athanasius, *De Synodis* 26. The anti-Nicene bishops gathered at Antioch in 344 reproduce the Eusebian subordinationist theology from the fourth Antiochene creed of 341 and the eastern synod of Serdica (Philippopolis) in 343. They interpret 1 Cor 11:3 as indicating the eternal relation of the Father to the Son and conclude that the Son has a beginning from the Father.

Paul did not say, ‘the Father is the head of Christ,’ but ‘God is the head of Christ’ because the deity, as the creator, is the head of the creature. And so Paul fittingly said, ‘God is the head of Christ,’ to indicate both the deity of Christ and the flesh, that is to say the incarnation, by mentioning the name ‘Christ’, and the unity of deity and greatness of power by mentioning the name ‘God.’”⁵² John Chrysostom reports that some use the verse to argue not that the Son is unlike the Father in substance but that he is subordinate to the Father—a position that comes close to the *ESV Study Bible*.⁵³ Augustine also knows of people taking this position. In his late work on heresies, he discusses a certain Donatus, who was known for his eloquence and who championed the cause of the Donatists. Augustine writes, “There exist writings of his which make it clear that he did not hold the Catholic position on the Trinity, but thought that, though they are of the same substance, the Son was inferior to the Father and the Holy Spirit inferior to the Son. But the vast majority of the Donatists did not take note of this erroneous view which he held concerning the Trinity, nor is it easy to find anyone among them who knows that he held this position.”⁵⁴ For Augustine anyone who asserts the equality of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and yet also insists upon the superiority of the Father and subordination of the Son departs from the catholic position on the Trinity and embraces an erroneous view of the Trinity.

Some today would object to Ambrose’s reading of 1 Corinthians 11:3 by claiming that Saint Paul often refers to the Father as “God.” Martin Chemnitz notes this and then explains why Ambrose’s reading of the verse is correct. Chemnitz writes,

In scripture the Father is not only called the Father but also the God of Christ (John 20:17; 2 Cor. 11:31; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3). That He is the God of someone involves the idea of greater and lesser, superior and inferior. Christ, therefore, is lesser or inferior to the Father in glory, not however according to His deity but according to His humanity (1 Cor 11:3). The husband is the head of the

⁵² Ambrose, *De Fide* 4.3.30, in *Ambrosius von Mailand: “De Fide,”* ed. Christoph Marksches (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 2:480. Note that the numbering of *De Fide* by Marksches differs from that in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd ser., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, vol. 10, *St. Ambrose: Select Works and Letters* (New York: Christian Literature, 1896).

⁵³ *I Corinthians: The Church’s Bible*, trans. Judith Kovacs (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 179–180: “At this point, the heretics pounce on us and twist these words to mean that the Son is inferior. But they fall into their own trap. For if *the head of a woman is her husband*, and the head has the same substance as the body, and *the head of Christ is God*, then the Son has the same substance as the Father. ‘But,’ objects the heretic, ‘with these words we are not trying to demonstrate a difference in substance, but rather that the Son is subordinate.’” Cf. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Commentary on the Letters of St. Paul*, trans. Robert Charles Hill (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox, 2001), 1:203–204.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *Heresies* 69.2, in WSA 1/18:50–51 (= CCSL 46:332).

wife, but the Head of every man is Christ. Indeed, He is the Head of all the angels (Eph 1:21-22). But God is the Head of Christ. However, according to His deity the Father is not the Head of Christ, for Christ is equal with God (Phil 2:6). Paul thus shows that the human nature in Christ has been exalted above all creatures, but is below or lower than God, as Luther so wisely teaches from this passage in Paul. Ambrose, *De Fide*, Bk. 4, ch. 3, explains this statement of Paul in the same way.⁵⁵

For Chemnitz there is no eternal headship of the Father over the Son. Scripture says God is the head of Christ to show that the human nature assumed by the Son is below or lower than God.

This same understanding of 1 Corinthians 11:3 appears with the Lutheran dogmaticians in both their commentaries and dogmatic works. For Tilemann Hesshus (1527–1588), when Saint Paul says that God is the head of Christ, he refers to Christ “in the flesh”; for Aegidius Hunnius (1550–1603), God is called the head of Christ “not with reference to the divine nature of Christ but to the human nature”; for Johann Quenstedt (1617–1688), God is the head of Christ “insofar as he is man, or with respect to the human nature”; for Sebastian Schmidt (1617–1696), God is the head of Christ, “according to his humanity.”⁵⁶ So too the Lutheran study Bibles of the seventeenth century emphasize the same interpretation of the verse. The Weimar Bible (*Das Weimarische Bibelwerk*), which is the work of thirty Lutheran theologians initially under the editorship of Johann Gerhard, states, “God the Father is the head of Christ, for Christ is less than the Father in his human nature, John 14:28.”⁵⁷ Likewise, Abraham Calov’s *Biblia Illustrata* states, “*The head of Christ* is said to be *God*, not according to the divine nature, because the Father and the Son are one (John 10:30), but according to the human nature, according to which the

⁵⁵ Chemnitz, *Two Natures in Christ*, 275.

⁵⁶ Tilemann Hesshus, *Explicatio prioris epistolae ad Corinthios* (Jena: Ernst von Gera, 1573), 166–167; Aegidius Hunnius, *Epistolae Divi Apostoli Pauli, Ad Corinthios Prioris, Expositio Plana et Perspicua* (Wittenberg: Mullerus, 1601), 368–369; Johann Andreas Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1.9.2.5, *fontes solutionum* 7 (Wittenberg: Johannis Ludolphi Quenstedtii, 1691), 364; Sebastian Schmidt, *Commentarii in Epistolas D. Pauli Ad Romanos, Galatas & Colossenses: Una cum Paraphrasi Epistolae Prioris ad Corinthios, Utriusque ad Thessalonicenses, Prioris ad Timotheum, Epistolae ad Philemonem, [et] Cantici Mariae* (Hamburg: Schillerus, 1704), 856–857. See also Johann Wilhelm Baier, *Compendium Theologiae Positivae, Adjectis Notis Amplioribus*, ed. Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (St. Louis: Ex Officina Synodi Missouriensis Lutheranae [Luth. Concordia-Verlag], 1879), 1:72. Georg Stoeckhardt, “Der moderne Subordinationismus in Licht der Schrift,” *Lehre und Wehre* 40, no. 5 (May 1894): 131.

⁵⁷ Johann Gerhard and Solomon Glassius, eds., *Das Weimarische Bibelwerk: Biblia das ist die ganze Heilige Schrift Alten und Neun Testaments . . . auf Herzog Ernst’s Verordnung von etlichen reinen Theologen dem eigentlichen Wortverstand nach erklärt* (St. Louis and Leipzig: Fr. Dette, 1877), 298.

Father is greater (John 14:28).⁵⁸ Finally, Calov's German commentary on the Bible, the so-called Calov Bible, which J. S. Bach owned, states, "*God is the head of Christ according to the flesh or human nature* (cf. 1 Cor 3:23; 1 Cor 15:28), who with God his Father, according to the divinity, is of one undivided essence (John 10:30), as also with the Holy Spirit (1 John 5:7)."⁵⁹

Not all Lutherans during the seventeenth century read 1 Corinthians 11:3 in this way. Heinrich Nicolai (1605–1665), who was an advocate of the irenic or syncretistic theology of his day, used 1 Corinthians 11:3, among other texts, to argue for the eternal subordination of the Son.⁶⁰ Both Calov and Quenstedt vehemently opposed his published position on the Trinity and his use of this verse to teach the eternal subordination of the Son. Nicolai reads 1 Corinthians 11:3 as a reference to the eternal relation of Father and Son.⁶¹ He further argues that the order (τάξις) of the divine persons, according to their eternal processions, indicates that the Father is superior to the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁶² Because the Son is from the Father, the Son must be posterior in both order and authority to the Father and therefore subordinate.⁶³

Quenstedt rejects Nicolai's position as both contrary to Scripture and theologically confused. The mode of origin or order in the Trinity does not introduce superiority or inferiority.⁶⁴ Quenstedt writes, "Where there is nothing greater or less, but equal glory and majesty, there one person has no prerogative or superiority over another, there one is not greater than another, there origin should not be used to make one person greater than another but should be used to preserve the equality of persons."⁶⁵ What does τάξις, or the order of persons, mean? Quenstedt continues,

⁵⁸ Abraham Calov, *Biblia Novi Testamenti Illustrata* (Dresden and Leipzig: Zimmermann, 1719), 2:351.

⁵⁹ Abraham Calov, *Die Heilige Bibel* (Wittenberg: Schrödter, 1682), 3.2:292.

⁶⁰ Nicolai is often described by scholars today as teaching tritheism. Calov and Quenstedt refer to his position as Arianism. Nicolai denied the charge as slanderous. Heinrich Nicolai, *De Methodo Trinitatis* (Elbinga: Literis Corellianus, 1654), § 33, p. 41 and § 36, pp. 42–43. Cf. Abraham Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum* (Wittenberg: Andreae Hartmanni, 1659), vol. 3, art. 2, chap. 2, q. 3, p. 213; Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 2, q. 5, Ἀντίθεσις 6, p. 363. Nicolai eventually retracted his false opinions and died in the faith of the church. See A. Bertling, "Nicolai, Heinrich," in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1886), 23:591–592, <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd122896637.html>.

⁶¹ Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*, 3, art. 2, chap. 2, q. 3, p. 210; Nicolai, *De Methodo Trinitatis*, § 16.

⁶² Nicolai, *De Methodo Trinitatis*, §§ 20, 37, 39, 46, 48.

⁶³ Nicolai, *De Methodo Trinitatis*, § 46. Calov, *Systema Locorum Theologicorum*, 3, art. 2, chap. 2, q. 3, p. 210; Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 2, q. 5, fontes solutionum 13, p. 373.

⁶⁴ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 2, q. 5, fontes solutionum 13, p. 373.

⁶⁵ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 2, q. 5, βεβαίωσις 5, p. 372. Cf. Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 1, thesis 17, p. 327:

“A spring [*fons*] has no superiority and greatness with respect to running water but only a priority of order. The same applies to the sun and its rays. Neither is the Father, who is the source of deity [*fons Deitatis*], superior to the Son; for to argue from the order of procession to the prerogative of essence is a *non sequitur*. . . . The order of origin in the divine does not in any way introduce greatness, whether taken strictly or broadly. In the Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less.”⁶⁶ Quenstedt concludes with a clear assessment of those proposing the Son’s eternal subordination: those who “assign a certain greatness to God the Father with respect to the Son are to a remarkable degree in agreement with the claims of the Arians.”⁶⁷

1 Corinthians 15:28

Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Martin Luther, and Georg Stoeckhardt offer lengthy treatments of 1 Corinthians 15:28.⁶⁸ None are easy to summarize. All four insist that the verse discusses the Son’s saving work for us and not his eternal relation to the Father. For Gregory of Nyssa, “subjection has no place” in the eternal relation of Father and Son.⁶⁹ Furthermore, the “context” of the passage shows that Saint Paul is discussing the resurrection and our salvation accomplished by Christ.⁷⁰ Gregory notes how Saint Paul identifies the church with Christ’s body, and thus the Son’s subjection refers to his mystical body, the church, and the completion of his saving work.⁷¹ For Gregory what Saint Paul calls “subjection” in 1 Corinthians 15, he calls “reconciliation” in Romans 5, “signifying by both terms the one idea, which is salvation.”⁷²

The real distinction of the divine persons arises from their order, both in subsistence and in activity. And yet we must distinguish between order of nature, order of time, order of dignity, and order of origin and relation. We ascribe no order of nature to the divine persons, because they are *homoousios*, of the same nature and essence. Nor do we ascribe an order of time, because they are consubstantial and coeternal, nor an order of dignity, because they are of the same honor. But we do ascribe to them an order of origin and relation, because the Father is from no one, the Son is from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is from both.

⁶⁶ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 2, q. 5, *fontes solutionum* 1, p. 373.

⁶⁷ Quenstedt, *Systema Theologicum*, 1, 9, sec. 2, q. 5, *Ἐχθεις* 3, p. 362.

⁶⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the ‘Final Subjection’ of Christ,” in *On Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Brian E. Daley (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2022), 65–85; Augustine, “Question 69: On the Meaning of 1 Corinthians 15:28,” in *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, in WSA 1/12:121–128; Martin Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15* (1532–1533), in AE 28:124–126 and 141; see also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 2:390–391; Stoeckhardt, “Der moderne Subordinationismus,” 131–140.

⁶⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the ‘Final Subjection’ of Christ” 3, p. 69.

⁷⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the ‘Final Subjection’ of Christ” 6, p. 71.

⁷¹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the ‘Final Subjection’ of Christ” 10–13, pp. 76–79.

⁷² Gregory of Nyssa, “On the ‘Final Subjection’ of Christ” 17, p. 84. Gregory’s entire reading of 1 Cor 15:28 is guided by Ps 61:1 (LXX), “Shall not my soul be subjected [*ὑποταγῆται*] to God?

Augustine reports that the Arians used 1 Corinthians 15:28 to argue that the Son is not equal to the Father but eternally subjected to him. For Augustine, they misunderstood this verse because they neglected the broader context of the chapter, which addresses the resurrection and the saving work of Christ, and therefore failed to rightly distinguish the two natures of Christ. In this case, they took a passage about the humanity of Christ and applied it to the divinity of Christ. Augustine explains,

[T]he rule of Catholic faith holds that, when it is said in some places in scripture that the Son is less than the Father, they are to be referred to his assumption of humanity, whereas, when it is clearly said in other places that he is equal, they are to be accepted as referring to the fact that he is God. It is evident, then, how it is said that *the Father is greater than I* (Jn 14:28), and, *I and the Father are one* (Jn 10:30), and *the Word was God* (Jn 1:1), and *the Word was made flesh* (Jn 1:14).⁷³

For Augustine, 1 Corinthians 15:28 refers to Christ's assumption of humanity.⁷⁴

Martin Luther considers the broader context of the passage and highlights how Christ rules his present kingdom in a hidden manner through the external word. When the Son hands everything over to the Father, the veil will be removed and what faith knows now through word and sacrament will be made clear to all.⁷⁵ Luther explains, "This is what St. Paul calls delivering the Kingdom to the Father, that is, presenting us and His whole Christendom openly to the Father into eternal clarity and glory, that He Himself may reign without cloak or cover. But Christ will nevertheless retain His rule and majesty; for He is the same God and Lord, eternal and omnipotent with the Father."⁷⁶ On that last and glorious day, our Lord will say, as Luther puts it, "Until now I reigned with You by faith. This I deliver to You, that they may see that I am in You and You are in Me, joined together with the Holy Spirit in one divine Majesty, and that they have and enjoy visibly in You what they hitherto believed and looked forward to."⁷⁷

Our Lutheran fathers repeat the insights of Gregory, Augustine, and Luther, often citing them explicitly to make their point. Martin Chemnitz echoes Augustine

For from him is my salvation. For he is my God, my Savior and my Helper, and I shall be shaken no more." Both Ps 61:1 (LXX) and 1 Cor 15:28 use *ὑποταγήσεται*. Gregory aligns these passages ("salvation is signified by subjection") and especially notes the significance of the future tense. See Gregory of Nyssa, "On the 'Final Subjection' of Christ" 2, 5, and 13, pp. 67, 71, and 79–80.

⁷³ Augustine, "Question 69" 1, WSA 1/12:122.

⁷⁴ Augustine, "Question 69" 2, WSA 1/12:123.

⁷⁵ Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15, 28:124–126.

⁷⁶ Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15, 28:141.

⁷⁷ Luther, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* 15, 28:141.

and insists that 1 Corinthians 15:28 refers to the human nature of Christ.⁷⁸ Johann Gerhard cites the Greek fathers, particularly Gregory of Nazianzus and Cyril of Alexandria, to show that Saint Paul is discussing the mystical body of Christ and that this is what will be subjected to the Father.⁷⁹ Abraham Calov agrees with Chemnitz and Gerhard and provides lengthy citations from the above texts by Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Martin Luther to show that 1 Corinthians 15:28 is about the saving work of Christ for us.⁸⁰

Finally, Georg Stoeckhardt in 1894 wrote a seventy-page essay in *Lehre und Wehre* against the subordinationists of his day.⁸¹ Stoeckhardt discusses every significant text from Scripture that has been used by subordinationists past and present in his essay. He reproduces the Nicene exegesis of the dogmaticians and reformers on such texts as John 5:19 and 16:13. He also provides a lengthy explanation of 1 Corinthians 15:28 that expands upon Luther's insights. Any assertion of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father is contrary to the context of the passage. Stoeckhardt writes, "The apostle, who here describes the completion of the kingdom of God, does not want to say anything about the essential relationship of the Son to the Father. Christ is considered here, as the whole context shows, not according to his

⁷⁸ Chemnitz, *Two Natures in Christ*, 275.

⁷⁹ Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and the Divine Attributes* (1625 exegesis), in *Theological Commonplaces*, vol. exegesis 2–3, *On the Nature of God and on the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), § 195, p. 191:

Against this insanity and madness we set forth these theorems: (a) The power of the Father and the Son is one and the kingdom that they both administer is one. Therefore as the power and kingdom of the Father is eternal, so also the power and kingdom of the Son is eternal and vice versa. (b) According to His human nature, Christ is inferior to and less than the Father (John 14:28; 1 Cor 11:3; 15:27). (c) [Scripture] says that finally at the Last Judgment the Son will be subjected to the Father. Nazianzen (*Or.* 31.5) and Cyril (*Thesaurus* 1.18) explain this as referring to the mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church. Thus the meaning is that when He hands His kingdom over to God the Father, it will happen that the Church clearly will be subjected to God and all the faults—because of which the Church Militant did not appear to be perfectly subject to Him—will be removed from that most happy kingdom.

Cf. Johann Gerhard, *On the Last Judgment*, in *Theological Commonplaces*, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, vol. 30–31, *On the Resurrection of the Dead, on the Last Judgment*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes, Heath R. Curtis, and Aaron Jensen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020), § 112, pp. 458–461; cited in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:392n103.

⁸⁰ Calov, *Biblia Novi Testamenti Illustrata*, 2:398–399.

⁸¹ Georg Stoeckhardt, "Der moderne Subordinationismus in Licht der Schrift," *Lehre und Wehre* 40, no. 1 (January 1894): 17: "The spokesmen of modern theology, and especially of so-called confessional or ecclesiastical theology, also distort Christology; they are on the one hand kenoticists, on the other hand subordinationists. Even if they hold to the eternal generation of the Son from the Father and the essential equality and unity of the Son with the Father in the wording, they nevertheless define the deity of Christ as a derived and conditioned deity and thereby establish a certain subordination of the Son, as well as of the Spirit, to the Father."

eternal being, his divine nature, but as the incarnate Son of God, according to his work and office, as the mediator of salvation.”⁸²

IV. Conclusion

Luther once quipped, “[H]e that coins new words, coins new doctrines.”⁸³ Those who advocate for the eternal subordination of the Son talk differently because they teach differently.⁸⁴ They confess a different doctrine of the Trinity than that confessed by the church fathers, ecumenical councils, Lutheran dogmaticians, and the fathers of the early Missouri Synod. They promote a new understanding of nature, person, will, and authority; they reject the Nicene exegesis of Scripture as preached and taught by the church fathers and our Lutheran dogmaticians; and they distort central trinitarian teachings of the church, such as the indivisible and inseparable works of the Trinity and a proper understanding of the order of the divine persons. And as Luther put it, that is wrong. May the Lord keep us ever faithful to his word and use us to confess with clarity and boldness the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, indivisibly and inseparably one in nature, power, will, and authority.

⁸² Stoeckhardt, “Der moderne Subordinationismus,” 135.

⁸³ Martin Chemnitz, Nicolaus Selnecker, and Timothy Kirchner cite this statement as Luther’s rule in their refutation of the Anhalt theologians. Martin Chemnitz, Timotheus Kirchner, and Nicolaus Selnecker, *Apology or Vindication of the Christian Book of Concord*, trans. James L. Langebartels, ed. Kevin G. Walker, Chemnitz’s Works 10 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 157: “Therefore Luther’s rule: ‘Whoever forms new ways of speaking simultaneously forms new things [i.e., doctrines].’” (= *Apologia Libri Christianae Concordiae* [Heidelberg: Ioannes Spies, 1583], chap. 4, p. 70: “Quare regula Lutheri, qui nouas phrases fingit, nouas simul res fingit.”) This rule is frequently cited as *Qui fingit nova verba, nova gignit dogmata* but often without Luther’s name. See, for example, John Gill, *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 1:xvi.

⁸⁴ Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 1:109: “Heresy arises from the improper use of words.”