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**NICENE TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY:
REFUTING THE ETERNAL SUBORDINATION OF THE SON AND THE SPIRIT**

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CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Subordinationism In Contemporary Theology	8
<i>The Development of the Contemporary Subordinationist View</i>	
<i>The Immanent and Economic Trinity</i>	
<i>Biblical Perspectives In Contemporary Subordinationist Ideologies</i>	
<i>Perichoresis and Intra-Trinitarian Relations</i>	
Chapter Two: A Historical Review of Nicene Trinitarian Theology	39
<i>Historical Developments In Nicene Trinitarian Theology</i>	
<i>The Biblical Perspective of Nicene Trinitarian Theology</i>	
<i>Holding All Things In Balance</i>	
Chapter Three: Reviving Nicene Trinitarian Theology	70
<i>Recommendations for Reviving Nicene Trinitarian Theology in the Evangelical Church</i>	
<i>Bearing The Image of God</i>	
<i>Perichoresis</i>	
Conclusion	87
Bibliography	92

INTRODUCTION

After several generations of near silence in Trinitarian theology, a new wave of interest has been piqued. A debate amongst Evangelical Christians has been instigated centering upon the immanent nature of God. While the Evangelical Church at large openly confesses the basic tenets of the creeds outlining the doctrine of the Trinity, a chasm has formed dividing Evangelicals on the topic of *authority* within the intra-Trinitarian fellowship. Ultimately, the debate hinges upon the question: Does the Trinity embody an eternal hierarchical structure with the Father established in a position of supreme authority over the Son and the Spirit, or does the Trinity share authority coequally? The dynamic responses to this question are represented in two distinct views. One view argues that the persons of the Trinity are equal in essence and being, but Jesus is eternally subordinate to the Father in role and function. Subsequently, the Holy Spirit is subordinate in function to both the Father and the Son. In this view, the distinctions of the persons of the Trinity are necessarily maintained through the functional subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father's supreme authority.¹ In opposition to this notion of hierarchy, the other view maintains complete coequality within the Trinity in both essence and functionality. It is recognized, and affirmed, that Jesus assumed a role of subordination for the missional fulfillment of salvation through His incarnation, but this temporary function of subordination did not represent His eternal nature, only His *kenotic*, self-emptied, state in the incarnation. Surely, there are variations regarding the

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 252.

particulars of the disagreement at hand, but for the most part, this brief explanation offers a basic assessment of the debate.

When surveying the writings of the early Church, and the formation of Nicene Trinitarian doctrine, the belief that God's triunity is to be understood communally as an intimate, self-giving fellowship of three equal persons, united as one substance, with a united will, undivided in work and functionality, reverberates as the heartbeat of Trinitarian theology. With this in mind, the notion that a hierarchical order exists within the Godhead, dividing the persons of the Trinity, seems disjointed and inconsistent. This research project will aim to demonstrate that the concept of hierarchy, and gradational levels of authority, within the immanent Trinity are not representative of classic Nicene Trinitarian thought.

The doctrine of the Trinity was forged in the flames of controversy as Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, began to deny that Jesus is eternally one in being, work, and authority with the Father.² In response, the bishops of the church mobilized in the face of this problem and began forming the creeds with the aim of completely condemning any form of subordinationism. As a result, traditional theology is vibrant with language promoting the coequality of the Trinity while simultaneously seeking to uphold distinctions amongst the Father, Son, and Spirit in a manner which avoids staunch hierarchical structures, modalism, or tritheism.³ With this in mind, one may wonder what

² Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), 186-191.

³ Surely, there are distinctions between the Western Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in describing the procession of the Holy Spirit in regards to the filioque clause, but it will be demonstrated in Chapter 2 that both the Western and Eastern traditions uphold the coequality of the Godhead in both Being and Act.

motivates subordinationist ideologies in contemporary Evangelical theology today, and, furthermore, how do they differ from the subordinationist ideologies of the fourth century?

On the heels of the women's movement in the mid-twentieth century, Evangelicals were faced with the challenge of re-examining doctrine regarding the personhood and functionality of women. Prior to the women's movement, it was not uncommon for women to be naturally confined in role and function both in the workplace and the home. Hence, when women began to seek *atypical* roles in family, church, and home, Evangelicals were faced with the challenge of reconciling biblical concepts of the perceived prescriptive subordination of women with the fast-changing dynamics of society. Kevin Giles points out that it was at this point that George Knight III published his highly influential book, *New Testament Teaching on the Roles and Relationships of Men and Women* (1977).⁴ In this book, George Knight III directly links the permanent subordination of women to the nature of God as revealed through the Trinity. Knight argued that the God-given subordination of women in the church and home is a reflection of Jesus' eternal subordination to the Father, particularly, in role and function.⁵ Kevin Giles notes that George Knight III was the first theologian in contemporary theology to teach that Jesus is equal to the Father in Personhood (fully divine), but eternally subordinate in role, function, and authority.⁶

⁴ Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 41.

⁵ George Knight III, *New Testament Teaching on the Role and Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1977).

⁶ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 20.

This nuance was popularized by Wayne Grudem in his publication of *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.⁷ Prior to this, concepts of subordinationism in Trinitarian theology generally encompassed both *personhood* and *functionality*. It was a new concept to insist that Jesus was eternally subordinate in *role* and *authority*, yet coequal to the Father in His *personhood*. Consequently, this ideology provided space for a legitimate hierarchical structure permanently subordinating a woman in role and function while simultaneously affirming her equality of personhood as it, supposedly, mirrored the nature of God. Over time, this concept of Jesus' *functional subordination* to the Father became a staple in Evangelical Trinitarian theology amongst complementarians.⁸

It is duly noted that while contemporary Trinitarian theology has been used to promote hierarchical structures, it has also been utilized to promote human liberation, equality, and emancipation.⁹ A question seems to reverberate: if God created men and

⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1994). It is important to note the significant influence of Wayne Grudem's *Systematic Theology* as his ideology reinforcing the eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit will be referenced frequently throughout this paper. Grudem's *Systematic Theology* is the most widely used theological text in conservative seminaries around the world with some 600,000 copies in print in the American edition alone. His impact on Evangelicals, Charismatics, and Pentecostals is significant, and his presentation of the eternal subordination of the Son and the permanent subordination of women permeates conservative Evangelical communities around the world. These statistics were taken from: Kevin Giles, Fred Sanders, and Ron Pierce. 2012. "The Trinity and Gender: The Recent Debate Among Evangelicals: A Dialogue between Dr. Kevin Giles (egalitarian) & Dr. Fred Sanders (complementarian)." Debate, Biola University, La Mirada, October 24. Accessed Feb. 1, 2016. <http://open.biola.edu/resources/the-trinity-and-gender-the-recent-debate-among-evangelicals>.

⁸ For the most part, the divide amongst conservative Evangelicals regarding the hierarchical structure of the Trinity can be represented by complementarians (promoting the notion of the eternal subordination of Jesus in role/function) and egalitarians (rejecting the concept of Jesus' eternal subordination to the Father).

⁹ We see this in the work of Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (New York: Orbis, 1998), Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), and Millard Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995).

women in His own image, how does this play out in communal relationships? Did God not intend for human relationships to mirror (in some capacity) the beautiful communion revealed in the Trinity? Ultimately, an emphasis on the implications of Trinitarian life for communal relations is woven into contemporary Trinitarian theology. In assessing these questions, it is vital that (1) we have a correct view of God, and (2) we resist the temptation of projecting our personal ideals for social structure into the immanent Trinity. It is a grave mistake to downplay the importance of this topic. This is a serious debate regarding the doctrine of God as our understanding of God will serve to influence a multiplicity of areas, not simply our concept of women's roles in church and family. This project is focused on unveiling the Nicene view of the Trinity in an effort to demonstrate that the hierarchical social ideals of contemporary subordinationists are being projected upon the Trinity in contemporary Evangelical theology.

A.W. Tozer asserts, "What comes to our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."¹⁰ The differing views presented above carry great weight as they outline very distinct concepts of the nature of God. These concepts are being utilized to influence the outworking of community life in church and family, and if they are incongruent with classic Nicene Trinitarian principles, it seems wise to discredit these assertions. Tozer says, "We tend by a secret law of the soul to move toward our mental image of God. This is true not only of the individual Christian, but of the company of Christians that compose the Church."¹¹ Furthermore, he speculates, "Were we able to

¹⁰ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper Collins Publishing, 1961), 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2

know exactly what our most influential religious leaders think of God today, we might be able with some precision to foretell where the Church will stand tomorrow.”¹² The mental images of God we seek to correct are those which have formed as a result of social conditioning. It is evident that particular perspectives on the nature of God have been formed in reference to social ideologies of subordination, and, in turn, continue to shape human life under these ideologies *in-the-name-of-God*. The question is, are these perspectives an accurate representation of God as upheld through Nicene thought? It is vital we maintain the doctrine of the Trinity in its purest form and prevent it from being adjusted to affirm social ideals.

The purpose of this paper is to refute false ideologies of subordinationism in Evangelical Trinitarian theology and to reinforce the tenets of the Creeds which emphasize coequality, coeternity, and consubstantiality within the Godhead. Adopting any form of subordinationism is problematic as doing so undermines the original intentions of Nicene Trinitarian theology and superimposes patriarchal ideologies of hierarchy into the Trinity. The ancient concept of *perichoresis*, which describes the Trinity as an ever-active, divine dance centered upon a single will, provides a more Nicene view of the intra-Trinitarian fellowship. Rather than viewing the Trinity as a staunch hierarchy, the Nicene bishops of the early Church understood the Godhead to be united as, “A poly-centric community of symmetrical reciprocity.”¹³ Eternal subordination within the Godhead deviates from the beauty of Nicene Trinitarian

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

theology, and, furthermore, is being utilized to impose hierarchical structures in Church, family, and society which emphasize (unjustly) the permanent subordination of women.

CHAPTER ONE:
SUBORDINATIONISM IN CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

As stated in the introduction, one of the first subordinationist ideologies to permeate the Church was formulated by Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria.¹⁴ In his attempt to explain the complexities of the incarnation, he concluded that the Son was not fully *God*, but rather a *subordinate god*. Arius taught *ontological subordination*. The Greek word *ontos* designates *being* and the essential nature or essence of something or someone.¹⁵ When Arius began to teach that Jesus was eternally differentiated from the Father in *being*, he deformed the truth of Jesus' nature and denied His oneness and equality with God. In response to this quickly growing heresy, the First Ecumenical Council was gathered in Nicaea in 325 and Arianism was adamantly rejected. It was decided to agree on a creed that would express the faith of the Church in such a way that all forms of Arianism were excluded. Consequently, the Nicene Creed was designed.

The Nicene Creed included language emphasizing Jesus' eternal equality with the Father in *substance* or *being* (Greek *homoousios*) and His *authority*.¹⁶ Jesus is defined as being, "... God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, by whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth...."¹⁷ After identifying his equality with God the Father, the work of redemption is described, "... who for us humans and for our salvation descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day...."¹⁸ There

¹⁴ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2010), 186-191.

¹⁵ Kevin Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 13.

¹⁶ González, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1*, 188.

¹⁷ Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 35-36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

is a distinction between His ontological equality with the God the Father and the economic subordination experienced, temporarily, in the incarnation. In the heartbeat of the Creed rests the understanding that Jesus' *kenotic*, self-emptied, work of redemption does not translate back into His ontological nature as an eternal subordination to the Father. If this ideology were accepted, it would rupture the unity and oneness of the Trinity. Furthermore, it would have the potential of diminishing the work of redemption as the *Word* becoming flesh would be perceived as an act of obedience rather than a voluntary choice of God [the *Logos*] to suffer and lay down His life for the sake of the world. This Creed, outlining the Christian doctrine of God, has been the bedrock of orthodox Christianity throughout the ages.

The contemporary form of subordinationism seeks to demonstrate an eternal subordination in the *functioning* aspects of the Trinity while simultaneously upholding ontological equality. This view is articulated by Wayne Grudem who states, "The Son and the Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles."¹⁹ This suggests that the inequality of roles is of an eternal nature serving to differentiate the Persons of the Trinity.²⁰ It must be noted that the emphasis on *functional subordination* is a unique nuance in contemporary theology which seems to have crept into Trinitarian dialogue in the twentieth century. Millard Erickson affirms that the modern discussion of the functional authority of the persons of the Trinity has

¹⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 249.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

experienced a gradual change over the last century and a half.²¹ This shift in emphasis can be discerned when surveying contemporary Trinitarian theology and noting the subtle adjustments over time. Paradoxically, those who uphold the subordinationist view disagree staunchly, arguing that the subordination of the Son has been clearly depicted as a functional aspect of the Godhead throughout the ages. They argue that the church fathers emphasized Jesus' subordination. Their argument demonstrates the complexity of the topic as both parties affirm the authority of Scripture as the inerrant Word of God and uphold orthodox tradition as a vital foundation for sound theological work. A proper assessment of the topic will require a careful look at the historical development of Nicene Trinitarian theology as well as a survey of the Scriptures utilized in support of each view to tease out the truth.

This first chapter will focus, solely, on outlining the contemporary subordinationist view. Before reviewing the historical development of Nicene Trinitarian theology, it will be beneficial to ascertain the ideologies of the contemporary subordinationist view in order to identify the ways in which their arguments depart from Nicene orthodoxy. Doing so will be accomplished by summarizing some of the most influential theological voices promoting the eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit in Evangelical circles. This summary will be followed by a brief survey of the primary Scriptures used by contemporary subordinationists to demonstrate Christ's eternal subordination to the Father. Since it is my claim that a hierarchical structure is being projected into the immanent Trinity with the patriarchal agenda of creating

²¹ Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009), 27.

theological grounding for the permanent subordination of women, I will aim to demonstrate the way contemporary subordinationists are using hierarchical ideologies in Trinitarian theology as a correlative to the permanent subordination of women.

Development of the Contemporary Subordinationist View

The specific views presented in this sections serve to demonstrate the subtle adjustments in Evangelical Trinitarian theology promoting the eternal functional subordination of the Son. There is an obvious link between the desire to emphasize the eternal subordination of Jesus with the permanent subordination of women which is highlighted through this brief presentation. Prior to the 1800s, theologians did not utilize Trinitarian theology for defining the roles and functions of men and women. The relatively recent and novel application of Trinitarian theology which departs from Nicene Trinitarianism also projects personal social ideals into the doctrine of the Trinity.

Charles Hodge (1797-1898)

Charles Hodge was likely one of the most influential voices in Evangelical theology in the late nineteenth century. He taught systematic theology, alongside his two sons, at Princeton Seminary for more than fifty years.²² Hodge published his own systematic theology text. In his section on the Trinity, he affirms the divinity of the Son, but also repeatedly speaks of the Son's subordination to the Father.²³ He teaches that the Bible clearly outlines a hierarchy in the Trinity and that three essential facts sum up the

²² Ibid.

²³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 1:445.

Trinity: “unity of essence, distinction of Persons, and subordination.”²⁴ Hodge writes, “In the Holy Trinity there is a subordination of the Persons as to the mode of subsistence and operation.”²⁵ The ‘mode of subsistence’ is key in Hodge’s language as it depicts the distinctions of the persons of the Trinity not only in operation, but also in *Being*.

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines *subsistence* as “real being; an essential characteristic of something that exists.”²⁶ According to Hodge, the mode of operations of the persons serves to define the eternal nature (subsistence) of the persons. Hodge affirms that the Trinity is one divine substance, which *subsists* in three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. The eternal nature of the Trinity as Father first, Son second, and Spirit third, demonstrates a hierarchical order in both operation and subsistence.

It is important to note that Hodge did not separate functional subordination from subordination in subsistence. Rather, he saw them as two sides to the same coin.²⁷ Hodge affirmed equality and oneness of essence in the Godhead, but his emphasis on eternal subordination *in subsistence* makes this confusing as subsistence seems to be synonymous with ontology. As noted earlier, *ontos* designates *being* and the essential nature of something or someone.²⁸ When a hierarchy of subsistence is claimed, it implies something of the ontological nature. Hodge adamantly affirmed an eternal hierarchy saying this was demonstrated through God’s self-revelation to humanity as Father, Son,

²⁴ Ibid., 467.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ “Subsistence.” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subsistence>. Accessed 2/9/16.

²⁷ Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 37.

²⁸ Giles, *The Trinity & Subordinationism*, 13

and Spirit. Charles Hodge represented a fairly stringent form of subordinationism which is heavily relied upon by contemporary subordinationists. Wayne Grudem, one of the leading voices for the eternal subordination of the Son, quotes Charles Hodge often as one who taught the eternal subordination of Jesus in role and function. In reality, Hodge taught an eternal subordination of Jesus in *both function and subsistence (personhood)*; this differs from Grudem's theology since Grudem only seeks to enforce eternal subordination in *functionality* and openly rejects eternal subordination in personhood/being.

Augustus Strong (1836-1921)

Augustus Strong followed close in the footsteps of Hodge in his discussion of the Trinity in his own *Systematic Theology* published in the early twentieth century. Much like Hodge, he points toward the procession of the Son from the Father, and that of the Spirit from the Father and the Son, as an irreversible attribute designating an eternal order of hierarchy within the Trinity.²⁹ Interestingly, Strong may be the first to relate this to a woman's role of subordination. He says, "Priority is not necessarily superiority. The possibility of an order, which yet involves no inequality, may be illustrated by the relation between man and woman. In office man is first and woman second, but woman's soul is worth as much as man's...."³⁰ This language became popular in more contemporary theology as Evangelicals sought to convince the Church to embrace the notion that a

²⁹ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (Westwood, NJ: Revell, 1907), 336.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 342.

woman's role of subordination does not imply an inequality of *personhood*. Rather, it simply demonstrates her distinction from men as the unequal counterpart in regards to her *functionality*. This distinction was reinforced in conjunction with the Trinitarian fellowship as an eternal order which cannot (and should not) be reversed. The problem with this reasoning is that anytime a person's role is *eternal* or *permanent*, it implies inferiority as there is an ever-present limitation resting upon her, regardless of skill, desire, giftedness, or opportunity.

The goal was to claim complete equality in being (*ontos*), but, in reality, a permanent role of subordination implies a *difference* in being which is grounded in hierarchical inequality. Strong highlights the eternal generation of the Son as proof of His subordination to the Father in personality, office, and operation. He taught that the Father is eternally first and this priority, though it highlights a superior authority, does not insinuate inferiority of the Son and the Spirit. While there seems to be a logical incoherence in this reasoning, it was embraced by the Evangelical Church to teach, both, the eternal subordination of the Son and the permanent subordination of women.

George W. Knight III (born 1931)

George Knight III offered a new development in discussion of Trinitarian subordinationism in 1977 when he published his book, *New Testament Teaching on the Role and Relationship of Men and Women*. Until this point, in Trinitarian theology, eternal *role subordination* was not a concept utilized to describe the Trinity. Rather, embracing any form of subordination generally pointed toward a descending hierarchy in

regards to personhood/being and functionality. Another area often left untouched in Trinitarian discourse (aside from Strong's work) was the deliberate correlation between a woman's permanent subordination and Christ's eternal subordination to the Father. George Knight III was one of the first theologians to cause a forward thrust in this ideology by placing a distinct emphasis upon these two areas which now saturate contemporary theology. He set out to reinforce the exclusion of women from authoritative roles in church and family in response to the women's movement. He did this by utilizing New Testament teachings and by teaching Trinitarian subordinationism to form a specific theological grounding for the subordination of women.

Knight appeals to 1 Corinthians 11:3 to demonstrate that the Father's authority over Christ is informative of man's permanent authority over women. He is clear in asserting that the headship of God the Father to the incarnate Christ in no way detracts from Christ's deity. Rather, he says, "This chain of subordination with its implications is apparently to answer the objection some bring to the headship of man in reference to woman. Just as Christ is not a second-class person or deity because the Father is His head, so the woman is not a second-class person or human because the man is her head."³¹ This language becomes very popular in Bruce Ware's and Wayne Grudem's work.

Knight is adamant that subordination in role and function does not detract from equality in personhood and being. For both relationships (the Father and Son/the man and woman), a permanent role of obedience simply differentiates the two. It does not

³¹ Knight, *New Testament Teaching on the Role and Relationship of Men and Women*, 9.

speak of an inequality of being. He says, “In both cases, it is [a matter of] equals in relationship to one another. In both cases, one [either Jesus or the woman], because of his or her *ontological* and ordained role in relation to the other, acknowledges headship and submits.”³² Ultimately, Knight introduced the idea that eternal role subordination should not compromise ontological equality. Furthermore, he links this ideology with the notion that women maintain equality of personhood even while being permanently subordinate to men in role and function. In response to the women’s movement, this complex argument validated a woman’s *equality of being* while simultaneously maintaining her permanent subordination and inequality in work, authority, and function.

Bruce Ware (born 1953)

Bruce Ware of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary is one of the most prominent voices teaching the eternal subordination of the Son in evangelical theology today. He prefers the language *eternal submission* since *subordination* carries negative connotations. Regardless, his Trinitarian theology boldly affirms the Father’s eternal, supreme authority over the Son and the Spirit. Ware upholds the traditional view of the Trinity in that “each member of the Godhead is equally God, each is eternally God, and each is fully God— not three gods but three Persons of the one Godhead.”³³ Yet, he places a heavy emphasis upon the authority-submission structure of the Trinity. He says, “The authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the

³² Ibid., 56. Emphasis added.

³³ Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 15-22.

One who is three.... 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.”³⁴ While he agrees with the Creeds in stating that the Trinity is equal in deity, he emphasizes an inequality in regards to authority, “The Father is, in his position and authority, supreme among the Persons of the Godhead.”³⁵ For Bruce Ware, this supremacy has implications for the process of creation, redemption, and even prayer.

Ware designates the Father as the supreme Architect, Designer, and Authority behind all that occurs.³⁶ He says it is God the Father who “... stands behind all that occurs as the One who plans and implements what he has chosen to do.”³⁷ Millard Erickson, in commenting on Bruce Ware speculates, “Thus, the Father is preeminent in foreordination, creation, providence, and many associated doctrines.”³⁸ The Father in his supremacy works through the Son and the Spirit to accomplish His work. Ware points to the order (*taxis*) of the Trinity given through Matthew 28:19 as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.³⁹ This order is not to be reversed or rearranged. Furthermore, it speaks to an order of hierarchy.

Since such a high emphasis is placed upon the Father’s supremacy, Ware also teaches that in worship and prayer the Father should be given utmost honor and glory.

³⁴ Ibid., 37.

³⁵ Ibid., 46.

³⁶ Ibid, 59.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?*, 38.

³⁹ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*, 72.

He says, “The ultimate object of our honor, glory, praise, and worship is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself alone is over all.”⁴⁰ While Ware claims he is seeking to maintain and uphold equality in deity, his over emphasis of the Father’s supremacy seems to imply the opposite. Ware affirms an equality of essence and divinity within the Trinity, but this supposed equality is disrupted by his over emphasis of the order of supremacy of the persons in function and operation.

Ware’s strong emphasis of the Father’s authority in the Trinity is supported by specific Scripture references which emphasize the Father as the One initiating plans and action in the world (Eph 1:9-12). He also draws heavily upon the Gospel of John where Jesus speaks of coming to do the Father’s will (John 6:38) and the Son being sent by the Father (John 3:16).

Following in line with Knight, Ware points to the husband and wife relationship as an earthly example of this authority: “Who is in a position of authority, with responsibility to pattern this manner of leadership after the Father? Clearly, every married man is in this category. Husbands have rightful authority in their homes with their wives, and if God has blessed them with children, their authority extends also to these precious gifts from the Lord.”⁴¹ Furthermore, he teaches that wives are to emulate *Jesus* by submitting to the authority of their husbands. Ware points toward Christ’s subordination to the Father as a theological example for the subordination of wives to husbands (and, in general, women to men).⁴² Once again, a stern view of hierarchy

⁴⁰ Ibid., 154.

⁴¹ Ibid., 59-60.

⁴² Ibid., 61.

within the intra-Trinitarian fellowship is linked to the conviction of hierarchical structures between men and women.

Wayne Grudem (born 1948)

Wayne Grudem is a professor of theology at Phoenix Seminary. He is arguable one of the most influential theologians in the Evangelical community through his popular publication, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.⁴³ As an avid supporter of complementarianism, Wayne Grudem co-founded the Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood in an effort to refute all forms of Evangelical feminism. He relies heavily upon the writings of Charles Hodge and George Knight III in his Trinitarian theology. Still, Grudem deviates from these theologians in offering new attributes to Trinitarian theology which are uniquely bound to the hierarchical structures of family and church.

In regards to the Trinity, Grudem teaches that two concepts are necessary for a true doctrine of the Trinity: “The Son and the Holy Spirit are equal in being to God, but they are subordinate in their roles.”⁴⁴ Grudem’s concept of *role subordination* is not particular to tasks or specific works amongst the Trinity, rather, it refers directly to that of commanding and obeying. He says, “... the role of commanding, directing, and sending is appropriate to the position of the Father... and the role of obeying, going as the Father

⁴³ His publication of *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* has sold nearly a half of a million copies and is the most widely used systematic theology text in evangelical seminaries and Bible colleges in North America. Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 20.

⁴⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 251.

sends, and revealing God to us is appropriate to the role of the Son....”⁴⁵ Much like Bruce Ware, Grudem emphasizes the Father’s role of orchestrating and commanding, he says, “... the role of the Father in creation and redemption has been to plan and direct and send the Son and the Holy Spirit.” He cites John 14:26, 15:26, and 16:7 to emphasize the authoritative *sending* of the Spirit by the Father through the Son.

In regards to the permanence of Christ’s subordination, Wayne Grudem sites 1 Corinthians 15:28 to demonstrate that Jesus is not only subordinate to the Father in eternity past, but will also be subordinate to God the Father in eternity future.⁴⁶ For Grudem, the eternal subordination of the Son and Spirit are vital for Trinitarian theology as it provides distinctions amongst the persons of the Trinity.⁴⁷ According to Grudem, it is the roles of commanding and obeying which also provide distinctions between men and women.

Quite possibly, Grudem is the most exhaustive in linking Trinitarian theology to the subordination of women. Grudem considers Trinitarian subordinationism to be the basis for women’s permanent subordination to men. In discussing the Trinity, he sites 1 Corinthians 11:3 and asserts, “... in the relationship between man and woman in marriage, we see also a picture of the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Trinity... just as the Father has authority over the Son in the Trinity, so the husband has authority over the wife in marriage.”⁴⁸ Grudem also teaches of the Holy Spirit’s

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 250.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 257.

subordination, saying, "... although it is not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, the gift of children within marriage, coming from both the father and mother, is analogous to the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son in the Trinity."⁴⁹ Grudem's Trinitarian theology is bound to a system of hierarchy which is depicted through a family structure with the Holy Spirit analogous to a subordinate child and Jesus to a subordinate wife. Grudem employs *analogy of being* in his Trinitarian work, and often to a detriment, as he over emphasizes the reflection of God in humanity as a direct informant of the immanent Trinity.

It should be noted that Wayne Grudem was the first to *define* the Trinity as *equal in personhood and subordinate in role*.⁵⁰ Prior to his publication of *Systematic Theology*, these two concepts were not considered *necessary* for a true doctrine of the Trinity.⁵¹ Furthermore, Wayne Grudem has always linked Christ's subordination to the Father with the family structure, and, particularly, to the subordination of women. Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., in partnership with Grudem, says of the Trinity, "God exists as one Godhead in three Persons, equal in glory but *unequal* in role.... The ranking within the Godhead is a part of the sublime beauty and logic of true deity. And if our Creator exists in this manner, should we be surprised and offended if His creaturely analog on earth exists in paradoxical form?"⁵² The aim to associate Trinitarian subordination to women's roles in

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 21.

⁵¹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251,

⁵² Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., "Male-Female Equality and Male Headship," in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper & Wayne Grudem, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2006), 103. Italics inserted.

church and family is central to Grudem's work, and for those who work in partnership with him.

While there are many other voices in contemporary theology seeking to maintain the eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit, this small sample seems to be sufficient in outlining both the progressive transformation which has taken place in Trinitarian discourse over the past century and a half as well as the ideologies represented in this transformation.

This next portion of this chapter will discuss the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity as this is a key component in the debate dividing the two views amongst evangelicals. Karl Rahner's contribution to Trinitarian theology in the twentieth century placed emphasis upon the revelation of the Trinity as depicted through the economy of God. He introduced a principle demonstrating the interconnectedness of the immanent and economic Trinity which is now known as *Rahner's Rule*: The immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity and the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity.⁵³ There are many nuances to the full meaning of Rahner's contribution, but, ultimately, for this debate, it plays a key role as subordinationists use Rahner's Rule to place an emphasis upon the economic Trinity as the full representation of the nature of God in the immanent Trinity. This has had many implications for Trinitarian theology, especially in regards to the perceived eternal subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit to the Father.

⁵³ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1967), 22.

The Immanent and Economic Trinity

Central to the debate regarding the eternal subordination of the Son is the discussion of the dynamics of the immanent and economic Trinity. The immanent Trinity speaks of God as He is *in Himself* apart from His external creation. The Greek word for the immanent Trinity is *theologia* and it was used by the Fathers in reference to the Triune God. The economic Trinity (Greek: *oikonomia*) refers to “God’s orderly way of achieving salvation of men and women.”⁵⁴ The economic Trinity points toward the self-revelation of God through the saving work of humanity as seen through history. Throughout the ages, there has been a distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity as it is understood that the ontological nature of God carries distinctions unique from the particular aspects God has revealed of Himself through His economy of salvation.

The theological foundation for Jesus’ eternal subordination to the Father, for contemporary Evangelicals, rests upon the notion that everything revealed in the economic Trinity informs us of the roles, functions, and authority in the immanent Trinity. On this basis, the incarnation is understood to demonstrate that Jesus is subordinate to the Father as an obedient counterpart, eternally. For instance, Christ’s ignorance (lack of omniscience), thirst, hunger, and obedience to the Father in the incarnation directly explains His eternal relationship with the Father in the immanent Trinity. All Scripture is viewed through this lens. Grudem explains that on earth Jesus was subordinated to the Father and this relationship tells us that He is subordinated and

⁵⁴ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 247.

obedient to the Father in all of eternity.⁵⁵ Also, Robert Letham states that the subordination seen in the incarnation is not a temporary [economic] function of Trinitarian work, rather “it is essential and eternal.”⁵⁶ Contemporary subordinationists conclude that if the Son was subordinate to the Father through His incarnate state on earth, then He must be subordinate and obedient to the Father, eternally, in heaven.

This understanding of the immanent/economic Trinity is counter to those who reject the eternal subordination of the Son. For them, the subordination seen in the incarnation does not reveal the Son’s eternal relationship with the Father. Instead, it is argued that when the *Logos* took on flesh, He *freely chose* to subordinate Himself for the sake of salvation, but never ceased being God in all of His majesty, glory, power, and authority. Hence, in the incarnation there is not a full revelation of Jesus Christ as He is in *Eternity* in all of His glory (the immanent Trinity). Rather, there is simply a revelation of God in His emptied, humbled, human state as one dependent upon the Father for the completion of the redemptive work of salvation. This view will be expounded upon in the following chapter. This view, emphasizing the *kenosis* of the *Logos* for the redemption of humanity is coherent with historical, Nicene Trinitarian theology. It is a more classical understanding of the Trinitarian fellowship in the incarnation. Yet, Grudem criticizes egalitarians for standing upon this principle, stating, “The egalitarian

⁵⁵ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 406-13.

⁵⁶ Robert Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 52 (1990), 68.

claim that the Son's subordination to the Father was only of His time on earth is surely incorrect."⁵⁷ Grudem asserts that the economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity.⁵⁸

Pre-Enlightenment & Post-Enlightenment

Millard Erickson, in his book, *God In Three Persons*, explains that prior to the Enlightenment, a statement about what something was *in itself* was believed to be the most true explanation of something.⁵⁹ In other words, the metaphysical nature of something represented the greatest truth of its being. The patristics understood Christ's immanent nature to be a greater reality of His personhood than the limited subordinate nature displayed in His temporary incarnate state. Kevin Giles teaches of the patristics, "... although they believe that after the resurrection the Son reigns as God and man, they will not ascribe to his exalted state any of the limitations of his incarnate state."⁶⁰ A pre-enlightenment view of God maintained a certain separation between the immanent and economic Trinity. Much of this was a result of the Arian controversy as Arius used Scriptures depicting Christ's weakness, dependence, and subordination to the Father to conclude that Jesus was eternally unequal to God in essence and power. In refutation of Arianism, Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers made a vivid distinction between God in His immanent Triunity and God in His economic Triunity. This divide preserved the

⁵⁷ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 406.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Erickson, *God In Three Persons*, 296.

⁶⁰ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 248.

aseity of God and maintained coequality, consubstantiality, and coeternity despite the subordination of Christ in His saving work.

In the twentieth century, Karl Rahner was a key theologian in reviving Trinitarian theology. Rahner argued that Trinitarian work had gotten lost in the great mystery of the metaphysical nature of God.⁶¹ In response, he claimed that the only knowledge one could gain regarding the Trinity was through the history of the saving work of God. Rahner introduced a principle demonstrating the interconnectedness of the immanent and economic Trinity which is now known as *Rahner's Rule* stating: "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity."⁶² *Rahner's Rule* equates all that has been seen in the economic Trinity to the immanent Trinity.⁶³ This principle became a governing influence in contemporary Trinitarian work and a reinforcement to the logic of Christ's eternal subordination.

Rahner's Rule carries with it some weaknesses. It integrates the understanding that God's immanent nature could only be realized, and complete, through the economy of salvation and His interaction with His creatures. David Bentley Hart cautions against this assumption as it implies a form of open theism where God is "becoming" as He participates in the economy of His saving work.⁶⁴ While there is a beauty in recognizing that God displayed His nature, perfectly, as a man through Christ Jesus, it does not mean that Jesus displays all of God perfectly in His incarnate state. This is precisely because

⁶¹ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 22.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 23-24, 34.

⁶⁴ David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 155-158.

God, in Christ, is veiled through the limitations of the flesh. Kevin Giles quotes Cornelius Van Til in providing insight into the weakness of equating the economic Trinity with the immanent Trinity. He says, “All heresies with respect to the Trinity can be reduced to one great heresy of mixing the eternal and the temporal.”⁶⁵ In order to preserve the aseity of God, we must consider the ontological nature of God prior to the economic nature of God and remember that He is God *eternal* and outside of time. His revelation to humanity is within a temporal context and only provides one glimpse into His uncreated and uncontainable nature.

It is important to keep in mind that the understanding of the nature of the immanent and economic Trinity is a key aspect in this debate amongst Evangelicals as this theological paradigm serves as a lens by which all Scripture is viewed. For those who insist the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, all which was displayed through Jesus in the incarnation will serve to translate directly back into the immanent nature of God. Those who reject Rahner’s Rule seek to maintain a clear distinction between the ontology (*theologia*) and the economy (*oikonomia*) of God. This distinction profoundly influences Biblical interpretation. The next portion of this chapter will highlight some of the key Scriptures used by subordinationists to teach the eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit.

⁶⁵ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1955), 233-34.

Biblical Perspectives In Contemporary Subordinationist Ideologies

This section will expound on the Scriptures utilized to uphold the notion of the Father's supreme and eternal authority. Chapter Two will provide the counter arguments to the exegetical methods employed by contemporary subordinationists, but for now, I will focus on outlining the subordinationist methodologies in order to demonstrate their logic and reasoning in Biblical interpretation. While both sides of the debate use Scripture to fortify their view, a key component fortifying the anti-subordinationist view is that it is congruent with Nicene tradition in its methodology. Ultimately, subordinationists depart from orthodox tradition by merging the economic and immanent Trinity. Furthermore, contemporary subordinationists employ analogy of being far more liberally than the Nicene Fathers in an effort to reinforce the Son's subordination to the Father.

Christ Is Seated at the Right Hand of the Father

In Colossians 3:1, Paul writes that Christ is seated at the right hand of God. In Psalm 110:1, we see the same language, and in Hebrews 1:3 it says, "After making purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high." According to Grudem, these Scriptures suggest Jesus is eternally 'second in command' to God the Father. Grudem states, "To sit at the king's right hand in the ancient world indicated that one was second only to the king in authority, but it did not indicate authority equal to the king."⁶⁶ Grudem affirms that a position at the right hand of God the Father is a place of subordination which also defines Jesus as lacking the same authority as the Father. The

⁶⁶ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 410.

fact that Grudem does not emphasize any Scriptures which exemplify Jesus seated on the throne demonstrates a neglect of integrating the whole scope of Scripture in ascertaining theological conclusions about Jesus' inequality with the Father.⁶⁷ The throne of God is occupied by the fullness of God's Trinitarian nature. In Revelation, the throne is "*the throne of God and of the Lamb.*"⁶⁸ Jesus and the Father are equal in glory and power, occupying the throne as One.

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.⁶⁹

This will be further addressed in Chapter Two. For now, it is important to note the eisegetical method of biblical interpretation used by contemporary subordinationists to promote a hierarchical view which is inconsistent with the whole counsel of God.

Headship

Another concept utilized from Scripture to reinforce the eternal subordinate status of Christ is the concept of headship. 1 Corinthians 11:3 has been one of the most popularly utilized Scriptures since it was first introduced through George Knight III to link subordinationism in the Trinity with the permanent subordination of women.

⁶⁷ See Revelation 3:21, 7:17, and 22:3.

⁶⁸ Rev 22:1 & 3

⁶⁹ Rev 22:1-5 (NKJV)

Grudem, Ware, and many others in *The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, are adamant that this portion of Scripture teaches the existence of a hierarchy between God and Christ. The word *kephale* is translated to mean *authority*. It is understood that Christ's subordination to God the Father indicates the biblical mandate for a woman's subordination to male leadership/authority. In disagreement, Gilbert Bilezikian, points out that the Greek understanding of *kephale* more prominently yields the meaning of, "servant-provider of life, of growth, and fullness."⁷⁰ It also images a fount or source of life. The English understanding of "head" points toward rulership or authority, but the Greek understanding points toward a source or provider of sustenance.

Furthermore, Bilezikian points out that even if this Scripture pointed toward a mode of leadership and subordination, it is important to emphasize that this portion of Scripture is not speaking of the eternal nature of the Logos. Instead, "Paul is referring to the relationship that prevails between God and Christ in the context of Christ's ministry to men and women within human history."⁷¹ In regards to the immanent and economic Trinity, when this Scripture is viewed through the lens of *Rahner's Rule*, the Father's headship of Christ becomes an eternal reality which may have the potential of pointing toward Christ's eternal subordination. Conversely, when viewed through the classic Trinitarian lens, which maintains distinctions between the immanent and economic Trinity, one can see that this Scripture emphasizes Christ's dependance upon the Father as

⁷⁰ Gilbert Bilezikian, "Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping," JETS 40/1 (March 1997), 61.

⁷¹ Ibid.

His Source of Life in His manhood, on behalf of humanity.⁷² He abides in this manhood as representative of humanity while simultaneously standing with God in the fullness of His divinity. Paul was not seeking to teach about leadership, authority, and subordination. He was pointing toward the interconnectedness of God and His Church (the Body of Christ) made possible through Jesus, the Source of all life and being.

The Work of Redemption

As stated earlier, any Scriptures outlining Jesus' obedience to the Father and His prayers to the Father are used to depict His subordination.⁷³ Once again, this is in alignment with the idea that everything revealed in the economic Trinity is fully equated with Jesus' nature in the immanent Trinity. A challenging text often used by Grudem and Ware is Romans 8:34, "... Christ Jesus who died--more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." It is asserted that if Jesus is interceding for us to the Father, He must have a lower place of authority and an eternal position of subordination which requires Him to ask of the Father on our behalf. There is no separation between the redemptive work of salvation and the immanent glory of Christ. Scriptures such as John 14:28 are used to depict Jesus' inequality with God the Father, "The Father is greater than I ..." as well as any Scriptures speaking of the Son being sent by the Father (John 4:34, 5:30).⁷⁴

⁷² "1 Corinthians 11:3 Commentary- John Gill's Exposition of the Bible," BibleStudyTools, last modified 2014, accessed February 10, 2016. <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/gills-exposition-of-the-bible/1-corinthians-11-3.html>

⁷³ See Mk 14:32-42, Mt 26:36-46, Lk 22:40-46, Jn 12:27; Heb 5:7-8.

⁷⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249.

Creation

In interpreting the creation account, it seems one might read John 1 and conclude that the *Word* truly is God and by the *Word* all things were created, equating Jesus (the *Word*) to be in equal authority and power with the Father in the creation account. This interpretation is not the case for contemporary subordinationists. As already noted in discussing Bruce Ware's notion of subordination, the *Word* is not seen as having equal authority with God; rather, He is seen as being the obedient servant to God the Father in the creation act.⁷⁵ Grudem supports this same ideology. He says, "When the Scripture speaks of creation, once again it speaks of the Father creating *through* the Son ... but nowhere does it say the Son or the Holy Spirit created through the Father These passages imply that there was a relationship of the Father (as originator) and Son (as active agent) before creation"⁷⁶ It is understood that the Father is the Master Architect, the Originator, and the Son and Spirit are servants which He employed to accomplish the work of creation.

A variety of challenges surround this debate as both views uphold the authority of Scripture as the inerrant Word of God and also assert that their theological views are thoroughly represented in classic Nicene theology and in the writings of the church fathers. While there are many other nuances in Scripture to demonstrate the Biblical

⁷⁵ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance*, 59.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

basis for subordinationism, the ones presented seem to be the most popular in the debate. In the following chapter, I will venture further into the biblical perspectives in my critique of contemporary subordinationism. First, I would like to offer insight into the beauty of the intra-Trinitarian fellowship when hierarchical structures and subordinationist ideologies are set aside.

Perichoresis and Intra-Trinitarian Relations

The patristics sought to provide language that would describe the beauty of the infinite God without edging into heresy. This attempt is much like walking a tightrope in stormy weather while hanging over an ocean of fire. God is indescribable and full of mystery. In an attempt to maintain His holiness and preserve our knowledge of what He has revealed of Himself in salvation history, theologians have carefully structured language and terms to give meaning to His nature. Much of the controversy surrounding the issue of subordinationism centers on the inability to strike a healthy balance in describing God's *oneness of being (homoousios)* and His *uniqueness in the distinctions of Persons (hypostases)*. Fortunately, there is a concept cherished by the church fathers which seemed to offer, maybe not a comprehensive, but a sufficient explanation for the mystery of the immanent Trinity: *Perichoresis*.

Perichoresis, as presented through John of Damascus (675-749) is a pregnant term filled with a picturesque concepts of God's Trinitarian nature.⁷⁷ It has been translated into English as "interpenetration," "coinherence," "mutual indwelling," and

⁷⁷ Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 1.

“mutual immanence.”⁷⁸ The historic Christian understanding of God is, as D. B. Hart puts it, “... a *perichoresis* of love, a dynamic coinherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared regard, delight, fellowship, feasting, and joy.”⁷⁹ It is “a polycentric community of symmetrical reciprocity.”⁸⁰ The *perichoresis* emphasizes the distinctions within the Trinity while also maintaining a complete unity of being. There is a “reciprocal interiority of the Trinitarian Persons where all mutually permeate one another, though in so doing they do not cease to be distinct persons.”⁸¹ The binding of the Trinity is a *coinherence* with absolutely no confusion or mixture. Miroslav Volf explains that the *perichoresis* provides insight into John 7:16 where Jesus says, “My teaching is not Mine ...” as the personal *interiority* of the Trinity both possesses and does not possess simultaneously. We see this *perichoretic* glory in Philippians 2:4, “Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” The *perichoretic* activity of the Trinity both possesses and empties possessions, simultaneously, in equal authority. This concept is challenging to grasp unless imagined in a state of constant movement. In a divine dance, each person of the Trinity is constantly pouring into the other. This dance is unified around a single will. It is an ever-active movement of selfless giving. It is the eternal activity of *agape* love. This beautiful picture is the direct opposite of the hierarchical structure of a subordinationist ideology which seeks to

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 155.

⁸⁰ Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 208-213.

⁸¹ Ibid., 209.

determine which person of the Trinity possesses highest authority, power, and leadership. The *perichoresis*, depicts an intertwined communion of selfless love which both *possesses all authority* and simultaneously *bestows all authority, honor, glory, and power* to the other.⁸²

This understanding of the Trinity was carefully constructed to preserve both the unity of God's single essence and the distinctiveness of the persons (*hypostasis*). In eastern orthodox theology, particularly, this understanding of the nature of God has been placed at the forefront of Trinitarian theology throughout the ages. Overall, it seems to be a far better depiction of the intra-Trinitarian fellowship, as understood by Athanasius and the Cappadocians because it emphasizes a unified will, selfless love, mutual submission, and an undivided interpenetration and *coinherence* which is not interrupted by the economic work of salvation.

In this chapter I have aimed to present the ideologies fueling the eternal subordination of Jesus as presented through contemporary, Evangelical theology. In outlining the development of contemporary subordinationism, it was demonstrated that the concept of Jesus being "equal in personhood, but unequal in function," is new to Trinitarian theology. History reveals that it became highly popular in conjunction with the women's movement as conservative Evangelicals were faced with finding biblical grounding for the permanent subordination of women in church, family, and society. Hence, the notion of Jesus' eternal subordination to the Father (in role and function) became a common emphasis in Trinitarian theology which, in turn, provided theological

⁸² 1 Cor 15:23-28; Phil 2:9-11

grounding for the permanent subordination of women. This theological language creates space for Evangelicals to affirm a woman's equality of *personhood*, while simultaneously limiting her roles and functions in church, family, and society.

While it is presumptuous to assert any theologian can fully explain the mystery of the immanent Trinity, I argue, confidently, that a more accurate view of Nicene Trinitarian theology can be gained through the age-old notion of *perichoresis*. The term, *perichoresis*, was embraced and developed centuries after the the Nicene-Constantinople Creed with the aim of capturing the mystery of *consubstantiality* and *hypostasis* as outlined by Athanasius and the Cappadocians. This cherished concept offers a description of the Trinity which dynamically balances the unity of essence (*homoousios*) and distinction of Persons (*hypostasis*) within the Godhead. It would be wise to place the notion of *perichoresis* at the forefront of contemporary discourse in an effort to eliminate false notions of subordinationism within the Godhead.

The following chapter will provide a historical account of the doctrine of the Trinity and seek to demonstrate the deliberate exclusion of subordinationist ideologies (in all forms) by Athanasius, the Great Cappadocians, and Augustine. While the focus of this research is not on the status of women in church and society, it has been emphasized as this is a key factor influencing the adjustments in contemporary Evangelical Trinitarian theology. Correlating female subordination with the eternal subordination of Jesus is a novel attribute in contemporary Evangelical theology. Nicene theologians made no attempt to interlink female subordination with Jesus' status in the Godhead. Attempts to project personal social ideals upon church and society based upon a unique understanding

of the Trinity is presumptuous, making theology vulnerable to human constructs.

Furthermore, the adjustment of the Doctrine of God for the promotion of personal and social agendas is damaging to the Church and subverts the purpose and of and virtue of theology. Tolerating this strand of theology is dangerous and damaging for the Evangelical Church. By returning to the root system of Nicene Trinitarian theology, it will be demonstrated that the early Church fathers sought to fortify the Doctrine of the Trinity against human agendas, and, furthermore, against claims imputing hierarchy within God's holy nature.

CHAPTER TWO

A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF NICENE TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

It was the year 325 when the bishops gathered in Nicaea for what would later be known as the First Ecumenical—that is, universal—Council. . . . In order to see that event in the perspective of those who were there, it is necessary to remember that several of those attending the great assembly had recently been imprisoned, tortured, or exiled, and that some bore on their bodies the physical marks of their faithfulness. And now, a few years after such trials, these very bishops were invited to gather at Nicaea . . . for the first time in the history of Christianity, they had before their eyes physical evidence of the universality of the Church.

— Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1*

Contemporary Evangelical complementarians claim that Nicene Trinitarian theology teaches that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are eternally subordinate to the Father in role and function.⁸³ They emphasize that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are ontologically equal to the Father in *essence*, but are eternally unequal in *role* and *functionality*. A. H. Strong, in his *Systematic Theology* text, states, “We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father, but we maintain at the same time that this subordination is a subordination of order, office, and operation, not a subordination of essence.”⁸⁴ Wayne Grudem, a primary representative of this view, teaches, “...the idea of eternal equality in *being* but subordination in *role* has been essential to the church’s doctrine of the Trinity since it was first affirmed in the Nicene Creed”⁸⁵ He highlights that the Nicene Creed states that the Son was “begotten of the Father before all ages,” and that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.”⁸⁶ According to him, this language demonstrates that the Son and the Holy Spirit have unequal position, authority, and functionality to the Father, *eternally*. John M. Frame agrees, saying, “... both Eastern and Western thinkers have regularly affirmed that God the

⁸³ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 Vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970 [reprint; first published 1871-73]), 1:460-62. Also, see A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 342. See also, Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 251.

⁸⁴ A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 342. In this same passage, Strong also states that the subordination mentioned is “... of the *person* of the Son, to the *person* of the Father, or in other words an order of personality, office, and operation which permits the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third” This is also quoted to support functional subordination in Wayne Grudem’s, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), 252.

⁸⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1995), 251 (italics inserted).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

Father has some sort of primacy over the other two Persons of the Trinity throughout the ages.”⁸⁷ These assertions, though they have been growing in popularity amongst Evangelicals, offer a disingenuous representation of the thoughts, intentions, and teachings of the early church in Nicene Trinitarian theology. On the contrary, subordinationist ideologies were some of the most fiercely rejected amongst Nicene theologians as they sought to guard the doctrine of God against popular Arian heresies which promoted the idea that the Son was of lesser rank or status than the Father in both essence and functionality.

This chapter will outline the historical development of Nicene Trinitarian theology to demonstrate that the Nicene bishops rigorously and adamantly sought to uphold the coequality of the Godhead both in Being (essence) and Act (role/function). In critiquing contemporary Evangelical subordinationism, Kevin Giles makes a key insight into the logical underpinnings of this debate; he says, “It is my case that once the word *eternal* is added to the word *subordination*, you have ontological subordination.”⁸⁸ If the Son and the Spirit are *eternally subordinate* to the Father in *role* and *function*, this speaks to their eternal *personhood* and defines the nature of their *being*.⁸⁹ For instance, when Grudem directly claims that the Father has greater authority than the Son

⁸⁷ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 719.

⁸⁸ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 28.

⁸⁹ This point is unintentionally emphasized by A.H. Strong in his argument of the eternal subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit. He says, “The subordination of the *person* of the Son, to the *person* of the Father, or in other words an order of personality, office, and operation which permits the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority....” A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 342. It is argued that priority is not necessarily superiority, but when this priority is of *eternal* nature, it naturally establishes the Father in a superior position, and, as John M. Frame states, “affirm(s) that God the Father has some sort of primacy over the other two Persons of the Trinity.” See, Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 719.

(eternally),⁹⁰ he divides the very being of God by ranking the persons of the Trinity in descending authority and power.

Giles points out that the term, “*role*,” is commonly defined as an action or duty which can be changed or altered over time.⁹¹ In contrast, Evangelical literature supporting the eternal subordination of the Son and the Spirit, uses the term, “*role*,” as a person-defining attribute which cannot be altered or adjusted.⁹² Contemporary subordinationists consider Jesus’ role of subordination to be the single character-defining attribute providing a distinction between Him and the Father. Grudem says, “... if the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally “Father,” and the Son is not eternally “Son.”⁹³ It will be demonstrated that Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine drew a distinct line between the economy of the Trinity and the ontological Trinity, agreeing that subordination existed in the economy of salvation, but this does not directly inform us of the eternal, functional ranking of Jesus in the ontological Trinity. For them, distinctions were rooted in their relations, not in functional roles of subordination.⁹⁴ No matter how much contemporary Evangelicals claim *eternal role subordination* has no relation to God’s ontological nature, the logic speaks otherwise and thereby demonstrates a departure from Nicene Trinitarian theology

⁹⁰ Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth*, 413.

⁹¹ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 45-46.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 251.

⁹⁴ See pages 44-45 for further discussion on how the Cappadocians defined the distinctions of the Persons of the Trinity.

by reintroducing an eternal hierarchy within the Trinity which the Nicene fathers fought tenaciously to keep out.

Historical Developments In Nicene Trinitarian Theology

Throughout the ages, many religious and philosophical ideologies surrounded the Church shaping and influencing the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.⁹⁵

Originally, Christians upheld a strong monotheistic understanding of God which was grounded in the religion of Israel. This emphasis is displayed in the writings of *Hermas*, who stated that the first commandment is to believe that, “God is one, who created and established all things, bringing them into existence out of non-existence.”⁹⁶ This view uniquely distinguished Christianity from the religious influences of Rome which were polytheistic; it also maintained the root system of the God of Israel Who declared over His people, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NKJV). While the earliest writings of the apostolic leaders of the first century definitely pointed toward the triadic understanding of God, they also reveal the difficulties embodied in forming accurate language for describing the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit while also maintaining the truth that God is One. It was not uncommon for the earliest apologists to use Greek

⁹⁵ Platonism significantly influenced the development of Christian theology. Many forms of Platonism sprouted up throughout the development of Trinitarian theology. Neoplatonism may have had some of the most significant influences as it claimed “the highest principle was God, the One, from whom all that exists emanates.” Furthermore, it taught that “whatever exists emanated from the One and all has longing to return and be in union with the One.” These views highly influenced Eastern Christianity and also highly influenced Arius. For philosophical and religious influences in early Trinitarian theology see Veli-Matti Karkkainen’s text, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 60-81.

⁹⁶ *Hermas*, *Mandate* 1.1, quote taken from Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey*, 64.

philosophy to develop Christian theology. Terms from Platonism were used to describe the unique Christian God explaining Him as the “Craftsman of the Universe” and “The Unmoved Mover.” While philosophies assisted in describing God in the earliest stages, they also introduced vulnerabilities as these ideologies were given free reign to influence the explanation of God’s nature — often in ways which diminished His aseity or portrayed Him as distant, unfeeling, and detached from His creation.

One of the earliest contributions to Trinitarian theology came through Irenaeus in his effort to refute Gnosticism. He emphasized God’s Trinitarian nature in affirming Him as sole creator.⁹⁷ Irenaeus spoke of the *Logos* and the Spirit as “the two hands of God”⁹⁸ in carrying out the work of creation. He bound the three (*Logos*, Spirit/Wisdom, and God-the-Creator) as One, confirming the eternal nature of the Son and the Spirit. This was movement forward, but his explanations of the *Logos* and the Spirit did not include coequality with God the Father. Instead, they were viewed as God’s Word and God’s Spirit— extensions of the One God rather than separate persons within the Trinity. This led toward a *modalistic* concept of God. In this the Son and the Spirit were perceived to be different manifestations of God as if, in the eyes of many modalists, He were donning a new mask in each time period revealing new aspects of His nature. Although the triad nature of God had been emphasized, it was absorbed back into a monotheist notion of God.

⁹⁷ Irenaeus was one of the first to describe God in a triad saying, “He who made, and formed . . . and nourishes us by means of the creation, establishing all things by His Word, and binding them together by His Wisdom— this is He who is the only true God.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.24.2 in *The Apostolic Fathers, Vol. 1*. Edited by Paul A. Boer, Sr. (Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2012), p. 293.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.20.1, p. 348-350.

The lack of distinctions in Irenaeus' explanation of God were somewhat corrected through Tertullian. The heresy of Tertullian's day came through Praxeas who spread modalistic ideologies.⁹⁹ Tertullian sought to prove that in the One God, three distinct "persons" coexist. He was the first to explain that God is "one substance and three distinct persons."¹⁰⁰ He was also the first to coin the Latin term *Trinitas* (Trinity) in describing God.¹⁰¹ It is important to note that Tertullian, in agreement with earlier theologians, sought to maintain the *monarchia* (that God is One and He alone is sovereign).¹⁰² In this, he explained that the Father, as the "monarchy," could share His sovereign rulership with the Son and not diminish in authority.¹⁰³ This monarchy was explained as beginning with the Father and extending through the Son and the Spirit as a beam of light extends from the sun.¹⁰⁴ He taught that the Son and the Spirit are derived from the Father, the *monarch*, but maintain distinctions. This explanation, while providing a great defense against modalism and tritheism, still lacked in emphasizing the

⁹⁹ Modalism taught that only the Father existed ontologically and any distinctions demonstrated through the economy of salvation were simply modes through which the Father was manifesting Himself. Roger E. Olsen & Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 29.

¹⁰⁰ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey*, 72.

¹⁰¹ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1*, 92.

¹⁰² The "monarchy" of the Father is an important concept which will be discussed later. It is important to note that *monarchianism* became a thread of heresy due to an over emphasis of the Father's utmost authority. "Monarchianism literally means "sole sovereignty,"... it questioned how Christians could maintain Christian-Jewish monotheism while believing in two gods, Jesus and the Spirit, in addition to the Father. It was deemed heretical but its motive was biblical: it sought to assure the supremacy of God the Father in the tradition of the Shema of Israel (Deut. 6:4) and the affirmation of that faith by Jesus and the apostles." Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey*, 71. The concept of *monarchie*, upheld in Eastern Orthodox Trinitarianism, maintains coequality amongst the Persons of the Trinity.

¹⁰³ Gonzalez, *History of Christian Thought*, 178.

¹⁰⁴ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas*, 8; from Olsen, *The Trinity*, p. 30.

coequality of the Trinity that would later be embraced in Nicaea. In an effort to uphold the monarchy and preserve the notion that God is One, Tertullian taught that the Father is distinctly God, “Thus the Word of God is not God himself, whose Word he is, so also the Spirit, though called God, is not God himself, whose Spirit he is. Nothing is identical with its possessor ... as coming from him, it can be of the same quality as its source and possessor ... but it is not identical with God from whom he is.”¹⁰⁵ While Tertullian made headway against modalism by affirming three distinct persons in the Trinity, he also promoted a stark hierarchy which diminished the coequal divinity, authority, power, and eternal nature of the Son and the Spirit.¹⁰⁶

What lacked in Tertullian’s notion of God was significantly balanced through the work of Origen of Alexandria (185-254). Origen’s insights in Trinitarian theology are considered to be some of the most significant and enduring contributions in Eastern theology and beyond.¹⁰⁷ He was the first to teach the coeternity of the Trinity. In seeking to preserve God’s transcendence, and His plurality in unity, he taught that God was outside of time and that the Father begot the Son as an *eternal act*.¹⁰⁸ He introduced the concept of the eternal generation of the Son. One caveat in Origen’s explanation of the Trinity, as highlighted by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, was his emphasis of the Father as

¹⁰⁵ Tertullian, “Against Praxeas,” in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), “The Trinity,” (p. 1890).

¹⁰⁶ Tertullian sought to uphold the truth that God is one substance and three persons, but continued to place the Word and the Holy Spirit in a lower position to the Father. He said, “That which is God of God, as a concrete existent, will not be God Himself, but God in the sense of being of the substance of God himself, as a concrete existent, as a portion of the whole; much less will the power of the Highest... a mere attribute, be identical with the Highest.” Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey*, 73.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 74.

ranking first in the Godhead, “so much so that one may wonder whether Origen compromised the divinity of the Son.”¹⁰⁹ Being highly influenced by middle Platonism, Origen believed that a cause is always superior to what is caused. He, therefore, named the Father the “fountainhead of deity” — the Source of the Son and the Spirit.¹¹⁰ Origen understood the distinctions of the *hypostasis* in the Trinity as falling in rank below the Father, eternally. He says, “

The Son is inferior in relation to the Father, since he touches only things endowed with reason; for he is subordinate to the Father. The Holy Spirit is still lower in degree, pertaining only to the saints. So then the power of the Father is superior to the Son and the Holy Spirit, while the Son’s power is greater than the Holy Spirit; and again the power of the Holy Spirit excels all other holy things.¹¹¹

It is noted, by Henry Bettenson, that such distinct notions of subordination in the Godhead are not commonly expressed in such bold language,¹¹² but this simply demonstrates the pre-Nicene understanding of hierarchy present in the early Church as Christianity was intimately tied to Israel’s monotheism.¹¹³ While Origen offered some of the most significant contributions in Trinitarian theology, it is possible that his insinuation toward Jesus’ lower ranking to the Father left a crack open for the development of Arius’ heresy which came into full bloom toward the end of the third

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Origen, Comm.in Ioannem, ii. 3, “Degrees of Divinity,” in 1.2.10, in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), “The Trinity,” (p. 325).

¹¹¹ Origen, Justinian, Ep. ad Menam (Mansi, ix. 524), in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), “The Trinity,” (p. 330).

¹¹² Ibid., 330. *See Note by Henry Bettenson.*

¹¹³ Let it be noted that in the same passage, Origen also states, “... there must be no question of lesser or greater in the Trinity, since the source of the one godhead holds sway over all things by his Word and Reason and sanctifies by the ‘Spirit of His mouth’ all that is worthy of sanctification” He then cites I Cor 12:4-7 demonstrating the oneness of God. See Origen, Justinian, Ep. ad Menam (Mansi, ix. 524), in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), The Trinity (p. 331).

century (c. 250-336). It was in the storms of Arianism that the greatest formation of the doctrine of the Trinity unfolded. Church leaders vigorously fought to shut the door to subordinationism and modalism by producing creeds and apologies defending the coequal, coeternal nature of the Trinity and renouncing any notion that Jesus lacked equal authority and power with the Father.

The Council of Nicaea and the Formation of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The Council of Nicaea was the first ecumenical council established primarily to address the feud erupting amongst the Church bishops regarding Arius' claim that the Son lacked equality of essence and authority with the Father. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, in describing Arianism, says the objective was "... in a sense, to qualify the divinity of the other persons of the Trinity in a way that gives the Father sole divinity, the highest place, so to speak, in the divine hierarchy."¹¹⁴ Arius was highly influenced by the Neo-Platonism of his day and intertwined the Scriptures with philosophy, concluding that the Father, alone, was considered God and Jesus was the first, unique creature of God.¹¹⁵ Arius upheld Proverbs 8 as an essential aspect of his theology to demonstrate Jesus as the Father's *assistant* in creation and the work of redemption. According to Arius, Jesus was viewed as an obedient counterpart to the Father.

A variety of subordinationist ideologies sprouted even after Arianism was renounced by the Council of Nicaea. Ultimately, it was identified by the bishops of the

¹¹⁴ Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey*, 74.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Nicene Council that a hierarchical substructure within the ontological Trinity ruptures the unity of the Godhead and diminishes the true identity of Jesus as eternal God. If Jesus is not God, the salvation and healing of humanity is incomplete as only one who is both fully God and fully man could stand as the perfect Mediator reconciling humanity back to God.¹¹⁶ Therefore, Nicene Trinitarian theology is rooted in a soteriological context with the foundational concept of Christ's complete oneness of *Being* with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, as the key component in the Christian doctrine of God.

The solution to counter the Arian heresy was identified by the Council of Nicaea through a key term, *Homoousion*. This term means, *consubstantial*, of one substance, or of one and the same being with the Father."¹¹⁷ *Homoousio* is "the hinge in the center of the Nicene Creed upon which the whole Confession of Faith, and indeed the whole Christian conception of God, and of the salvation of mankind, turns."¹¹⁸ It points toward the interconnectedness and essential unity of the Father and the Son.¹¹⁹ The term brought revolutionary truth as it linked the Father and the Son both in *Being* and *Act*. Thomas Torrance teaches that it also provided understanding for the "indivisible unity of the Being of the Godhead in three co-equal persons ... [which exist] through a mutual indwelling and a mutual movement toward and for one another in the *homoousial*

¹¹⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark LTD, 1997), 94.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹¹⁹ The Council of Nicaea addressed, primarily, the divinity of Jesus. This is why the unity of the Father and Son is often emphasized sometimes to the exclusion of the Holy Spirit. Later, the Cappadocian Fathers at the Council of Constantinople (381) produced a more comprehensive creed which also declared the full, equal, eternal divinity of the Holy Spirit.

communion of the Holy Trinity....”¹²⁰ The concept of *homoousios* carried a unique spiritual authority as it “supplied the Church with a firm conceptual grasp of the central truth of the incarnate economy of redemption which Christ undertook for our sake.”¹²¹ Christ is the perfect Mediator between God and man since He is *homoousios* with the Father.¹²² It was upon the safeguarding and development of this concept that Nicene Trinitarian theology was developed through Athanasius and the Cappadocians.

Athanasius: The Champion of Nicene Orthodoxy

Athanasius is known as the *Champion of Nicene Orthodoxy*.¹²³ He attended the council as secretary and advisor of his bishop Alexander of Alexandria. It was not until after his mentor died that he was appointed bishop of Alexandria and soon became the leader of Nicene theology. “With unflagging energy he defended the formula of the *homoousion*, as expressing this truth: if Christ is God, then he must be God in the same sense as God the Father is God; divinity is one ‘substance.’”¹²⁴ In turning toward the theology of Athanasius we can gain clarity on the importance of coequality and unity in the Godhead as upheld in Nicene Trinitarian theology. Athanasius rejected all forms of subordinationism and many of his arguments against hierarchical structures within the

¹²⁰ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*, 130.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹²² Torrance points out that the explanation of the Trinity in the Nicene Creed is set in a soteriological context. After describing Jesus as One Being with the Father the Creed reads, “... who for us men and our salvation, came down from heaven, and was made flesh from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father. And he shall come again in glory to judge both the living and the dead: his kingdom shall have no end.”

¹²³ González, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1*, 188.

¹²⁴ Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 37.

Godhead provide a refutation against the subordination promoted by contemporary Evangelicals today.

Athanasius had extraordinary insight in understanding the Scriptures. He rejected the popular hermeneutic of the Arians as *devious* and *selective* as they pieced together Scriptures demonstrating Christ's weakness in the incarnation to prove His eternal subordination to the Father.¹²⁵ Athanasius argued that the entire scope of Scripture must be considered when seeking to understand the nature of God. Furthermore, the "scope" of Scripture offers a "double account" of the Savior.¹²⁶ In this double account, Christ's deity and his humanity are exposed demonstrating *temporary* subordination for the sake of humanity and salvation in the incarnation. For Athanasius, the Scriptures used to demonstrate Christ's subordination to the Father only relate to His redemptive work, in the flesh. A double account of Scripture maintains the coequality of Jesus with the Father as the eternal *Logos* (consubstantial with the Father), and accepts the temporary subordination in the incarnation as exemplifying His manhood. One specific example of this is in his explanation of Philippians 2:9.¹²⁷ The Arians pointed toward the Father's exaltation of the Son as an example of Christ's lower position in the Godhead in the same way contemporary Evangelical subordinationists do today. It is speculated: if the Father exalts the Son, does that not demonstrate His higher position to

¹²⁵ Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 4:1.1. Let it be noted that many of the Scriptures used by subordinationists in Athanasius' day to argue for Christ's eternal subordination to the Father are the same Scriptures used today by contemporary evangelicals to demonstrate the eternal functional subordination of Jesus.

¹²⁶ Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 1.5.14.

¹²⁷ Athanasius, "Contra Arianos," i. 17 in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1956), "The Trinity," (p. 382).

reach down and give the Son honor? In response, Athanasius writes, “‘Highly exalted’ does not signify the exaltation of the substance of the Word; that was and is always equal with God. The exaltation is of the manhood.”¹²⁸ Athanasius teaches that the Scriptures (esp. Phil. 2:5-11 & Jn 1) demonstrate that the Son’s voluntary and temporary subordination is for our salvation, but in His eternal nature, there is no subordination at all because He is God of God, *homoousios* with the Father. Athanasius writes, “If he says that he was ‘created for the works’ it is clear that he means to signify not his substance but the dispensation which happened ‘for his works,’ and this dispensation is subordinate to being.”¹²⁹ This understanding of Scripture refutes the notion of the eternal functional subordination of Jesus upheld by contemporary Evangelical complementarians as Athanasius draws a distinct line between the temporary functional subordination in the economic Trinity and the complete coequality He has in His ontological nature.

Athanasius discouraged anthropomorphic analogies which perceived the Son to be subordinate to the Father in the same way an earthly son is subordinate to an earthly father. Athanasius says, “... they must not think of him [God] on the human level... man is begotten in time and begets in time... but ‘God is not like man’ as the Scripture has said; but he exists forever; therefore His Word exists eternally from the Father as radiance from a light.”¹³⁰ The Son, as begotten of the Father, is meant to demonstrate their eternal *coinherence*, not a hierarchical ordering. The eternal generation of the Son

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 393.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

demonstrates the concept of the *homoousion* as the Father cannot be Father without the Son, and the Son cannot be Son without the Father.¹³¹ Athanasius says, "... as a river is generated from its source, and is not separated from it, although there are two forms and two names as the source is not the river, nor the river the source, but each is one and the same water... so the Godhead flows from the Father to the Son without change or separation."¹³² In this description, Athanasius seeks to remove the idea of hierarchy and reinforce the coequality of God's nature. He felt it was right to call the Son, the eternal offspring of the Father, because in doing it demonstrates that the Father was never imperfect, but was always emanating the fullness of His radiance and wisdom through the Son.¹³³ He says, "We see that the radiance of the sun is integral to it, and that the substance of the sun is not divided or diminished; but its substance is entire ..."¹³⁴ If the Father were ever, at any point, without the fullness of the Son, He would lack in radiance. Therefore, the Father's identity is dependent upon the eternal presence and personhood of the Son. In this analogy, Athanasius affirms that the Son "exists always and preserves the likeness and image [of the Father] without alteration."¹³⁵ This means, for Athanasius, that the Son is begotten of the Father bearing every attribute in perfect likeness. He says, "the same things are said of the Son which are said of the Father except for calling Him Father."¹³⁶ In Athanasius' explanation of the Son's relation to the

¹³¹ Ibid., 398.

¹³² Athanasius, "Expositio Fidei," 1, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 411.

¹³³ Ibid., 381.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 390.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Athanasius, *Four Discourses*, 4:3.13.

Father, there is no reference to the Son being equal to the Father in essence, but *unequal in role/function*. Quite the opposite. He prefers to describe the Godhead using verbs¹³⁷ in order to represent the constant movement from One to the Other — the eternal flow which emanates from the coequal Source of eternal divinity.¹³⁸ There are no dividing lines distinguishing them from one another in degrees of authority and power.

Kevin Giles makes the point that, “Once this complete *coinherence* of the persons of the Trinity is recognized, it follows that the works of the divine three cannot be divided.... the Father is always in the Son and the Son is always in the Father, they must work as one.”¹³⁹ If this is the heart of Nicene Trinitarianism, it would be illogical to conclude that the Son is distinct from the Father based upon His *eternal role of functional subordination*. How can God be subordinate to God? Professor Lewis Ayres teaches that Athanasius was the first to identify a correlation between God’s perfect unity of *Being* and perfect unity of *work and will (Act)*.¹⁴⁰ Giles, referencing Ayres, states that Athanasius can be seen as “the originator of one of the most basic Pro-Nicene theological principles, that the Father and the Son work inseparably.”¹⁴¹ With this in mind, it is important to note that contemporary subordinationists would agree with this principle, but with a certain caveat: that the Son works inseparably with the Father *as His obedient counterpart*. It is my claim that this departs from Nicene Trinitarian

¹³⁷ Torrance, *The Doctrine of God*, 130.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 141.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

theology as Athanasius held that the whole Godhead dwells in the Son and in the Spirit, so they are included with the Father as the One *Uncreated Source* sharing a perfect unity of will and work, undivided in authority.

Athanasius held the line of Nicene theology through many exiles successfully preserving the cherished concept of *homoousion*. Still, the Nicene Creed, in its original form lacked clarity regarding the divinity of the Holy Spirit and the distinctions of the persons of the Trinity. The Great Cappadocians were key figures in developing these aspects of Trinitarian theology in the fourth century.

The Cappadocians

All three of the Cappadocians, Basil the Great (330-370), Gregory of Nazianzus (329-390), and Gregory of Nyssa (335-394), played a significant role in Trinitarian theology.¹⁴² One of the prominent heretics of their time was Eunomias who proclaimed a radical form of Arianism, claiming there is only one God, the Father, and professing that the Nicene Creed led to tritheism.¹⁴³ There was also debate over whether Jesus was *homoousios* (the same substance) with the Father, or if He was *homoiousios* (of similar substance) with the Father.¹⁴⁴ Furthermore, some were arguing over whether the Holy Spirit should be considered equally divine with the Father and the Son. Two of the Cappadocians (Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa) led the process in resolving these conflicts, with the help of Basil's work, at the Council of Constantinople

¹⁴² Olsen, *The Trinity*, 34.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1*, 217.

in 381. At this council, the Nicene Creed was reinforced and further developed to reflect the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Also, the Cappadocians helped in clarifying the difference between *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis*. *Hypostasis* literally translates to mean “substance” but the Cappadocians defined it with the Latin term, *persona*.¹⁴⁵ This led to the Trinitarian formula: one essence (*ousia*) and three persons (*hypostasis*).¹⁴⁶

Hypostases: One Being, three persons

Basil of Caesarea, also known as “The Great,” was a leader of the Nicene party after Athanasius. He was the first to coin the Trinitarian formula, “one essence in three persons,” to reject the Neo-Arianism that was spreading throughout the Church. Basil taught, “In the case of the Godhead we confess, one essence of substance [*ousia*], so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular *hypostasis*, in order that our conception of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear.”¹⁴⁷ Basil’s formula aided the Church in staying unified regarding the Trinity by distilling Trinitarian language down to these simple, agreed upon, terms.

Gregory of Nazianzus took the phrase developed by Basil and argued that the distinctions of the Persons, as identified in the names given by God through His self-revelation (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are terms of *relation*.¹⁴⁸ Thomas Torrance teaches that the Greek term, “*Hypostasis*... was stretched [and removed from its

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Karkkainen, *The Doctrine of God*, 76.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Hellenistic context] to carry meaning which was associated with God's personal, intimate, relational, self-manifestation of Himself through the economy of salvation."¹⁴⁹ God is explained as relational within Himself and toward humanity. The *homoousial* and hypostatic interrelation also conveys that no divine person is who he is without essential relation to the other two.¹⁵⁰ Keeping in line with Origen, the Cappadocians sought to maintain the eternal generation of each *hypostases* of the Trinity while also preserving the coequality upheld by Athanasius through consubstantiality. In this, the distinctions are understood in their *relations* to one another, but these relations are coequal and united in a single essence through their interdependence of each other. The Godhead is not complete and whole in the Father alone, but in the Son and the Spirit as well.¹⁵¹ Still, one may wonder, what makes the Father distinct from the Son and the Spirit aside from being called *Father*?

Gregory of Nazianzus teaches that the distinctions are related to origin. The Father is the "*Unoriginate*, for He is of no one," the Son "is not unoriginal, for He is of the Father," and the Holy Spirit is "truly Spirit, coming forth from the Father indeed, but not after the manner of the Son, for it is not by the Generation but by Procession."¹⁵² This is of key importance in this debate as contemporary subordinationists refer to this theological concept as proof of eternal functional subordination saying that the Son is

¹⁴⁹ Torrance, *The Doctrine of God*, 156.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 157.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Gregory Nazianzus, *Theological Orationes*, 39.11.12 in Kärkkäinen, *The Doctrine of God: A Global Introduction, A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Survey*, 77.

eternally begotten of the Father so He must be subordinate to the Father.¹⁵³ It is true that the Cappadocians spoke of the Father as the ‘sole source’ and ‘origin’ (*monarche*) of the being of the Son and the Spirit, but in their thinking this did not imply subordination. Gregory of Nazianzus states, “...we recognize one glory of the Father, the equality of the Only-begotten; and one glory of the Son and the Spirit. And we hold that to subordinate any of the three, is to destroy the whole.” It is vital to keep in balance the understanding that the Cappadocians were building upon *homoousios* which emphasized that God is One Being (*ousia*).¹⁵⁴ Gregory of Nyssa said, “We do not know of any difference by way of superiority and inferiority in attributes which express our conceptions of the divine nature.”¹⁵⁵ Also, Gregory of Nazianzus describes God as, “The one Godhead and power found in the three in unity, and comprising the three separately, not unequal in substance or natures, neither increased or diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same”¹⁵⁶

The concept of ‘origin’ is grounded in the understanding that each Person of the Trinity is equally, and fully God, not a lower, less potent form of the Origin, but rather God of God, Light of Light emanating from a single, undivided, shared essence (*ousia*). This

¹⁵³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 251 (italics inserted).

¹⁵⁴ As stated earlier, Athanasius compared this concept to a river saying, “As the source is not the river, nor the river the source, but each is one and the same water... so the godhead flows from the Father to the Son without change or separation.” Athanasius, “Expositio Fidei,” 1, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 411.

¹⁵⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Holy Trinity,” in NPNF 5 (p. 327) from Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity*. 148.

¹⁵⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration on Holy Baptism,” in NPNF 7:40.41 (p. 375) from Giles, 148.

means it is counterintuitive to infer any notion of eternal subordination, even if only in function, as the Godhead is united in Being as well as in operations.

Gregory of Nazianzus was the first to use the term *coinherence* which more vividly captivated the *consubstantiality* described in *homoousios*.¹⁵⁷ This term was later developed by John of Damascus (675-749) and Maximus the Confessor (650-745) through the notion of *perichoresis*.¹⁵⁸ It explains a *coindwelling*— the “three divine persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or *exist* in one another while nevertheless remaining ... distinct from one another.”¹⁵⁹ Nicholas Loudovikos, in discussing *consubstantiality* and *perichoresis*, says, “Each person of the Divine Trinity represents Divine Essence in its wholeness.”¹⁶⁰ He also says, “The Patristic notion of *consubstantiality* represents the discovery of a balance of essence and person within a subject, *which does not require either the over-elevation or the diminution of any of its ontological parts*.”¹⁶¹ It is a timeless, affirmation of one *hypostasis* toward the other which declares the reality of a shared essence and nature.¹⁶² Loudovikos says, “the magnificence of patristic theology is that it perceives the *hypostasis* as inseparable ... as

¹⁵⁷ Torrance, *The Doctrine of God*, 102.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Torrance, *The Doctrine of God*, 102.

¹⁶⁰ Nicholas Loudovikos, “Consubstantiality Beyond Perichoresis: Personal Threeness, Intradivine Relations, and Personal Consubstantiality in Augustine’s, Thomas Aquinas’ and Maximus the Confessor’s Trinitarian Theologies” (Paper presented at the Oxford Patristic Conference, 2015), academia.com, accessed Jan. 21, 2016, p. 2.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 3. Italics added.

¹⁶² Loudovikos says, “... it is an affirmation by the Son of His nature as the Father’s nature, and affirmation by the Spirit of His nature as the Father’s nature, and a reciprocal affirmation by the Son and the Spirit of their essence as that of the Father’s together with each other’s, timelessly following the causal affirmation made by the Father of his nature as the Son’s and the Spirit’s nature through generation ...” Ibid., 6.

fundamentally in relation to the essence and not above, before, or after it.”¹⁶³ As Athanasius said, in speaking of the eternal generation of the Son, “... the whole nature of the Father is impressed upon the Son as with a stamp.”¹⁶⁴ If the concept of coinherence is not fully grasped, or if it is disregarded, the concept of subordination emerges with few boundaries as evidenced by contemporary subordinationists. Ultimately, Nicene Trinitarian theology recognizes that anytime one person of the Godhead is revealed, the fullness of God is presented because the Trinity is unified in *Being* and in *Act*.

Stephen Kovach and Peter Schemm, in their article, “A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” argue that Jesus’ name, as the eternal Son of God, reveals His eternal relationship to the Father as the subordinate Son.¹⁶⁵ They point to Galatians 4:4 and conclude that since God *sent* His Son, it is revealed that the Son is “ranked below the Father” as the *Sent One* and not the *Sender*.¹⁶⁶ They also deem the Son to be the “agent” of creation, but not the “originator” of all things as that title is reserved for the Father alone.¹⁶⁷ They cite John 1:3, saying, “the Word is the one *‘through’* whom all things were created,” ranking Him below the Father.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, they point toward the redemptive work of salvation stating that redemption

¹⁶³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁶⁴ Athanasius, “Contra Arianos,” ii.31, from *The Early Christian Fathers*, p. 390.

¹⁶⁵ Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, Jr., “A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son,” JETS 42/3 (September 1999), 463.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 471.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

was accomplished because the Son was sent by the Father and *obediently* accomplished the work He was sent to do.¹⁶⁹ Referencing Hebrews 5:8, they teach that Jesus had to learn obedience as *a man*, but in His eternal, ontological nature He understood His role of subordination and obedience in the Godhead.¹⁷⁰ This is a heart wrenching depiction of the incarnation which departs, drastically, from Nicene Trinitarianism as outlined above. It depicts Jesus as having no other choice but to obey His Father and suffer to complete the redemptive work of salvation as commanded by the Father. The concept of God's willingness to voluntarily empty Himself and become a servant for the sake of salvation is stripped away and the beauty of *agape* love is eclipsed by the picture of a subordinate Son obeying an authoritative Father. This is a complete departure from the concept of *coinherence*. The active process of instilling a concept of eternal subordination has the effect of erecting walls of division which seemingly divide the Godhead into quadrants of hierarchy, eliminating the Nicene concept of coinherence which, on the contrary, presents an active and timeless pouring forth of one *hypostasis* toward the other, constantly exalting and affirming the full nature of God as One essence with a unified will.

Vladimir Lossky offers a balanced view of the *hypostatic* reality within the redemptive work of salvation. He links the voluntary *kenosis* of the Son to being an

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 472.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 471. These views are common amongst Evangelical subordinationists. The Sydney Anglican Diocese, in support of the Son's eternal role subordination to the Father states, "The Son's eternal subordination arises from the very nature of his being as Son: he is incapable of doing other than the Father's will" See: Sydney Anglican Diocesan Doctrine Commission Report, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and Its Bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women," Kevin Giles has the full document printed in his book, "The Trinity & Subordinationism (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 2002), 122-137. Also, Grudem teaches, "The Son's role is to obey and the Father's to command (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249)."

exact representation of the heart of God *in Himself*— the united Trinitarian will decides to swallow death and this was manifested through the Word which communicates, openly, the whole nature of God:

The Son “did not avail Himself of His equality with God,” but, “on the contrary, divests Himself,” which is not a sudden decision, nor an act, but the manifestation of His very being, of personhood, which is no longer a willing of His own, but of His very hypostatic reality *as the expression of the Trinitarian will* ... for the only way to conquer death was to allow it to penetrate God Himself where it could find no place In renouncing Himself totally, in making His divine nature inconspicuous, in abandoning every will of His own to the point of saying: “the Father is greater than I,” He accomplishes on earth the Trinity’s work of love.¹⁷¹

Lossky emphasizes the *kenosis* of the Son as the expression of the united Trinitarian will and nature of God. When this Nicene value is central in our understanding of the operations of the Trinity, the imbalance in claiming eternal subordination and hierarchical authority become apparent. Redemption is a manifestation of the heart of God (the unified heart and will of Trinitarian persons), not simply the fulfillment of the Father’s heart as exacted through the obedience of the Son and the Spirit in fulfillment of the Father’s command.

Arche & Monarchie in Nicene Tradition

It is important to note the distinction between Eastern and Western Trinitarian theology regarding the concept that the Father is the sole *monarchie* (source) of the Godhead. This theological idea was emphasized when Augustine contributed to Trinitarian theology by stating that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the

¹⁷¹ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), 101.

Son,”¹⁷² suggesting that the Father is not the ‘sole source’ from which the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds. Augustine’s contribution resulted in the Great Schism of the Church many centuries later through the *Filioque* Clause (*filioque* meaning “and the Son”) which was added to the Nicene Creed by the Western Church. While this has been an issue of contention between the East and the West, as it is argued that subordinationism is more easily applied through the notion of the *monarche*, it is important to note the full meaning and intention behind this concept.

Athanasius considered the Father to be the *arche* (*beginning*) of the Son, but he also includes the Son in this beginning. He declares, “The Word has his beginning (*arche*) in no other beginning (*arche*) than the Father whom they allow to have no beginning (*anarche*), so he too exists without beginning (*anarche*).”¹⁷³ For Athanasius, the whole Trinity abides in the *arche* and not in the Father alone. Torrance points out that Athanasius preferred to use *arche* to describe the eternal generation of the Godhead rather than *monarchia* as it maintained the coequality of essence and order.¹⁷⁴ According to Torrance, the concept of subordination was not inferred when the Cappadocians spoke of the Father as the “sole source” or *monarche*, of the Son because they considered the *hypostases* to be united as a single essence— as the One Godhead.¹⁷⁵ The Cappadocians focused on defining the distinctions of the Godhead while Athanasius focused on emphasizing the *homoousios* of the Godhead. Possibly the explanation that the persons

¹⁷² Saint Augustine, *Treatise On The Trinity*, Ed. Philip Schaff, 1887, 2.2.8 (p. 103).

¹⁷³ Athanasius, “Discourses,” in NPNF 4:2.57 quote taken from Giles, 138.

¹⁷⁴ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*, 182.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

of the Trinity were differentiated due to origin lacked in precision (as being incongruent with Athanasius), but this was eventually balanced through the notion of *perichoresis*.

Thomas Torrance, in discussing this topic, includes a quote from the Orthodox Reformed Commission commenting on the *monarchia* to demonstrate that the concept is to be grounded in the *coinherent perichoresis* and is not intended to present the Father as superior to the Son and the Spirit.

Monarchia is reinforced by the unique conception of coinherent or perichoretic relations between the different Persons in which they completely contain and interpenetrate one another while remaining what they distinctively are in their otherness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is intrinsically Triune, Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity. There are no degrees of Deity in the Holy Trinity, as is implied by the underived deity of the Father and the derived deity of the Son and the Spirit. Any notion of subordination is ruled out. The perfect simplicity and indivisibility of God in His Triune Being mean that the *Arche* or *Monarchia* cannot be limited to one Person as Gregory the Theologian pointed out. While there are inviolable distinctions within the Holy Trinity, this does not detract from the truth that the whole Being of God belongs to all of them as it belongs to each of them, and thus does not detract from the truth that the Monarchy is One and indivisible, the Triunity in Unity and the Unity in Trinity.¹⁷⁶

The *Monarchie* is not limited to a single person of the Trinity. This is also depicted, concisely, in the Athanasian Creed: “Nothing in this trinity is before or after, nothing is greater or smaller; in their entirety the three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other. So in everything, as was said earlier we must worship their trinity in their unity and their unity in their trinity.”¹⁷⁷ Nicene theology continually seeks to refute all forms of subordination and exalt a coequal, coeternal, consubstantial understanding of God as one Being and three persons.

¹⁷⁶ *Theological Dialogue between Orthodox and Reformed Churches*, vol. 2, ‘Significant Features, a Common Reflection on the ‘Agreed Statement,’ ch. 7, p. 231. Quote taken from Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 185.

¹⁷⁷ Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, 63.

The Biblical Perspective of Nicene Trinitarian Theology

One of the key aspects for refuting subordinationism was identified through Athanasius in his hermeneutical method of identifying that the whole scope of Scripture presents a double account of the Logos. This was a cutting edge perspective in Athanasius' time that was honored and upheld by the Cappadocians, Augustine, and others. Augustine, in discussing the equality of the Trinity makes a special claim against interpreting the incarnate life of Jesus as proof of an eternal role of subordination. He says: "... men have erred for a want of careful examination or consideration of the whole tenor of Scriptures, and have endeavored to transfer those things which are said of Jesus Christ according to the flesh, to that substance of His which was eternal before the incarnation, and is eternal."¹⁷⁸ Like, Athanasius, Augustine centers his understanding of the *hypostatic union* in Philippians 2:5-11 through the notion of *kenosis*. He explains:

For in the form of a servant which He took He is less than the Father; but in the form of God, in which also He was before He took the form of a servant, He is equal to the Father. In the form of God He is the Word, "by whom all things are made;" but in the form of a servant He was "made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law." In like manner, in the form of God He made man; in the form of a servant He was made man. For if the Father alone had made man without the Son, it would not have been written, "Let us make man in *our* image, after *our* likeness." Therefore, because the form of God took the form of a servant, both is God and both is man¹⁷⁹

Nicene Trinitarian theology understood that the weakness displayed through Jesus in the incarnation (including His obedience to the Father) did not translate directly back into the ontological nature of God. Nor did the economic Trinity inform us of eternal roles

¹⁷⁸ Saint Augustine, *Treatise on the Trinity*, Loc. 617, Kindle.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

of functional subordination. In fact, Augustine points out that when the Son emptied Himself and became lower than the Father, He also became lower than Himself since the Word is equally God as much as the Father is God.¹⁸⁰ Contemporary subordinationists are actually using the same method for biblical interpretation that was used by the subordinationists of the early Church. The slight distinction in the subordinationism of today is that they are attempting to prove that eternal subordination *in function, role, and work* is not the same as the ontological subordination of *Being* that was promoted by Arius. As stated earlier, the problem with this logic is that any claim of an *eternal* role of subordination insinuates something of ontology, pointing to the eternal personhood. Furthermore, it disrupts the entire theological concept of consubstantiality which provided a framework of coequality and coeternity for the doctrine of the Trinity. In this short section some of the primary Scriptures used to demonstrate Christ's role of eternal subordination to the Father will be explored in an effort to shine light upon them through the perspective of Nicene Trinitarian theology.

Seated at the Right Hand of the Father

In the first chapter it was pointed out that Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware point to Hebrews 1:3 to demonstrate Christ's eternal subordination to the Father because when Jesus, "made purification for sin he sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high," and this position, being at the right hand, demonstrates the Son's subordination to

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., Loc. 592, Kindle. "... is there anyone who cannot perceive that He Himself in the form of God is also greater than Himself, but yet likewise in the form of a servant less than Himself? And not, therefore, without cause the Scripture says both the one and the other, both that the Son is equal to the Father, and that the Father is greater than the Son. For there is no confusion when the former is understood as on the account of the form of God, and the latter as on account of the form of a servant."

the Father. This concept is refuted, boldly, by Gilbert Bilezikian. He points out that there are a variety of Scriptures discussing the throne of God, and in several, Jesus is equally sharing the throne with the Father. In Revelation 3:21 Christ says, “I overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne.” Also, in Revelation 7:17 the Lamb is at the center of the throne of God. Bilezikian also highlights Revelation 22:3 where the throne in the heavenly Jerusalem is called “the throne of God and of the Lamb.”¹⁸¹ The key in viewing Scriptures about the rulership of God is in understanding that the Godhead is One, ruling and reigning with equal authority and power. Bilezikian says, “God the Father and God the Son occupy the same throne for eternity.”¹⁸² As discussed earlier, Athanasius gave firm warning against taking the anthropomorphic analogies of the Father/Son relationship too literally. In another place, it was noted that Athanasius related the Father’s exaltation of the Son in Philippians 2 to be referring to the incarnate Son fulfilling the task, but this is not to be read, directly, back into the ontological Trinity as a descriptor of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father. This short analysis simply demonstrates, once again, the importance of keeping the whole scope of Scripture in view when seeking to understand a single, peculiar, passage.

Christ Intercedes

Another text often used to demonstrate Christ’s subordination is Romans 8:34 where it says, “... Christ Jesus who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.” It is asserted that if Jesus is

¹⁸¹ Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee Jumping,” 63.

¹⁸² Ibid., 63.

interceding for us to the Father, He must have a lower place of authority and an eternal position of subordination which requires Him to ask of the Father on our behalf. This interpretation seems to sidestep the reality of Christ's intermediary role as the Redeemer of humanity which is being depicted through Paul's exhortation. Rather than viewing Jesus as a subordinate who stands before the Father to ask for things, Paul is presenting an image which demonstrates the reality of God's grace in judgement. Paul is showing how Christ, in all His righteousness, stands before God on our behalf when we face judgement. It is through Christ that we are saved and enter into communion with the Godhead. Prior to this verse, Paul is asking, "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Rom 8:33-34). Rather than highlighting Jesus' subordinate role to the Father, Paul is highlighting the way humanity has been hedged in by God Himself through God's justice and righteousness. When we claim Christ, we are in God and nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. If we do not understand that Jesus is our Great Intercessor, constantly exchanging our sins for His righteousness, we have lost sight of the glory of salvation which could only come through God Himself.

Holding All Things In Balance

Contemporary Evangelical Complementarians have sought to instill the notion that the Nicene Fathers and the Creeds of the early Church clearly emphasize Christ's

eternal, functional subordination to the Father. This argument is based upon the creedal statements pointing toward the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. Through this brief assessment of Nicene Trinitarian theology, it has been demonstrated that Athanasius and the Great Cappadocians, as the primary shapers of Nicene Trinitarian theology, made every effort to reject all forms of subordinationism in explaining the Trinity as coequal, coeternal, and consubstantial. Even prior to the development of *perichoresis*, the concepts of *homoousion* and *coinherence* paved the way in explaining the Trinity in a dynamic way emphasizing that He is One Being and Three persons, unconfused, yet actively interpenetrating One another in perfect unity of *Will, Being, and Act*. This explanation of the Trinity is grounded in a soteriological context as only God has the authority, power, and ability to restore broken humanity back to Himself.

Nicene theologians have adamantly upheld the understanding that there is a double account of Scripture in which the *Logos*, in His eternal nature as God, and the *Logos*, in his emptied state as a Man, are revealed. Unless the Scriptures are interpreted with this in mind, the weakness displayed in Jesus incarnate will be directly translated back into the ontological Trinity providing a skewed vision of Jesus (the *Logos*) as eternally subordinate to the Father. Nicene theology, has sought to prevent this. In order to remain faithful to the Creeds, it is important to honor the methods of interpretation utilized by the early Church leaders in forming the doctrine of the Trinity. Also, consistent Nicene Trinitarian theology seeks to keep consubstantiality and perichoresis

central for explaining the mystery of God's eternal nature as *Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity*— completely One in both *Being* and *Act*.

CHAPTER THREE

REVIVING NICENE TRINITARIANISM IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

It is disconcerting to see the Doctrine of the Trinity subtly adjusted over a short period of time in order to promote the subordination of women. It was not until the late 19th century that Trinitarian theology was used to ground female subordination in the Doctrine of God. Rather than upholding the Nicene values of coequality and consubstantiality, Trinitarian theology in modern conservative Evangelical circles is emphasizing an inequality of the persons of the Trinity and then hinging Church communal life upon this novel caveat. While I uphold egalitarian values for communal life, and disagree with the permanent subordination of women, my chief concern in this debate does not rest upon the topic of biblical roles for men and women in Church-life. Rather, my chief concern is that conservative Evangelical theology has departed from Nicene Trinitarianism and is systematically offering the Church a vision of the Trinity which misrepresents the ecumenical values of centuries past. In response, I propose we return to the Trinitarian doctrine upheld by the universal Church through Nicene tradition and seek to systematically restore this vision of God in the Evangelical Church through the ecclesial rhythms of prayer, worship, communion, and teaching.

Possibly, adjustments to Trinitarian theology have gone unnoticed by Evangelicals because Trinitarian theology has faded to the background in Protestant Christian living. The concern for restoring Trinitarian doctrine to the center of Evangelical Christian living is not a new idea. It was first emphasized through Karl Rahner in the mid-twentieth century. He was concerned that most Christians, while confessing the Trinity, actually lived as monotheists with very little understanding for the operation of the Trinity in salvation, the incarnation, and other major aspects of the Christian faith. He said, "...

should the doctrine of the Trinity be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain unchanged.”¹⁸³ His concern was heeded. Since then, much work has been done to structure Christian theology in such a way that this statement would not carry the weight it once did. Still, his concern for a lack of Trinitarian application in the Protestant Christian life continues to be a relevant issue for the Evangelical Church. Andrew Horsman also concurs on this, saying, “The Trinity does not feel any longer to be the life-giving central doctrine of Christian faith, but a problem best left to theologians.”¹⁸⁴ Oftentimes, the doctrine of the Trinity is locked away and isolated to a distant metaphysical reality. As a result, acuity in understanding the Doctrine of the Trinity (as preserved through Nicene tradition) is lacking, resulting in vulnerabilities to the subtle adjustments outlined in this paper. While Karl Rahner’s formula (Rahner’s Rule)¹⁸⁵ does not completely align with Nicene Trinitarianism, his aim to restore Trinitarian doctrine to its central place in Christian living continues to carry relevance today.

In concern for the restoration of Trinitarian theology in Evangelical Church-life, this chapter will provide some basic recommendations which may offer insight into methods for renewing Nicene Trinitarian ideologies and practices in the Protestant

¹⁸³ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 11.

¹⁸⁴ Andrew Horsman, “The Shape of the Trinity: Eucharist Worship and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” *Theology* 102, no. 806 (March 2011): 91.

¹⁸⁵ Rahner’s Rule is the formula implemented by Karl Rahner in an attempt to bind the immanent Trinity to the economic Trinity in order to demonstrate the Trinitarian nature of God throughout the incarnation and the economy of salvation. As stated in chapter 1 & 2, the equation that the economic Trinity directly informs the immanent Trinity departs from Nicene Trinitarianism. Still, Rahner’s concern for the restoration of Trinitarian doctrine in Christian living is heeded and, in my eyes, continues to be relevant today.

Church. A collage of suggestions will be presented with a pastoral heart of concern as it seems insufficient to simply present the problem the Evangelical Church faces without seeking to ascertain some solutions which may serve to bring things back into balance. Following these suggestions, I will provide a comprehensive conclusion outlining the findings and resolutions from the research completed in this project.

Recommendations for Reviving Trinitarian Theology in the Evangelical Church

Miroslav Volf emphasizes that the correspondence between Church communion and the Trinity is grounded in Christian baptism.¹⁸⁶ Through baptism, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the new believer is entered into both Trinitarian communion and ecclesial communion. Volf says, “If Christian initiation is a Trinitarian event, then the church must speak of the Trinity as its determining reality.”¹⁸⁷ Every Christian is brought into communion with the Triune God through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and it is through the same Spirit that the Church becomes unified and distinctively one with the Father through Christ. The very nature of the Church (universal and local) is rooted in the Triune nature of God, and so is the birth of each individual Christian. With this in mind, it is important to ask if there are ways to better reinforce our ‘reality’ as grounded in the Triune God in basic church-life and function. Furthermore, are there ways to emphasize the Trinity in a manner which upholds and promotes Nicene values more carefully in our ecclesial rhythms?

¹⁸⁶ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 194-195.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

Ecclesial Rhythms

The Nicene Creeds provides great insight into a balanced structure for worship, prayer, and teaching. God is described as three persons united as one substance, equally honored and worshiped. Furthermore, the confession of the Triune God is anchored in a soteriological context which demonstrates God's active pursuit of humanity revealed through the economy of salvation through each person of the Trinity. The Nicene Creed provides a holistic view of God which is beneficial for understanding how to speak of Him in community gatherings, and, furthermore, to unbelievers. He is a triune God who, "For us and for our salvation came down from heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit ..."¹⁸⁸ The Creed magnifies *One God*: the Father, Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the Lord Jesus Christ who laid down His life for the sake of the world, and the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and Son.¹⁸⁹ Each person is exalted as Lord and worshiped as God, equally and distinctively in reference to the love He extended to humanity in creation and salvation history. By following this framework, our leading of worship, prayer, and teaching will maintain balance in our presentation of God.

Worship

In designing worship sets, it is ideal to exalt the Triune God so that the congregation is led into honoring the fullness of His nature. Sometimes worship sessions

¹⁸⁸ *Annotated Book of Common Prayer: Being an Historical, Ritual and Theological Commentary on the Devotional System of The Church of England* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899), 358.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

can lean toward emphasizing one person of the Trinity (often Jesus or the Father) more than the others, but it is ideal to balance a worship set to exalt each person of the Trinity equally. This will integrate a Trinitarian mindset into our life of worship. Much like the Nicene Creed, we can seek to offer honor and worship to each person, emphasizing the restorative work of healing and salvation provided through the Triune God.

Prayer

Prayer can be viewed similarly. In the New Testament, we see prayers directed toward the Son¹⁹⁰ and we also see prayers directed toward the Father.¹⁹¹ The Scripture demonstrates prayer being done in the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹² There is no reason to avoid worshiping and praying to the Spirit, directly, since the Holy Spirit is fully God. Prayer is a time of communing with God, understanding His will, being strengthened in His power, and praying for His plans to be fulfilled through the Body of Christ.¹⁹³ This is made possible through the work of the cross and in the power of the Spirit as the fullness of God has been made accessible through the complete work of redemption. The Nicene Creed specifies that the Holy Spirit, “with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.”¹⁹⁴ Prayer to the triune God is healthy and treasured as it demonstrates the unique fellowship the believer has with God. God is a triune communion and the

¹⁹⁰ See Acts 7:59-60, John 14:14, 2 Corinthians 12:8-9, and Revelation 22:20

¹⁹¹ Matthew 6:9-13

¹⁹² Ephesians 6:18

¹⁹³ Ephesians 1:17-18; 3:14-21, 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13, Philemon 25; Philippians 1:9-11; Romans 15:5-6, 13.

¹⁹⁴ Book of Common Prayer, 359.

believer is welcomed into that communion through the blood of Jesus.¹⁹⁵ The beauty of this intimate prayer and worship is demonstrated through Elizabeth of the Trinity in her renowned prayer to the Triune God. In this prayer, she speaks directly to each person of the Trinity. The following are excerpts demonstrating her ministry to God:

O my God, Trinity whom I adore; help me to forget myself entirely that I may be established in You as still and as peaceful as if my soul were already in eternity...

O my beloved Christ, crucified by love, I wish to be a bride for Your Heart; I wish to cover You with glory; I wish to love You ... even unto death!

O consuming Fire, Spirit of Love, 'come upon me,' and create in my soul a kind of incarnation of the Word: that I may be another humanity for Him in which He can renew His whole Mystery. And You, O Father, bend lovingly over Your poor little creature; 'cover her with your shadow,' seeing in her only the 'Beloved in whom You are well pleased.'¹⁹⁶

She describes her union with God as dwelling within the fullness of the Trinity and she places emphasis upon the distinct persons of the Trinity in describing this fellowship:

Live within Them in the heaven of your soul; the Father will overshadow you, placing something like a cloud between you and the things of this earth to keep you all His.... the Word will imprint in your soul, as in a crystal, the image of His own beauty, so you may be pure with His purity, luminous with His light; the Holy Spirit will transform you into a mysterious lyre, which, in silence, beneath His divine touch, will produce a magnificent canticle Love.¹⁹⁷

Her mystical approach to prayer and worship demonstrates the dynamic life of God opened up to the believer when pursued with a full understanding of His triune nature.

¹⁹⁵ Hebrews 6:19.

¹⁹⁶ *Elizabeth of the Trinity, The Complete Works, Vol 1, Letters from Carmel*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (Washington DC: ISC Publications, 1995), 185. Quote taken from: Anne Hunt, "Apostle of the Indwelling Trinity: Elizabeth of the Trinity OCD," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73 (2008), 66.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

God is Trinity in Unity, and Unity in Trinity. It is important that our worship and prayer reflect this knowledge.

Teaching

The gift of teaching is a vital resource for integrating and reviving Trinitarian theology in the Evangelical church. Powerful and precise explanations of God's nature cannot be underestimated. Karl Rahner offers a keen observation in his critique of the Church's lack of Trinitarian understanding when speaking of the incarnation. He says, "Nowadays when we speak of God's incarnation, the theological and religious emphasis lies only on the fact that 'God' became man the Christian's idea of the incarnation would not have to change at all if there were no Trinity. For God would still, as (the one) person, have become man, which is in fact about all the average Christian explicitly grasps when he confesses the incarnation."¹⁹⁸ Rahner voiced this concern a little more than fifty years ago, but I wonder if things have changed much? It is my concern that a simplistic understanding of the incarnation continues to guide the Protestant Christian's concept of God today. Unless the incarnation is presented through the complete lens of God's triune nature, the sacredness of Christ's willingness to suffer, and His surrender to death, loses significance. It would be beneficial to explain the Triune nature of God in reference to the message of salvation and sanctification as it is through the fullness of God's nature that redemption occurs.

All too often, in Evangelical circles, the Trinitarian nature of God is pushed to the background in the message of atonement and the presentation of the cross. Jesus is

¹⁹⁸ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 11.

exalted and given highest honor in the message of the cross, and rightly so, but the message fails to carry with it the full comprehension of God's unending mission (*hesed* love) to restore humanity back to Himself as demonstrated through the history of Israel. Karl Barth teaches that Evangelical theology must present the Christ of Israel with a full understanding that the Word (Logos) incarnate is the fulfillment and consummation of God's covenant with Israel, which now the whole world has been welcomed into. Furthermore, Barth teaches, "Theology would not respond to the *whole Word of God* if it wished only to hear and to speak the Word become flesh. It would totally miss the truth of this Word if it proclaimed simply and solely the history of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world . . . it must remain attentive to what happened in Israel's history."¹⁹⁹ The cross is a fulfillment of Israel's promise from God, and in order for it to be understood fully, it must be presented within the historical context of Israel as this provides insight into God's triune nature expressed through covenant love. In addition to the history of Israel, we must present the cross in conjunction with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit as the gift of the Spirit is part of the fulfillment of God's covenant with Israel and all of humanity to dwell with humanity and to live in the hearts of His people.²⁰⁰ Surely, our salvation and conversion is established through the justification made through Jesus on the cross, but the full implications of the cross can be lost if we do not seek to present the entirety of

¹⁹⁹ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1963), 24. Italics inserted.

²⁰⁰ Jeremiah 31:33 "This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." 2 Corinthians 3:3 "You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." See also, 2 Cor 6:16; Ezekiel 37:27; John 1:14; Revelation 21:3; 2 Cor 1:21-22; Romans 8:16.

the Gospel displayed through this history of Israel and the triune nature of God as seen in the economy of salvation.

Communion

Another method for reviving Trinitarian theology in the Evangelical church can be found in the way we participate in, and lead, communion. Andrew Horsman offers insight into the importance of maintaining a Trinitarian mindset in the administration of the eucharist. He teaches that the early church emphatically understood the Eucharist in a trinitarian way. He says that St. Ignatius of Antioch taught:

- (a) through Christ God moves out to us in creation, incarnation and atonement;
- (b) that through Christ we are enabled to return to God, to participate in his self-giving and his new life, his cross and his resurrection; and (c) that each of these aspects of the dynamic work of our redemption is the work of the Holy Spirit, by whose power God took flesh to come to us (as the Nicene Creed affirms) and in whom we have access through Jesus to the Father (Eph. 2:18).²⁰¹

The early Church partook of the Eucharist as worship because it not only represented, but enacted, the reality of being united with God through the cross. The early Christians understood the cross, the resurrection of Jesus, and Triune nature of God to be intermingled in the partaking of communion. Horsman writes, “The very center and heart of what it meant to be a Christian, a center owing its dynamic and transforming power to the cross and resurrection of Jesus, was focused in the experience of eucharistic worship, and this was an experience of God as Trinity.”²⁰² Now the Trinity, in the Protestant Church, often becomes a theological idea, but not necessarily a faith-

²⁰¹ Horsman, “The Shape of the Trinity: Eucharist Worship and the Doctrine of the Trinity,” 91.

²⁰² Ibid.

experience by which we partake through worship and communion. The partaking of communion, in fellowship with other believers, is to be a physical act of the two-way dynamic of God's self-giving love toward humanity through Jesus, and the Christian's response and return of that love by the power of the Holy Spirit. "God the Father pours himself out in love to us through Christ who is one with God. We respond by pouring ourselves out in loving offering back to the Father, through Christ who is one with us. In the Spirit God does this; in the Spirit we respond. This two-way response gives the shape of the Trinity"²⁰³ The Eucharist is the enactment of the believer recognizing the self-giving sacrifice of God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit, and responding by offering herself back to God through Jesus in the power of the Spirit. The Eucharist, when taken in this mindset, demonstrates the shape of the Trinity and the union of God with humanity through the selfless love of the cross.

It is understood that Christ unites the Godhead with humanity through the power of the Spirit and the redemptive power of the cross. Horsman critiques that when congregations participate in worship and communion unaware of the meaning and "shape" of it, they slip into "individual piety" or else expect the service to entertain (or impress) them.²⁰⁴ "Worship becomes inward-looking, the generation of subjective good feelings, missing the point completely."²⁰⁵ Furthermore, he offers the suggestion that if the congregation is led through communion and worship with the "Trinitarian shape" in mind, it will cultivate a sense that the offering we give back to God is our whole life since

²⁰³ Ibid., 92.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 95

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

God offers His whole life to us.²⁰⁶ The sacraments of the Church are vital for maintaining a balanced understanding of God as *Trinity*. It is important to uphold them and to lead the congregation through them in a manner which genuinely communicates the reality of redemption made complete through the Triune God of all Creation.

The Nicene Creed offers a simple and thorough framework for our presentation of God. It is wise to pull it forward and present it to the congregation on a regular basis for teaching and edifying the Body regarding the Christian Doctrine of God. Furthermore, it is a beneficial framework for leaders to consult for maintaining a *Trinitarian shape* in leading worship, teaching, and in upholding the ecclesial rhythms of the sacraments and liturgies. Part of the value in placing the Nicene Creed (and other creeds) front and center for church-life is that doing so creates a culture which honors, acknowledges, and teaches the ecumenical history of the Church. While it is not uncommon for Evangelical churches to prefer to avoid liturgies and rote tradition, it is important that we do not lose sight of the foundational things which help unite the universal Church. The creeds provide foundational structures which honor the ecumenical history of the Christian community, and these must be remembered as we seek to uphold the doctrine of God as handed down throughout the ages.

Bearing the Image of God

Within the contemporary subordinationist debate, we are faced with the ideology that humans are to bear the image of God; therefore, the Trinitarian nature of God communicates some sort of social structure to be followed in Church-life.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

Subordinationists are emphasizing a hierarchical structure in the Godhead in order to instill the notion that bearing the image of God should unfold hierarchically in social order. Specifically, this structure appoints women to be permanently subordinate to men. This ideology is pervasive and continues to have a great affect on ecclesial order and structure. Yet, it causes me to ask: Is it appropriate to create such direct and prescriptive social structures based upon Trinitarian theology?

Miroslav Volf responds to this question in a balanced way which demonstrates ecumenical humility. Volf cautions against the attempt to draw a direct and simplistic correspondence between the Trinitarian communion and human community.²⁰⁷ He points out that God's triune nature will forever remain a mystery for humanity, for He dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16). Losing sight of this, and insisting that social relations should directly reflect Trinitarian relations, is a misstep and a failure to remember that God is God, and that we are not God, and we cannot simply imitate God. We must remember that any reflection of God displayed in church-life will be marred and imperfect as we await the eschatological consummation which will, surely, bring us into complete union with God. Until then, our understanding of God continues to include a great deal of mystery. Conclusive statements outlining roles and relationships amongst men and women as direct correlations to the intra-Trinitarian fellowship is an overstep in our application of Trinitarian theology for Church-life.

With this in mind, does the community of God bear the image of the Trinity in any way through the way we interact? Can we draw reasonable correlations between the

²⁰⁷ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998).

intimate communion within the Trinity and the communion of Christians? Volf explains that a social vision based upon the doctrine of the Trinity is not so much about God's community projecting, or representing, the nature of God through social models, but more so about Christians imitating the selfless love of God demonstrated through the Cross.²⁰⁸ God's display of Himself is through the economy of salvation, as He reaches out for the lost and broken. Therefore, the community of God will bear the image of the Trinity, most accurately, as it works in unified, selfless love for the cause of bringing the broken back into fellowship with God and with one another. The intricacies of how this unfolds in governmental structures, ordination, and specific roles and functions will be defined through careful and thorough exegetical work as we seek to understand God's intentions for community structures. The binding and unifying agent within the Body of Christ is the indwelling Holy Spirit. The Spirit becomes the mark of the Triune God upon the believer, and it is the indwelling Spirit which compels each Christian, in unison with the Body of Christ, to operate toward the vision of God to see all of creation restored to perfection. While there are many speculations regarding social models for how humanity can bear the image of the Triune God, I find it most compelling to remember that we bear His image when we operate in the unifying, selfless love of His Spirit for the purpose of bringing the lost back into fellowship with the Creator.²⁰⁹

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 219.

²⁰⁹ John 13:34-35 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Perichoresis

As stated earlier, one of the key ways for maintaining a Nicene understanding of the Trinity is found in the notion of *perichoresis*. The concept of *perichoresis* maintains the unity of the Trinity while simultaneously upholding the unique distinctions of the Persons. When discussing God's divine nature, keeping the concept of *perichoresis* front and center will aid in providing balance and unify the concepts that He is Three and One.

Thomas Torrance writes:

Perichoresis reinforces the fact that the Holy Trinity may be known only as a whole for it is as a whole that God makes himself known to us through himself and in himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It enables us to appreciate more fully the truth that the Holy Trinity is completely self-grounded in his own ultimate Reality, and that God's self-revelation is a self-enclosed *novum* which may be known and interpreted only on its own ground and out of itself. This means that our knowing of God engages in a deep circular movement from Unity to Trinity and from Trinity to Unity, since we are unable to speak of the whole Trinity without already speaking of the three particular Persons of the Trinity or to speak of any of the three Persons without presuming knowledge of the whole Trinity, for God is God only as he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.²¹⁰

The notion of *perichoresis* automatically offers correction to the contemporary subordinationist view as it emphasizes the coinherence of the Godhead and dispels gradational ideologies which divide the Godhead into descending levels of authority and power. The *perichoresis* teaches us that God is only known in a "circle of reciprocal relations."²¹¹ It emphasizes the eternal movement of God and rejects concepts of staunch hierarchical structures which seek to describe God as flowing in one direction, from the top down, in descending authority. *Perichoresis* highlights the notion that God is fully

²¹⁰ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 174.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

God in each Person of the Trinity as each Person is fully dwelling in the others, interpenetrating, yet remaining unconfused. Karl Barth describes God in this *perichoretic* way, saying, "... according to the biblical witness, the one God may be known only in the Three and the Three only as the one God, so none of the Three may be known without the other Two but each of the Three only with the other Two."²¹² *Perichoresis* provides a cohesive understanding of the intra-Trinitarian fellowship which asserts the full equality of the divine persons and also strengthens our understanding of the *hypostatic* distinctions. It is a vital concept to keep front and center in our efforts to teach the doctrine of the Trinity and uphold the Nicene values in Trinitarian theology.

The departure from Nicene Trinitarian theology is disconcerting as it has unfolded over time with a distinct agenda to teach subordinationism in the Church and family, claiming it to be a reflection of subordination within the Godhead. Possibly, the Evangelical Church has been vulnerable to accepting the subtle adjustments over time due to a lack of Trinitarian theology in community life. In order to bring things back into balance, it has been proposed that a systematic integration of Nicene Trinitarian concepts be imbedded in ecclesial rhythms. The Christian mind should be ever aware of the Trinitarian reality of God in worship, communion, fellowship, teaching, and evangelism. It was through the work of salvation that God's Trinitarian nature was revealed in history. The Nicene Creed grounds the doctrine of God in the context of salvation, and the community of God should carry this understanding within its heart.

²¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics I.1*, 370. Quote taken from Torrance, 174.

God's mission continues to be for the restoration of broken humanity. The Holy Spirit dwelling within the hearts of believers causes this mission to be continuously expressed as we seek to narrate, through our lives, the same selfless love demonstrated through God on the Cross. When the Christian community reflects God's love, unity, and pursuit of the lost, we bear His image and, even further, the mission of the Triune God to deliver captives. Seeking to prescribe social models (roles and functions of men and women) based upon our limited understanding of the hidden, intra-Trinitarian life seems to overstep boundaries and limitations in theological application. As the Body of Christ seeks to integrate Trinitarian theology in ecclesial rhythms, it is ideal to keep the Nicene Creed central as a guiding framework for the doctrine of God. Furthermore, it is beneficial to keep the notion of *perichoresis* central in explaining the Trinity as it cohesively binds the concepts of Unity and Trinity and exemplifies the circular movement of selfless love within the Godhead which serves to dispel subordinationist ideologies.

CONCLUSION

This project has presented the landscape of Trinitarian theology, throughout the ages, in an effort to demonstrate that the contemporary notions of the eternal subordination of the Son are a departure from classic Nicene Trinitarian theology. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the eternal subordination of the Son has been endorsed for the distinct purpose of enforcing the permanent subordination of women. Adjustments toward the eternal subordination of Jesus, in Evangelical Trinitarian theology, were made in response to the women's movement and have been popularized in conjunction with teachings of female subordination. It is alarming to see Trinitarian theology adjusted to reinforce social ideals. Even further, it is alarming to see those social ideals cemented and promoted through this revised notion the Trinity. It is my concern that this misinterpretation of Trinitarian theology is not only misrepresenting God to the Evangelical Church, but it is also limiting the health, freedom, and dynamic growth and development of the Body of Christ.

It is important to ask: Is it ideal to utilize the doctrine of the Trinity to prescribe roles and functions for male-female relationships? In agreement with Kevin Giles, I believe the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of male-female relations are two separate doctrines which should be studied independently.²¹³ It was not until this past century that the doctrine of the Trinity was interwoven with the topic of women's roles for Church and family life. This transformation in Trinitarian theology is directly correlated with societal shifts and social ideologies. Acceptance of such adjustments

²¹³ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 312.

opens the Church to innumerable vulnerabilities as human agendas are given priority for the adjustment and shaping of age-old doctrines. Furthermore, it is disingenuous to present the doctrine of the Trinity with the correlation of female subordination as if it were always intended to inform women of such things. Our understanding of God, and our presentation of God, must stay true to the whole counsel of God as depicted through Scripture, and it also must be accountable to orthodoxy as the ecumenical work of centuries past must be welcomed to inform and influence the theological developments of the future. In this particular case, one way tradition can inform this debate is by alerting the Evangelical Church to the absence of female subordination as a correlative in Trinitarian theology prior to the late 1800's and women's liberation.

Another concern regarding this topic is in regards to how this ideology, left uncorrected, will influence future generations. Evangelical theologians of the future are left vulnerable to embracing the *ontological subordination* of Jesus as this is the underlying implication of the contemporary subordinationism. Both sides of the debate remain within the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, at this time, but will this remain the case if the subordinationist ideologies of contemporary Evangelicalism are left uncorrected and unchanged? As stated earlier: anytime the word *eternal* is added to the nature or characteristic of God, it insinuates something of His ontological nature. Ultimately, accepting the *eternal functional* subordination of the Son insinuates ontological hierarchy within the Trinity. This implies gradational authority in the immanent Trinity which eclipses the Nicene values of coequality and consubstantiality. If future theologians continue onward and further emphasize subordination to the

embrace of the ontological superiority of the Father, Evangelical theology will be left vulnerable to the development of Trinitarian theology which parallels far too closely with Arianism. This is why it is important for adjustments to be made sooner than later. It is my hope that Evangelicals would be able to return to classic Nicene Trinitarianism and find common, united ground in Trinitarian thought once again. This renewed Trinitarian understanding, as upheld in our Creeds, can provide a restorative understanding of God in the Church as the Body of Christ deliberately integrates Nicene Trinitarian ideologies into ecclesial rhythms.

The research completed in this project was very narrow as my emphasis simply rested upon demonstrating how the contemporary notion of the eternal subordination of the Son is a departure from classic Nicene Trinitarian thought. Yet, through the process of research, other areas of interest emerged which would surely serve to further balance my argument and offer greater clarity and insight in this debate. In some ways, contemporary Evangelical subordinationism can mirror the Eastern Orthodox concept of the Trinity as Eastern Trinitarianism maintains that the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father. Yet, the Orthodox Reformed Commission openly rejects any notion of subordination in the Trinity.²¹⁴ It would be beneficial to do further research on Eastern Orthodox Trinitarianism and contrast contemporary subordinationist ideologies with Eastern thought. Even as Eastern Trinitarianism operates detached from the *filioque*, a sense of coequality and unity in authority is maintained. Also, it would be beneficial to unveil the complexities of the theological concept of the eternal generation of the Son. I

²¹⁴ This is outlined in greater detail in Chapter Two on pages 53-54, in the section, *Arche & Monarchie in Nicene Tradition*.

believe historical theology would demonstrate that origination does not imply gradational levels superiority, authority, and power in the immanent Trinity.

The hinge of this debate is the correlation of Trinitarian theology with the roles of men and women in Church and family. While it has been an adamant concern to do away with false ideologies meant to shape the life of the Church in order to preserve Church health, there has not been sufficient research, in this project, demonstrating that our idea of God has authority in shaping social structures. It would be valuable to uncover the social implications for cognitive beliefs about God in Church and family life. This would unveil the urgency of this debate and also provide insight into which aspects of Trinitarian theology are most vital for maintaining the cognitive and spiritual health of the Church. What are the implications for presenting a skewed notion of God and structuring family and Church around these ideologies? It would be beneficial to understand if there are social implications for our understanding of God, and if so, to what degree do these implications shape the life of individuals and communities?

My greatest concern in this debate regards the adjustment of the doctrine of the Trinity emphasizing the eternal superiority of the Father in order to ground female subordination in the most foundational doctrine of Christianity—the doctrine of the Trinity. Any departure from traditional, Nicene Trinitarianism should raise red flags in theological circles, especially if these adjustments are being implemented to promote social ideals. Since the Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed, are universal confessions of faith for the Christian community, it is vital we maintain accountability to their meaning and purpose in the Evangelical Church. It is my hope that the Evangelical

Church will consider the implications of placing the Father in a role of eternal superiority over the Son and the Spirit and redirect the skewed theological claims being made to enforce the subordination of women. Let matters regarding the roles and functions of women be discussed and solved in an arena independent of Trinitarian theology.

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