

The subordinationist heresy? Christ is eternally subordinate to Father God

By [Philip B. Payne](#), Contributor | Monday, July 24, 2023

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"The Cross of Wales" is displayed for a photograph ahead of a ceremony to bless the Cross at Holy Trinity Church in Llandudno, north Wales, on April 19, 2023. | Paul Ellis/AFP via Getty Images

One of the clearest expressions of the idea that God the Son is eternally subordinate to God the Father comes from Wayne Grudem. He writes that the subordination of a wife to her husband reflects the “eternal ... subordination in role, but not in essence or being [of the Son to the Father]... Scripture speaks of that ... [in [Hebrews 1:3](#)]. Jesus is at the right hand, but God the Father is still on the throne” (*Recovering Biblical Manhood* 457).

This claim is problematic in several ways. First, it misrepresents the Bible. The word “throne” does not occur in [Hebrews 1:3](#), but 1:8 states, “of the Son he [God] says, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.” [Revelation 7:17](#) even describes “the Lamb at the center of the throne.” [Revelation 22:3](#) depicts “the throne of God and of the Lamb” in the New Jerusalem, and [Revelation 3:21](#) and [12:5](#) depict Jesus Christ on the throne of God.

Second, the idea of the eternal subordination of the Son goes against the most basic Christian traditions, the creeds. Since the time of Athanasius and the early church creeds, Christian orthodoxy has affirmed that there is one God existing eternally in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, equal in being, power, and glory. The subordinationist heresy teaches that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father. Thomas F. Torrance's *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons*, p. 189, states "any implication of subordination (*hupotagē*) in the Trinity was completely ruled out by the Fathers of the Constantinopolitan Council ... rejecting any difference in Deity, Glory, Power and Being between the Father and the Son." Kevin N. Giles *Jesus and the Father* and Millard J. Erickson's *Who's Tampering with the Trinity* document this in detail.

The reason for this consensus in orthodox theology is that subordinationism conflicts with Christ's ontological equality with God the Father as taught in [Romans 9:5](#); [Philippians 2:6–11](#); [Colossians 1:15–20](#); [2:9](#) and [Titus 2:13](#). [Philippians 2:6–8](#) affirms that Christ relinquished "equality with God" and "made himself nothing ... humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" Christ's submission to incarnation and death was the voluntary submission of an equal for the specific purpose of redemption. It was not the submission of a subordinate in a hierarchy of authority. "Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" ([Hebrews 5:8](#)) implies that obedience was not inherent in his status as Son but was a new experience to be "learned," specifically through his incarnate sufferings, not from some prior subordination. The incarnate Son's voluntary subordination to the Father implies no eternal subordination.

Third, virtually all of the biblical evidence it proposes regards Jesus's life on earth. The eternal Son took on human flesh for our redemption and to model for us how to love God and one another. As church fathers explain, it is wrong to interpret how Jesus modeled for us submission to the Father as his eternal subordination to the Father.

Fourth, its appeal to "God is the head of Christ" in [1 Cor 11:3](#) misunderstands the use of "head" in Hellenistic Greek and Paul's letters, as I explained in [this CP op-ed](#). That piece documents that the Church Fathers' exegesis is virtually unanimous that all three occurrences of "head" in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) mean "source." We know that Christ was the creative source of every man because [1 Corinthians 8:6](#) states that God created all things through Christ. Paul repeatedly refers to man as the source from whom woman came in [1 Corinthians 11:3](#), [8](#), [12](#). In light of [8:6](#) and [11:3](#), it is clear that *ho theos* in [11:12](#) is a broad reference to the Godhead's creative work that must include Christ, just as *ho theos* typically does in the second half of [1 Corinthians](#). [1 Corinthians 11:3](#) almost certainly refers to Christ coming from the Godhead in the incarnation. That implies nothing about subordination of the Son to the Father.

Fifth, these uses of *ho theos* to refer to the Godhead in the second half of [1 Corinthians](#) also affect how we should understand [1 Corinthians 15:28](#), the primary text used to justify the Son's eternal subordination. [1 Corinthians 15:28](#), too, is better translated "so that the Godhead (*ho theos*) may be all in all." Augustine in *de Trinitate* Book [1 Ch 8](#) argues that *ho theos* is not limited to the Father. The shift from "God the Father" in verse 24 to "the God" in verse 28 indicates this shift in reference from the Father to the Godhead. Paul's concluding statement, "that God may be all in all," applies far more naturally to the oneness and encompassing

authority of the Godhead than it does to God the Father exclusively. Other statements by Paul show he did not believe that in the new age, God the Father would be everything to the exclusion of Christ. [Romans 9:5](#) refers to Christ as “God over all, forever praised.” Here “Christ is not only called *Theos*, He is also the subject of a benediction normally reserved in Judaism, and by Paul, for God alone” (TDNT 3:105). [Ephesians 1:20–22](#) states that Christ is seated “at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.”

Christ’s voluntary submission to the Father is part of a Father-Son mutual putting-oneself-at-the-disposal-of-the-other. This undermines any hierarchical view of the Trinity. Church fathers called this dance of the Trinity *perichōrēsis*. The Son glorifying the Father no more makes the Son subordinate to the Father than the Father glorifying the Son (e.g., [John 8:50](#); [11:4](#); [13:31–32](#); [17:1](#), [5](#), [22](#), [24](#); [Acts 3:13](#)) makes the Father subordinate to the Son. The Son submitted to the Father, and the Father put the Son “over every power and authority” ([Ephesians 1:20–22](#); [Philippians 3:21](#) and [Colossians 2:9–10](#)). [1 Corinthians 15:27–28](#) is best understood within this context of mutuality, five times affirming that “everything is in subjection” to the Son and concluding “then the Son himself will be subjected to the one who subjected everything to him, so that the Godhead may be all in all.” There is no mention of “eternal” here.

Sixth, “eternal ... subordination in role, but not in essence” is logically incoherent because if the Son is eternally subordinate, then his subordination is a necessary aspect of who he is, his essence, his being, his ontology. Grudem’s claim is nonsense. When this nonsensical formula of equal but subordinate is applied by those in power to those without power, it is self-serving nonsense. It is like George Orwell’s pigs saying, “all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others.”

It is not surprising, then, that even some complementarian leaders, such as Carl Trueman and Liam Goligher, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, accuse those who teach the eternal subordination of the Son of “reinventing the doctrine of God” and “doing great dishonor to Christ.” Neither the Bible nor classic Trinitarian orthodoxy teaches the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. Quite to the contrary, the church has designated this as the subordinationist heresy. Arguing for the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father to the subordination of women is dangerous for both theology and women.

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