

Hongyi Yang, M.A., M.S., PH.D.

Foreword by Fred Sanders

A Development, Not a Departure

*The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine
of the Trinity and Gender Roles*

REFORMED ACADEMIC DISSERTATIONS

“Hongyi Yang’s dissertation is a truly impressive analysis of recent debates about the eternal submission of the Son to the Father in the Trinity. Her work is carefully reasoned, remarkably insightful, and comprehensive in scope. Where she pointed out shortcomings in my own writings on this topic, I found her evaluations to be thoughtful and useful. I am happy to give this book a strong commendation.”

—**Wayne Grudem**, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

“The Trinitarian debate regarding the internal relations of Father, Son, and Spirit and whether these apply to gender relations has long been the playing field of Western theologians, many obliged today to decry patriarchy and affirm women’s functional equality. Once an atheist and feminist, Hongyi Yang has come to the field asking who set the rules and why. She has researched with depth, weighs all sides, raises legitimate concerns for all, and knows where to take the reader without overstating her reasoned complementarian case. Her arguments help reset the direction for evangelical conversation and greater maturity.”

—**J. Scott Horrell**, Professor of Theological Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

“Recently a vehement debate has arisen in evangelical circles on the eternal hypostatic relations, prompting accusations of heresy. With incisive analysis, Dr. Yang carefully probes weaknesses—of historical, theological, and exegetical kinds—on all sides. One does not have to agree with her conclusions to recognize that this is a book that cannot be ignored.”

—**Robert Letham**, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Union School of Theology

“This volume’s uniqueness rests first in the author—a young woman with a Ph.D. who is overseeing a massive Mandarin Translation Project for the entire MTS degree of Southwestern Baptist Theological

Seminary. Dr. Yang came to seminary as a relatively new believer who had been reared in China as an atheist. Her undergraduate work was impressive, but the highest level of work she has done in a research degree truly puts her into a group of international scholars. While asserting the full ontological equality of the Son with the Father, Yang argues credibly for the voluntary functional submission of the Son to the Father as a paradigm for marriage. Those looking for careful documentation and analysis as well as a concluding summary need look no further. I will recommend to our Women's Studies faculty that this volume be required reading for our women students, and I can say without pause that I believe this to be one of the most important works in this field for men as well as women. And this volume's scope is not limited to scholarly circles. Yang is clear and insightful in a way that opens her work to all with interest in this timely subject."

—**Dorothy Kelley Patterson**, Professor of Theology in Women's Studies, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

"Hongyi Yang has written a thoughtful and wide-ranging study defending the idea that the submission of the Son to the Father is a legitimate development of and not a departure from the doctrine of the Trinity. Yang integrates church history, theological reflection, and biblical exegesis into this fascinating study. The subject is complex and controversial, but we can be thankful for Yang's clarity and research. Yang recognizes that she has not written the last word on this subject, but we can be thankful for her contribution. Even those of us who would not concur with all her solutions are reminded of three important truths. First, we must not cherry-pick sources from church history but read them in their own historical context. Second, a coherent and convincing theology of the Trinity must explain the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity, even when diving into mysterious waters. Third, key biblical texts must be interpreted in their biblical context. Too often verses are read out of context or discussion on the Trinity takes place without any

explication of the biblical text. I am grateful for this fine study and expect that it will be often cited in future discussions.”

—**Thomas R. Schreiner**, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, Associate Dean, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Hongyi Yang’s new monograph is a razor-sharp text. It boldly, even bravely, joins one of the toughest debates of our era. Where we might expect polemics, however, Yang gives us cool reasoning based on crystalline biblical exegesis. The text defies the stereotypes: it is doggedly scriptural yet sourced from the church’s theological tradition; it takes a side, but critiques all comers in no uncertain terms; it is academic theology, yet stimulatory of the worship that knowledge of the Trinitarian God yields without limit. Among many contributions, the text stands out for its gracious challenge to affirm oneness without fail, but to speak with clarity of threeness. Yang, in sum, invites us to glory in the united *hypostases* Scripture unveils in such beauty and detail. A serious work by a gifted thinker that advances and reframes the discussion.”

—**Owen Strachan**, Associate Professor of Christian Theology, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

“Combining journalism, historical theology, exegesis, and good sense, Hongyi Yang brings perspective and wisdom to the current debate regarding the relation (if any) between the Godhead and gender. She has mastered a vast literature, isolated salient questions, identified major issues, and arrived at convincing conclusions. Her book is exactly what is needed at this juncture to consolidate findings from the last generation’s disputations, retrieve insights from former eras and thinkers, and sketch ways forward. This energetic, logical, creative, and focused study is not only a research report but also a weighty contribution in its own right.”

—**Robert W. Yarbrough**, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“The theologian who simultaneously navigates the demanding disciplines of scriptural exegesis, historical theology, and contemporary systematics is rare. That a rising scholar does so, especially when many of contemporary evangelicalism’s finest find it difficult, challenges the imagination. Add to this complex scenario the further difficulty of a contemporary debate filled with rancor, and you will quickly realize that this present book represents a human impossibility. Yet Hongyi Yang has successfully authored a monograph that will demand appreciative responses from across the spectrum. An Asian female theologian, Professor Yang is herself a convictional complementarian, but this does not keep her from judiciously and fairly treating the multisided problems within the contemporary debates over Trinity and gender with both academic clarity and Christian charity. On the one hand, knowledgeable readers will discern my divergence from one of Professor Yang’s significant conclusions; on the other hand, I believe that her analysis of the contemporary debate on Trinity and gender is the most substantive yet to find its way into print. From now on, theologians who wish to speak to this critical issue with credibility will simply have to work through her book.”

—**Malcolm B. Yarnell III**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

A Development, Not a Departure

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John J. Hughes

A Development, Not a Departure

*The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine
of the Trinity and Gender Roles*

Hongyi Yang


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A Development, Not a Departure: The Lacunae in the Debate of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Gender Roles. Hongyi Yang, M.A., Beijing Normal University; M.S., University of North Texas; M.A. and Ph.D., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Submitted to Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016, for the degree of Ph.D. Supervisor: Malcolm Yarnell.

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To God the Father, who demonstrates his love
by giving us his Son and his Spirit

To God the Son, who demonstrates his love
by obeying the Father in dying for us

To God the Spirit, who demonstrates his love
by uniting us with the Father and the Son

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Series Introduction

P&R Publishing has a long and distinguished history of publishing carefully selected, high-value theological books in the Reformed tradition. Many theological books begin as dissertations, but many dissertations are worthy of publication in their own right. Realizing this, P&R has launched the Reformed Academic Dissertation (RAD) program to publish top-tier dissertations (Ph.D., Th.D., D.Min., and Th.M.) that advance biblical and theological scholarship by making distinctive contributions in the areas of theology, ethics, biblical studies, apologetics, and counseling.

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John J. Hughes
Series Editor

Foreword

The public controversy over trinitarian theology that culminated online in the summer of 2016 was a remarkable event. Academics and commentators, pastors and laypeople, experts and amateurs, bloggers and tweeters got involved, hashing out the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. The multi-sided, multi-platform discussion called to mind Gregory of Nyssa's complaint about what Constantinople was like once the public got interested in the Euno-mian controversy:

Everywhere, in the public squares, at crossroads, on the streets and lanes, people would stop you and discourse at random about the Trinity. If you asked something of a moneychanger, he would begin discussing the question of the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you questioned a baker about the price of bread, he would answer that the Father is greater and the Son is subordinate to Him.¹

On the one hand, trinitarian theologians couldn't help but be glad to see Christians become so interested in the doctrine, and many fine essays appeared online, read eagerly by an expanding public as the discussion churned on. Free, public essays on trinitarian theology were being served up daily and read immediately! On the other hand, the discussion was often overcharged with polemics, crowded

¹Gregory of Nyssa, "Oration on the Deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit," in *PG* 46, col 557.

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with presuppositions, conducted in haste, diverted by irrelevant associations, and pervasively skewed by faulty framing. Even more than Nyssa on Eunomianism, the discussion sometimes seemed like the dangerous confusion of the English Reformation as described by C. S. Lewis:

The theological questions really at issue have no significance except on a certain level, a high level, of the spiritual life; they could have been fruitfully debated only between mature and saintly disputants in close privacy and at boundless leisure. . . . In fact, however, these questions were raised at a moment when they immediately became embittered and entangled with a whole complex of matters theologically irrelevant It was as if men were set to conduct a metaphysical argument at a fair . . .²

Throughout the public controversy (about which you can read in some detail in this book), I found myself worried about two things. First, I worried about the way the discussion was canalized into a set of narrow contemporary concerns, which led to the various positions being fairly predictable along tribal lines, and many positions being taken on an *ad hoc* basis as challenges arose. Second, I worried about the rising generation of evangelical theologians who were first being drawn into discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity in this controversial context. In many cases, my worries were assuaged by the participants themselves: a host of energetic younger evangelical theologians took to the blogosphere precisely to place the discussion in a broader context methodologically, hermeneutically, historically, and dogmatically. Still, my worry persisted. In a conversation so diffuse and wide-ranging, it was impossible to know who was learning which lessons from which engagements.

² C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 37.

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The present book, which I first read in an earlier form as a dissertation, is a great encouragement to me that younger theologians can fend for themselves, get their bearings, and make sense of contemporary controversy. Hongyi Yang had already been hard at work for a few years on the issues arising from the controverted discussion of Trinity and gender in evangelical circles. This Trinity-and-gender discussion was one which I had for a long time publicly wished had never happened; again, the footnotes of my demurrals are all in the text before you. But even as I lamented the existence of the discussion, I was well aware that conversations have to happen, and it would be better for them to happen well than poorly.

The conditions for a good conversation about Trinity and gender are fairly stringent. In particular, a good book-length contribution to the subject would have to be impartial enough to identify the real core commitments held by the key participants. It would have to take its bearings from the longer historical arc, and make some judgments about how to appeal to that history. It would have to be willing to engage in some actual exegesis of a few contested passages of scripture. It would have to be committed to setting the conversation in a broader doctrinal context, and on that basis it would have to be willing to identify the blind spots and lacunae in the discussion all sides. And its author, having invested in such a wide range of preparatory work in more classical scholarly modes of study, would have to finish the project up by scrambling after the latest documentation of things like conference panel discussions, recorded interviews, and blog posts.

Hongyi Yang has written the book that does all that, and does it well. I commend it as a responsible journalistic report on the 2016 controversy, and a very helpful placement of that controversy in a broader context. Recall that Dr. Yang had been at work on the subject for some years before the controversy broke out, and seems providentially prepared to serve as an informed commentator.

I also commend this book as a piece of theological research from the complementarian perspective that seeks to make a contribution to Trinitarian understanding in the present.

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Dr. Yang's particular hypothesis is that the modern cultural context is so strongly oriented toward equality of all kinds, and against hierarchy of any kind, that it threatens to distort the traditional Christian confession that the three persons exist in coequal and coeternal fellowship that is nevertheless structured according to a particular interpersonal *taxis*. It is indeed a striking intercultural observation about the difference between the ancient Christian culture that produced classical Trinitarian confessions (a culture at home with a range of hierarchical realities, and fluent in describing them), and modern Western culture (a culture inveterately suspicious of all ordered structures and allergic to hierarchies of any kind). Dr. Yang argues that in order to continue saying the same thing we have always said about the unity and distinction of the three persons of the Trinity, it would make sense for the church in modern culture to take the step of articulating the ordered distinction between the Father and the Son in terms of some sort of interpersonal, relational authority. That some evangelical theologians attempted to do this without the resources of classical Trinitarianism—indeed, even sometimes denying them—was inauspicious in the extreme. Dr. Yang has learned the right lessons from those episodes, and teaches them here.

Dr. Yang's work is an attempt to renew the research program of pushing back against the prevalent egalitarian spirit of modern culture precisely for the sake of saying the right thing about the ordered distinction of persons within the being of God. This is where its importance lies, and what makes it not only a clarifying account of the recent controversy, but also a strategically valuable contribution to the conversation. Even where I disagree with her findings (as for instance she documents below on the question of whether we ought to try to relate Trinity and gender), I am glad to have this careful articulation set forth as part of the dialogue.

There is today a real danger that the conceptualities of modern social equality may so thoroughly pervade our thought forms as to render the Father-Son relation harder for moderns to grasp.

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Theology today needs, but mostly lacks, voices that will call our attention to the strictures that we rarely notice because we share them so completely with each other. Where may we expect to hear these voices? We may hear them from the theologies of the developing world beyond the traditional centers of theological instruction: Asian and African theologians in particular may draw from other cultural forms and sources than Westerners take for granted. We may also hear them from Eastern Orthodox theologians, with the so-called “monarchy of the Father” rooted deeply in their tradition. But what Dr. Yang has especially noted is that the emergence of “the contemporary doctrine of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority” among some evangelical theologians can also serve as a place where we may hear this voice. She considers the teaching as “a doctrinal development in response to the prevalent egalitarian context, yet based on the truth already contained in Scripture rather than a departure from biblical teachings.” That is, according to her sympathetic reading of the overall movement, what some have called complementarian Trinitarianism articulates something latent in classic Trinitarianism. Strong assertions of the way the Son looks up to, or receives from, or is purely filial toward, the Father, are implicitly contained in the biblical and classical Trinitarianism of Christian confession; they simply didn’t emerge explicitly until the pressure of modern egalitarianism brought them forth and made them necessary.

The filial character of the Son’s hypostatic distinctiveness is extremely hard to confess instructively, and in my opinion the entire recent controversy has made it even harder. To me, the way forward seems to be to retrieve and then extend more classic conceptualities, so I tend to avert my eyes from the current controversy when possible, and wait for its dust to settle before expecting to make progress in the steady task of catechizing the Christian church in its Trinitarian confession. Dr. Yang has adopted another strategy, which is to plunge directly into the current discussion in order to draw out resources for doctrinal work. Near the end of her project here,

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Dr. Yang admits that “one still awaits a more coherent presentation that includes ...a more balanced view of the whole portrait of biblical trinitarianism.” She also signals that the way forward in this regard is to ponder more deeply the nature of the Fatherhood of God the Father, as a way of grasping what is distinctively filial in the Sonship of the Son. This is exactly right. There is indeed more work to be done here in building up a responsible modern confession of the triune God, and I am grateful for Hongyi Yang’s principled, diligent, and clarifying work in this field.

Fred Sanders
Professor of Theology
Torrey Honors Institute
Biola University

Preface

Writing this dissertation has been a long journey. After my conversion from atheism and feminism to Christianity in the year of 2000, I often thought of questions like these: With what kind of woman is God pleased? What is God's original design and purpose for man and woman? How does this relate to God Himself? These questions were not just abstract or academic inquiries. They were real for me, a young Christian at that time, and are still closely related to my Christian life. I am eager to become a Christian woman who pleases God.

In the spring of 2003, responding to God's calling, I enrolled at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in the master of theology program (concentrating on biblical studies), which laid the foundation of biblical theology and languages for my further pursuit of theological knowledge. In 2009, I entered the Ph.D. program, majoring in systematic theology. During that year, I decided to write about the doctrine of the Trinity and gender issues, on which all my seminar research centered. The debate of the doctrine of the Trinity and gender roles naturally drew my attention at that time. I wanted to see if the scholars in the debate offered any answers to the questions I was asking.

In the fall of 2013, I started to write this dissertation. Many times I knelt down before the Lord and asked, "Lord, You are the one who knows Your words the best. Please help me to understand them. Please help me to present accurately who You are and what You have said." God faithfully answered each prayer. He supplied insights, ideas, books, energy, health, support, comfort, encouragement, and time—all of which were needed to finish. What Jesus said is true:

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“Apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). I have learned that academic endeavors should never be separated from prayer. Writing this dissertation has been a process of learning the discipline of prayer, the most important form of conversation in the universe.

Although the journey has been long and sometimes lonely, I have not been alone. God blessed me with Dr. Malcolm Yarnell as my supervisor, who has been very encouraging and gracious. He contributed important information, insights, guidance, and many helpful suggestions. I am always thankful to God for him and for Dr. Dorothy Kelley Patterson, my second reader, who has also been very supportive and encouraging, not only in reading my dissertation promptly and carefully but also through praying for me. Dr. Fred Sanders served as my third reader at Dr. Yarnell’s invitation. Before that, his writings provided very good guidance to the relevant literature. I am impressed by his humility and am grateful for his virtual presence at my dissertation defense. Tamra Hernandez, my dear friend and proofreader, has patiently helped me in various ways. Probably no one understands my struggles in this journey better than she. Without her help, I would not have been able to express what I intended to communicate with as much clarity. Her friendship is a blessing that I greatly treasure.

I also deeply appreciate four senior Christian ladies: my mother (Yinghua Ma), Joann Jones, Tsaiping Feng, and Ann Hudgens. They have all been my prayer warriors, supporting me through persistent prayers, encouraging cards, kind words, and wise counsel. My gratitude also goes to my late pastor, Peter Teo, who lived a life of obedience to the Lord. He always reminded me of the right attitude for approaching the Word of God. I thank everyone who prayed for me and supported me through this journey. My aim is that whoever reads this dissertation will say, “This is not done by her but by God through her.”

I am also grateful to have met John Hughes at the 2016 Evangelical Theological Society Annual Meeting, where he first showed interest in my dissertation. He has been instrumental in bringing

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this volume to a wider audience and in walking along with me during the whole process. He kindly connected me with two well-respected scholars: Dr. Vern Poythress and Dr. Robert Letham. Both scholars took precious time to read my dissertation and pointed out places that needed clarification. Dr. Robert Letham also brought some references to my attention. I am impressed by their generous help to young scholars like me.

I also thank Dr. Paige Patterson and Dr. Craig Blaising who graciously allowed me to sit in their classes: the class on Revelation and the PhD seminar on the Arian Controversy, respectively. Both classes provided me with more knowledge and insights relevant to certain content of this dissertation. My previous committee members (Dr. Malcolm Yarnell, Dr. Dorothy Kelley Patterson, and Dr. Fred Sanders) continued to support me through prayer and recommendations. I am very grateful for their faithful encouragement. When I told them that I was revising and updating my dissertation for publication, the four senior Christian ladies realized that their task was not over. They started to pray for me again. Their prayers are a great blessing to me from God.

This dissertation was finished in April 2016, before two major players in the debate, Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem, revised their position on the doctrine of the Son's eternal generation and its possible implications. I have updated and revised according to these changes and developments. However, if anything has escaped from my attention, the error is mine. There are certainly limitations and shortcomings in this volume. Theological endeavors are always a development. Like many other theologians, I hope that my knowledge of God develops and grows more and more in conformity to the truth of God's Word. May God bless you with this volume.

Hongyi Yang
Fort Worth, Texas
October 2017

Abbreviations

ANF	A Select Library of Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church
BAGD	Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament</i>
<i>Bsac</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Sacra</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
<i>CTR</i>	<i>Criswell Theological Review</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ERT</i>	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>IJST</i>	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
<i>MT</i>	<i>Modern Theology</i>

ABBREVIATIONS

NAC	New American Commentary
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NES	<i>The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son</i>
NPNF	A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
PE	<i>Pro Ecclesia</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version
RTR	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
SVTQ	<i>St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
TrinJ	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

1

Introduction

The Debate

At the end of the last century a debate erupted among evangelicals.¹ This debate concerned the Trinity and gender roles. More specifically, it was about the subordination of the Son to the Father and the submission of women to men. Egalitarian scholars, namely Gilbert Bilezikian and Kevin Giles, criticized some complementarian theologians for creating a doctrinal innovation in order to push their ideological agenda of the submission of women to men.² This doctrinal innovation that Bilezikian and Giles oppose is that the Son submits to the Father eternally in role, function, and authority, while being equal to the Father in nature, glory, and power. When this is applied to the relationship between men and women, women

¹ Although there are controversies about the term “evangelical,” both sides in the debate identify themselves with this term.

² Egalitarians are those who hold that man and woman are equal, so that man and woman should share the same roles, responsibilities, and authority. Complementarians are those who acknowledge the distinctive roles of man and woman while affirming the equality of them before God. Complementarians believe that in family, the wife submits to and supports the husband, and the husband leads and cares for the wife; in church, the leadership responsibility rests on men rather than women.

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submit to men in role and function but are also equal to men in nature and dignity.

Bilezikian vehemently criticizes the idea of the eternal subordination of the Son and calls this theological understanding “hermeneutical bungee-jumping.”³ He warns complementarians not to “mess with the Trinity.”⁴ The two complementarian theologians whom he targets are Robert Letham and Wayne Grudem. Bilezikian did not publish anything further regarding this issue after this article and offered no response to others’ criticisms of his article.⁵ However, Kevin Giles has picked up Bilezikian’s criticism and has continued the battle against complementarians’ presentation of the intra-trinitarian relationships and their implications for gender roles.

In his two books, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (2002) and *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (2006), Giles argues that the eternal subordination of the Son in role, function, or authority is a reinvention of the doctrine of the Trinity by some evangelicals and that it is neither the teaching of Scripture nor the position held within the orthodox Christian tradition.⁶ Besides Robert Letham and Wayne Grudem, Giles mentions other evangelicals, such as Bruce Ware, Norman Geisler, John

³ Bilezikian, Gilbert, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS* 40 (1997): 57–68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁵ In the same year (1997), Bilezikian published *Community 101: Reclaiming the Local Church as Community of Oneness* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), which includes this article and addresses the issue briefly. However, he has not published on this topic since 1997.

⁶ Giles remarks, “I am convinced that what is being taught by many of my fellow evangelicals on the Trinity is contrary to the most fundamental teaching of the New Testament and to what the best theologians of the past and present tell us is orthodoxy.” *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 9. Another book of Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (2012), mainly focuses on the eternal generation of the Son except that one chapter and some portions argue against the Son’s eternal subordination

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Frame, and Thomas Smail, who teach the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in role, function, and authority.⁷

Since criticisms arose from Bilezikian and Giles, their major opponents, Grudem and Ware, have responded to them and have attempted to refute their arguments in books and articles. Other scholars also joined the debate.⁸ Although Millard Erickson's view was already cited by the egalitarian side, he did not officially join the debate until 2009 with the publication of his book *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate*.⁹ Later, Grudem responded to this book with an extensive article: "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father."¹⁰ Besides these publications, many public discussions about this topic in the forms of blogs, articles, and panel discussions have taken place.¹¹ The debate

in authority. See Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2012), 203–19, 225–35.

⁷ See the section titled "The Post-1970s' Evangelical Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son" in *Jesus and the Father*, 20–32.

⁸ Kovach and Schemm's article, "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son" (1999), mainly responds to Bilezikian rather than Giles since Giles had not yet published his book about this issue. Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son," *JETS* 42 (1999): 461–76. Craig S. Keener, "Is Subordination Within the Trinity Really Heresy? A Study of John 5:18 in Context," *TrinJ* 20 (1999): 39–51.

⁹ Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009).

¹⁰ Wayne Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father" in *NES*, 223–61.

¹¹ For example, Fred Sanders has written blogs about this topic at *The Scriptorium Daily*. One of his blog articles recapitulates his involvement in this debate. Fred Sanders, "A Plain Account of Trinity and Gender," June 17, 2016, <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/a-plain-account-of-trinity-and-gender/>. In 2013, two panel discussions related to this topic were held—one at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (SBTS) and the other at Biola University, where Sanders and Giles presented their papers and interacted with each other. The SBTS panel discussion (including Lewis Ayres, Fred Sanders, Scott Horrel, Robert

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thus keeps growing, and more and more scholars are becoming involved in it.¹²

In 2016, two major events marked the growing expansion of this debate. One was an online debate in the summer; the other was the 68th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) held in San Antonio, Texas, which included a panel discussion and other sessions about this topic. On June 3, 2016, Liam Goligher's blog was posted on *Mortification of Spin* (the blog of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals).¹³ In his post, Goligher accused Ware and Grudem of "presenting a novel view of God; a different God than that affirmed by the church through the ages and taught in Scripture."¹⁴ This post pulled the trigger of the online debate about the Trinity and gender in 2016. Within a very short period of time, both scholars and lay people produced hundreds of blogs, posts, and follow-up comments. Carl Trueman, Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, Lewis Ayres, Michel R. Barnes, and Fred Sanders were some of the leading scholars involved in the debate.¹⁵

Letham, and Wayne Grudem) did not directly address the issue of the Trinity and gender but did touch on it during the discussion.

¹² *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (2012) includes fifteen scholars' contributions to this ongoing debate. Although the total number of these essays is sixteen, Yudha Thianto's article does not address this debate so it is not counted here. Another set of eleven essays is collected in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, ed. Bruce Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015).

¹³ Liam Goligher, June 15, 2016, "Is it Okay to Teach a Complementarianism Based on Eternal Subordination?" *Mortification of Spin*, June 3, 2016, <http://www.alliancenet.org/mos/housewife-theologian/is-it-okay-to-teach-a-complementarianism-based-on-eternal-subordination#.WSCdF2YkuUk>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Detailed accounts about this online debate can be found in *Christianity Today*. Caleb Lindgren, "Gender and the Trinity: From Proxy War to Civil War," *Christianity Today*, June 16, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/june-web-only/gender-trinity-proxy-war-civil-war-eternal-subordination.html>. Kate Shellnutt, "The Complementarian Women Behind the Trinity Tussle," *Christianity Today*, August 22, 2016, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct>

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In November 2016, the theme of the ETS meeting was “The Trinity.” The conference had sessions and a panel discussion about the subordination and submission in the Trinity. Millard Erickson, Kevin Giles, Bruce Ware, and Wayne Grudem constituted the panel, which drew a good number of attendees. One of the remarkable things about this panel discussion was that Grudem and Ware publicly invalidated their earlier view of the eternal generation of the Son. Previously, neither had accepted the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation, but now both affirm this doctrine.

The summer 2016 online debate was a “civil war” among complementarians rather than a “war” between complementarians and egalitarians as in the early stages of debate. During the ETS meeting, two major players in the debate, Grudem and Ware, publicly changed their position on a very important doctrine. The impact of this revision remains to be seen. The publication of *One God in Three Persons* (2015) also exhibits a more complex spectrum of positions among complementarians.¹⁶ All these happenings indicated that this debate was becoming more and more complex, and attempts to delineate its configuration grew more and more difficult.

Using the two terms “complementarian” and “egalitarian” to describe the two sides of the debate seems inadequate now. The online debate in the summer of 2016 clearly shows that some

/2016/september/behind-trinity-tussle.html. Todd Scacewater has collected a comprehensive bibliography of this online debate: “2016 Trinity Debate: A Bibliography,” *Books at a Glance: Quality Christian Books—Summarized!*, July 12, 2016, <http://www.booksataglance.com/blog/2016-trinity-debate-bibliography-okay-teach-complementarianism-based-eternal-subordination/>.

¹⁶ While reviewing this book, Fred Sanders commented, “A number of these essays advance their arguments in ways that are not simply extensions of the lines established by the Grudem-Ware trajectory of the debate so far. Instead, they appeal to categories that I don’t think we’ve seen before among the complementarians who have participated in this debate.” Fred Sanders, “Things Eternal: Sonship, Generation, Generatedness,” July 11, 2015, *The Scriptorium Daily*, May 8, 2015, <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/things-eternal-sonship-generation-generatedness/>.

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complementarians adamantly oppose the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority. On the other hand, a few egalitarians support such a doctrine.¹⁷ Various terms have been created to refer to the contemporary teaching of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority. These terms include EFS (Eternal Functional Subordination of the Son), ESS (Eternal Subordination of the Son), ERAS (Eternal Relational Authority-Submission), and others. The major proponents of EFS/ESS/ERAS are Grudem and Ware, while the main opponents of EFS/ESS/ERAS are Giles and Erickson.¹⁸

Rather than using any of these labels, the writer suggests two terms that represent the positions more adequately—pro-subordination (pro-S) and anti-subordination (anti-S). The term “pro-subordination” distinguishes that position from the “subordinationist” view, which may have certain historical connotations and sound heretical. “Pro-” means “tilt towards” or “tend to”; “pro-subordination,” therefore, does not signify a view “equal to” that of subordinationists. An additional advantage of using these two terms is that they are better able to reflect a wide spectrum of positions in each camp. “Pro-S” advocates refer not only to Grudem and Ware but also to those whose views, although allied to this camp, may vary from the views of Grudem and Ware in some details.¹⁹ Similarly,

¹⁷ For example, Craig Keener is an egalitarian who supports the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority.

¹⁸ This was exactly the way 2016 ETS meeting arranged the panel discussion, which nicely placed the important representatives of the two opposing camps together.

¹⁹ For example, other pro-S proponents like Wayne House highlight relational subordination rather than functional subordination. See Wayne House, “The Eternal Relational Subordination of the Son to the Father in Patristic Thought,” in *NES*, 133–81. Michael Ovey, an adamant pro-S advocate, disagrees with the way that Grudem and Ware distinguished the three persons in the Trinity before they changed their position on the eternal generation of the Son. Ovey argues for the Son's eternal subordination mainly based on the Son's eternal sonship. The Son's submission is one implication of the Son's eternal sonship. See discussion: “Listen in as Four Theologians Discuss

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“anti-S” proponents include not only Giles and Erickson but also their allies, who may take different approaches to opposing EFS/ESS/ERAS.

Besides these two camps, there is a group of scholars involved in this debate known as “commentators.” They do not belong to either side but have interacted with both sides. These scholars include Fred Sanders, Robert Letham, Lewis Ayres, Keith Johnson, D. A. Carson, and many others.²⁰ Sanders has commented and has written about this debate, and has been invited to speak about it in various occasions. Lewis Ayres also commented on this debate in the summer of 2016. Although often regarded as one in the pro-S camp, Letham considers himself neutral, not belonging to either side.²¹ Carson

the Trinity Debate,” July 24, 2016, <http://www.booksataglance.com/blog/listen-four-theologians-discuss-trinity-debate/>. And Michael J. Ovey, “True Sonship—Where Dignity and Submission Meet: A Fourth-Century Discussion,” in *One God in Three Persons*, 127–54; idem, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility*, Latimer Study 83 (London: The Latimer Trust, 2016).

²⁰ Scott Horrell may also belong to this group due to his rejection of the term “subordination.” Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 72–73. Another scholar whose position has undergone a radical shift is Michael Bird. In the early stages of this debate, he sympathized with the pro-S position. See the article written by him and Robert Shillaker, “Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles: A Response to Recent Discussion,” *TrinJ* 29 (2008): 267–83 and Michael Bird, “The Son Really, Really Is the Son: A Response to Kevin Giles,” *TrinJ* 30 (2009): 25–68. However, the online debate in 2016 indicates that he now is not in the pro-S camp, although it is not clear if he belongs to the other camp either. He is at least in between. However, when his earlier articles are mentioned in this dissertation, the writer treats him as a pro-S advocate due to his position at that time. His current position is definitely not pro-S.

²¹ Letham objects to being classified as a subordinationist by Bilezikian. He says, “I never use *subordination* or *hierarchy* or their functional equivalents—indeed, I sedulously avoid them.” Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 480. In his e-mail to this writer in May 8, 2017, he remarks, “I see myself as

briefly touches on this debate in one of his most recent publications. Although he refrains from entering or even commenting on the debate, he does offer some solid, insightful arguments.²² These scholars have contributed much to the debate through challenging both sides to examine and explore their positions, arguments, and rhetoric.

Although this debate started as early as the end of the last century, there are still lacunae that need to be addressed and explored. Both sides have ignored or have not adequately explained certain important issues in their arguments. These lacunae include (1) the legitimacy or illegitimacy of relating the Trinity to gender roles, (2) the methodology of using historical evidence in the debate,²³ (3) elaboration of the implications of the relationship between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, and (4) exegetical problems in the debate. This dissertation thus intends to expose and examine these lacunae, and then to attempt to provide solutions to some lacunae. However, solutions do not necessarily mean answers. Sometimes, the solution may be to wait for a further development with cooperative efforts, to stop where Scripture stops, or to provide a very possible answer to a certain issue based on what Scripture says.

Literature Review and the Lacunae

The following literature review shows the commonalities and disagreements between the two sides of the debate. Both sides share the following commonalities:²⁴

in the middle.”

²² See D. A. Carson, “John 5:26: *Crux Interpretum* for Eternal Generation,” in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 92–96.

²³ For example, words of church fathers are quoted out of their context to prove a theological claim they had not encountered or intended to address.

²⁴ The following summary about both sides comes from their major works. The anti-S side includes Bilezikian, “Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Godhead,” *JETS* 40 (1997): 57–68; Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the*

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1. Both hold that Scripture should be the authority to judge their views.
2. Both *state* that the three persons share the same divine substance. Each person is eternally and fully divine.
3. Both *state* that they affirm distinctions (differences) among the three persons.
4. Both believe that the opponents do not faithfully understand Scripture and church tradition but allow their own agenda to distort the doctrine of the Trinity.
5. Both are concerned that the opponents' understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity may lead to a heresy (either Arianism or modalism).

The two sides disagree on the following points:²⁵

Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) and *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002); Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009) and others. On the pro-S side, see Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); idem, "Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?" in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002); idem, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority and Submission among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead Being," in *NES*; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1994); idem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004, 2012); Stephen D. Kovach and Peter R. Schemm, "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son," *JETS* 42, no. 3 (September 1999): 461–76; and others.

²⁵ Ibid.

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1. Although both claim to hold a high view of Scripture, anti-S proponents such as Giles believe that tradition is the interpretive key for explaining Scripture.
2. Although both continually emphasize that the three persons are equally God, anti-S proponents including Giles and Erickson believe that the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in role, function, and authority would indicate the Son's subordination in substance (nature or essence), which leads to the heresy of Arianism.
3. The focus of this debate is on the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father (as well as the Spirit to the Son and the Father, but the issue of the Spirit is not as intensively debated as that of the Son to the Father). Anti-S proponents such as Giles and Erickson believe in the temporary subordination of the Son to the Father, which means that the Son submitted to the Father only in his incarnation when he was on earth. However, pro-S proponents such as Grudem and Ware believe in the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. The submission of the Son to the Father when the Son was on earth shows the eternal relationship between the Son and the Father. The Son not only submitted to the Father in his incarnation but also submits to the Father eternally, though not ontologically (in substance, nature, or essence) but in role, function, and authority.
4. So, how do the different understandings of the Trinity relate to contemporary gender issues? Grudem and Ware as well as other pro-S proponents parallel the Son's eternal subordination to the Father with the relationship between men and women. They believe that as the Son submits to the Father in role, function, and authority but is equal to the Father in nature, woman also submits to man in role, function, and

authority but is equal to man in nature. However, anti-S proponents oppose this parallel and argue that woman and man should be equal in nature, role, function, and authority.

5. On one hand, anti-S proponents claim that their opponents undermine the equality of the three persons, especially the equality between the Son and the Father, while pro-S proponents emphasize that they hold to the coequality of the Son and the Father in nature, power, glory, and status. On the other hand, pro-S advocates claim that their opponents have eliminated the differentiation among the three persons, while anti-S proponents state that they affirm the distinctions among the persons.

There remain, however, several lacunae in the arguments of both sides in the debate.

The First Lacuna

The first big lacuna is the legitimacy or illegitimacy of relating the Trinity to gender roles. Is this a legitimate analogy? Neither side has provided an adequate answer to this question. What they have offered so far are only assertions of *yes* or *no*, but not reasons, especially biblical reasons. The ones who say *yes* have not examined adequately the links between the Trinity and gender roles. Grudem and Ware have referred to 1 Corinthians 11:3, but their explanations are too brief to be considered a sufficient support to the legitimacy of relating the Trinity to gender roles.²⁶

²⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More than 100 Disputed Questions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004, 2012), 453; idem, "The Key Issues in the Manhood-Womanhood Controversy, and the Way Forward," in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, 49. Ware briefly points out that 1 Corinthians 11:3 shows that headship in the other two instances is grounded in the Father-Son relationship. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles," in *NES*, 22.

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Those who say *no* also have not offered adequate reasons why one should not relate the Trinity to gender roles. They simply reject this possibility and ignore the fact that many non-complementarian authors actually have drawn social implications from the Trinity to apply to human relationships.²⁷ Several have used superficial “common-sense” arguments to support their claims. They argue that since the Trinity is about three persons but marriage involves two persons and the Trinity also “has two male persons and human marriage has one male and one female,” it is illegitimate to apply trinitarian relations to gender relations.²⁸ This argument is deficient because (1) marriage is not just about two persons. One important purpose of marriage is procreation. Once a man and a woman are united, there is another potential person involved—their future child. (2) God is not male, even as gender language (e.g., Father, Son, he) is normatively applied to God.

In contrast to both sides of the debate, some scholars—such as Fred Sanders, Keith Johnson, and Robert Letham—have made more attempts to examine this issue. Keith Johnson questioned the methodology of “treating the immanent Trinity as a blueprint for human relations.”²⁹ He criticized those who used this approach without biblical boundaries, such as Leonardo Boff (Trinity for egalitarian forms of society), David Williams (Trinity for a proper ecology),

²⁷ Those who take this approach include Stanley Grenz, Jürgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, David Cummings, and so on.

²⁸ Michael F. Bird and Robert Shillaker, “Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles: A Response to Recent Discussion,” *TrinJ* 29 (2008): 281. Giles agrees to and follows their arguments concerning this aspect. Giles, “Response to Michael Bird and Robert Shillaker: The Son is not Eternally Subordinated in Authority to the Father,” *TrinJ* 30 (2009): 237–38.

²⁹ Keith Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism: An Augustinian Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2011), 186–219. Johnson restates some of his criticisms of this methodology in his article, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective,” *Themelios* 36 (2011): 22–24; idem, “Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective,” in *NES*, 130.

Daniel Helminiak (Trinity for gay marriage), David Bjork (Trinity for the unity between Protestant missionaries and Catholics), and Jürgen Moltmann (Trinity for a proper political structure).³⁰ Most of Johnson's criticisms are legitimate; for example, he points out that these theologians lack Scriptural warrant, have the problem of projection, and sever the Trinity from God's revelation in Scripture.³¹ However, these criticisms may not be applicable to the issue of the Trinity and gender roles. Johnson does not examine the applicability of his criticisms before he directly uses them to nullify the relation between the Trinity and gender roles.

Fred Sanders' position on this issue shows a development. In his article "The State of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Evangelical Theology" (2005), he did not completely reject the methodology of relating the Trinity and gender roles but warned to do it with caution.³² However, he later has strongly opposed linking the Trinity with gender, especially the *immanent* Trinity with gender. In almost all his publications and open discussions about this topic, he has advocated separating the doctrine of the Trinity from gender relations or any human relations.³³

³⁰ Johnson, *Rethinking the Trinity and Religious Pluralism*, 196–201.

³¹ Ibid., 201–9.

³² Sanders remarks, "In the hotly contested field of the theology of gender relations, evangelical theologians would be well advised to exercise great caution in the way they make their appeals to the doctrine of the Trinity. I am attempted to call for multilateral disarmament in this arms race, asking both sides to declare a temporary moratorium on invoking trinitarian warrant for their positions on gender relations. That, however, is unrealistic, because the fact is that scripture itself does make use of analogies and appeals which cross over the line between trinitarian relations and human gender relations, and responsible theologians must account for this biblical witness (1 Corinthians 11 is the most obvious crux). What is needed in this area is some sense of perspective and balance." Fred Sanders, "The State of the Doctrine of the Trinity in Evangelical Theology," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 47 (2005): 166.

³³ See his articles and blogs on "The Trinity in Gender Debates," *The Scriptorium Daily*, October 30, 2012, <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/the-trinity-in-gender-debates/>; idem, "You, Me, and the Heavenly Three? Why the

In his article “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” Letham attempts to provide the theological grounds for the relationship between men and women through exploring the relational aspect of the image of God.³⁴ Letham’s article is pioneering and has been cited by both sides many times. However, his exploration is limited to less than five pages and the biblical passage of 1 Corinthians 11:3–12 does not receive adequate attention.³⁵ Although in a brief fashion, this article may still be the most extensive examination of the links between the Trinity and gender.

Anti-S proponents such as Bilezikian, Giles, Erickson, and others have not shown any biblical reasons to disprove the links between the Trinity and gender. Pro-S advocates also have not examined this issue adequately. Some scholars who do not belong to either side have offered more discussions about this methodology of relating the Trinity and gender, but their works still seem to be wanting. Since neither side has provided adequate reasons for the legitimacy or illegitimacy of relating the Trinity with gender roles, it is necessary to explore this lacuna further before jumping into the debate.

The Second Lacuna

The second major lacuna is the way both sides use and interpret historical evidence. Both sides claim that church tradition, including the confessions and the writings of the church fathers, is on their side. What they normally do is list quotations of church fathers and creeds in church history to support their views. Some church fathers, such as Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine, are quoted by both sides to argue different positions. But how can the same church father’s words be used both to support *and* reject the

Trinity Can’t Tell Us about Gender. A Response to Larry Crabb,” *Christianity Today*, August 8, 2013; idem, “18 Theses on the Father and the Son” June 13, 2016, <http://scriptoriumdaily.com/18-theses-on-the-father-and-the-son/>; etc.

³⁴ Robert Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52 (1990): 65–78.

³⁵ Ibid. 69–73.

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eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in role, function, and authority?

What anti-S proponents found in the confessions and church fathers is the emphasis on the equality and unity among the three persons in essence, glory, and power. However, to show that the church fathers highlight the equality and unity among the three persons does not automatically prove that they reject the idea of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, or authority. The most relevant evidence that anti-S advocates can show is that the majority of church fathers reject the Son's subordination to the Father in substance, essence, or nature but agree that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father.³⁶

According to pro-S proponents, obviously the church fathers see the distinction and order among the three persons while upholding the equality among them. Pro-S advocates follow the evidence upon which the church fathers clearly draw to demonstrate that the Father is eternally the Father and the Son is eternally the Son.³⁷ However, to show that the church fathers acknowledge the differences (or even an order) among the three persons does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the church fathers support the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in role, function, and authority.

When examined in detail, almost none of those church fathers' quotations, which both sides list, directly supports or rejects the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father in role, function, and authority. While using historical data to argue their cases, both sides seem to have ignored a very important factor in historical research: context. The church confessions and church fathers' thoughts were produced in certain historical and theological contexts. This is especially true for the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

³⁶ Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 32–69. Giles, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and Subordinationism," *ERT* (2004): 270–84. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* 141–59.

³⁷ Kovach and Schemm, "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal

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Controversies and heresies drove the church fathers to draw certain truths out of Scripture and to articulate those ideas with their contemporary language to respond to their opponents. For example, the theological perspectives of church fathers such as Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Augustine were formed in response to Arianism, the most influential heresy at that time. Thus, it is not surprising that their works emphasize the equality between the Son and the Father and avoid any color of subordination. This is also why anti-S proponents like Giles favor these church fathers (especially Athanasius) and are happy to compile quotations that highlight the equality and unity between the Son and the Father when they were arguing against Arianism.³⁸ Giles, however, is actually borrowing someone's answers to a certain issue in a certain context and applying them to a different issue in a different context.

On the other hand, pro-S advocates may be disappointed to find little evidence to show that the church fathers supported the idea of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, or authority. The literature of the pro-S side actually shows this deficiency. The most relevant evidence available is that the church fathers affirmed the eternal distinctions and an order among the three persons.³⁹ While some mention that the Father is greater than

Subordination of the Son," 465–70. Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles," in *NES*, 29–36. Wayne House, "The Eternal Relational Subordination of the Son to the Father in Patristic Thoughts," 133–81. House points out that many church fathers clearly "recognize an ordering within the Trinity *implies* subordinationism in regard to personal relationship." House, "The Eternal Relational Subordination of the Son," 159. Notice that the ordering that the church fathers acknowledge may "imply" a relational subordinationism but does not "prove" such an idea.

³⁸ Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism*, 33–52 and *Jesus and the Father*, 129–241.

³⁹ Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles," 29–36; idem, "Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?" 245–47. Wayne House, "The Eternal Relational Subordination of the Son," 133–81. Kovach and Schemm, "A Defense of the Doctrine of the Eternal Subordination of the Son," 464–70.

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the Son, the direct statement that the Son eternally submits to the Father in role, function, or authority rarely occurs in these church fathers or in the confessions.⁴⁰ After listing major creeds in church history, Erickson claims, “Note, however, that nothing is said about subordination or relative authority.”⁴¹

One may agree with Erickson, but even this does not prove that church tradition rejects the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority. The reason is simple. What the church fathers faced at that time were different controversies and different contexts than those in this modern era. When discussing Athanasius, Steven Boyer insightfully points out, “To be sure, equality is the dominant theme of Athanasius’s writings: the burden of nearly all of his work is explicitly to overthrow the Arian error by insisting that what the Father is, the Son is also. Yet given the

⁴⁰ Among the quotations that both sides provide, Hilary may be the only one who states the idea closest to our contemporary debate. In his work *On the Councils, or the Faith of the Easterns*, he says, “There is no question that the Father is greater. No one can doubt that the Father is greater than the Son in honor, dignity, splendor, majesty and in the very name of Father, the Son Himself testifying, *He that sent Me is greater than I*. And no one is ignorant that it is Catholic doctrine that there are two Persons of Father and Son; and that the Father is greater, and that the Son is subordinated to the Father, together with all things which the Father has subordinated to Him . . . But the subordination of filial love is not a diminution of essence, nor does pious duty cause a degeneration of nature, since in spite of the fact that both the Unborn Father is God and the Only-begotten Son of God is God, God is nevertheless One, and the subjection and dignity of the Son are both taught in that by being called Son He is made subject to that name which because it implies that God is His Father is yet a name which denotes His nature. Having a name which belongs to Him whose Son He is, He is subject to the Father both in service and name; yet in such a way that the subordination of His name bears witness to the true character of His natural and exactly similar essence.” Quoted by Bruce Ware in “Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles,” 10, and later by Erickson in *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 152. Even Erickson, who is against the eternal subordination of the Son, admits, “Although not using the term, Hilary in effect says that the Son’s subordination is one of role.” *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 153.

⁴¹ Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 146.

ubiquitous presence of Arianism in the fourth century, this emphasis is hardly surprising.”⁴² The church fathers did not face the challenge of modernism, which has bred today’s feminism and egalitarianism. The battle they fought required them to highlight certain biblical truths, such as the equality and unity among the three persons, but this does not necessarily mean that they denied other biblical truths, such as the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father.⁴³ It is hard to tell if they would accept or reject the idea of the Son’s eternal subordination in role, function, or authority if they lived in the contemporary context. However, a methodological hole has developed due to the use—on both sides of the debate—of historical data without the examination of the relevant contexts.⁴⁴ Neither side has addressed such methodological questions concerning historical research as, “How do we use historical thoughts and interpretations? How do we understand the terms or languages that church fathers used in their times? How different is our debate today from their debate at that time?”

The Third Lacuna

The third lacuna in this debate concerns the relationship between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. Both sides agree that the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity but does not limit the immanent Trinity. What, then, is the point of divergence? For pro-S advocates, the Son’s submission to the Father on earth has an eternal basis and reflects his relation with the Father

⁴² Steven D. Boyer, “Articulating Order: Trinitarian Discourse in an Egalitarian Age,” *PE* 18 (2009): 255.

⁴³ Unless they believed these truths were mutually exclusive, they would deny one truth while affirming the other.

⁴⁴ Erickson does call attention to the context of the church fathers’ writings. However, describing the issue within merely three paragraphs, he does not build a coherent methodology for applying historical evidence. He merely exemplifies the approach of using the church fathers even though they were responding to contexts different from ours. *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* 140–41.

in heaven and eternity.⁴⁵ God's revelation in the economy of salvation is consistent with who God is eternally. However, although anti-S advocates admit the economic submission of the Son to the Father without hesitation, they deny that it is also an eternal feature of the immanent Trinity.

On one hand, anti-S proponents need to explain why the economic Trinity shows discrepancy from the immanent Trinity. So far, only Giles has tried to provide a structured explanation.⁴⁶ His argument includes two basic aspects.⁴⁷ First, he argues that the economic Trinity should not limit the immanent Trinity; then, he locates the Son's temporary subordination to the Father in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Giles believes that the Son's submission on earth is a creaturely characteristic and should not be read back into the immanent Trinity.⁴⁸ However, does the Son's submission on earth belong to what limits the immanent Trinity or belong to what truly reveals God? How does Giles know which one is correct? If the immanent Trinity can be unlike the economic Trinity, then what is the immanent Trinity like? Even based on God's revelation in the economy, one has nothing certain to say about God.

On the other hand, pro-S advocates need to address the issue of the relationship between the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit sometimes seemed to play a leading role when the Son was on earth. For example, Jesus was led by the Spirit to be tempted in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1; Mark 1:12; and Luke 4:1). How does this reconcile with the Spirit's submission to the Son in the immanent Trinity? Ware says, "The Son is shown to be under the Father but over the Spirit. Although the Son is under the Spirit in the incarnation, in his exaltation the Son 'returns' to his place under

⁴⁵ Bruce Ware and John Starke, "Preface," in *One God in Three Persons*, 11. Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission," in *NES*, 242.

⁴⁶ Erickson does not specifically address the issue of the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity in his book, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*

⁴⁷ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 242–74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 256 and 262.

the Father yet over the Spirit.”⁴⁹ This statement actually shows the breach rather than the consistency between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity. It is more like anti-S proponents’ temporary subordination view and thus undermines pro-S advocates’ own arguments.⁵⁰

Although the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity is important to the current debate, both sides have paid little attention to this issue, especially in terms of the relevance of this relationship to the current debate.⁵¹ Few have realized the consequences that the two different positions in the debate may bring to the epistemology of the Trinity and thus to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. The value of the Rahner rule—“the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa”—has not been related to the debate in an adequate way. The logical implication of the Rahner rule—i.e., if the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, then the Son’s economic submission to the Father will be an immanent submission to the Father—precisely expresses the pro-S position. However, few pro-S proponents, including Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem, have ever examined and carefully adopted this rule for the debate. The significance of the relationship between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity for the debate is another lacuna that needs to be acknowledged and explored.

⁴⁹ Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 97.

⁵⁰ Anti-S advocates McCall and Yandell also spot this problem but they do not offer a solution; instead, they attack this weakness of the pro-S side. Thomas McCall and Keith E. Yandell, “On Trinitarian Subordinationism,” *Philosophia Christi* 11 (2009): 345–46.

⁵¹ Apart from Kevin Giles, Michael Bird, Robert Shillaker, Scott Horrell, and Kyle Claunch, who have addressed the relevance of this relationship to the debate in a brief way, few have noted and explored the significance of this issue for the debate. Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 242–74. Michael Bird and Robert Shillaker, “Subordination in the Trinity and Gender Roles,” 273–74. J. Scott Horrell, “Complementarian Trinitarianism: Divine Revelation Is Finally True to the Eternal Personal Relations,” in *NES*, 344–45, 367. Kyle Claunch, “God Is the Head of Christ: 1 Corinthians 11:3,” in *One God in Three Persons*, 82–87.

The Fourth Lacuna

Exegetical problems on both sides of the debate comprise the fourth lacuna. In this arena, the larger hole is found on the anti-S side. Scholars on this side of the debate have not provided convincing biblical evidence to disprove the pro-S position. Most of the passages cited to refute the pro-S position affirm the deity of the Son and the equality between the Father and the Son—truths denied by neither side of the debate. Furthermore, these passages do not automatically nullify the fact that Scripture does present the Son's subordination in relationship to the Father and that this subordination does not seem to be limited only to the Son's incarnation.

Anti-S proponents have tried to explain away the meaning of the Son's submission in certain passages. For example, Giles appeals to Philippians 2:5–11 to argue against the Son's eternal subordination. Based on this passage, he divides Christ's ministry into three stages: "(1) his preexistent glory, (2) his humiliation for a short period in the incarnation, and (3) his exaltation to reign as Lord."⁵² Giles thus argues that Jesus submitted to the Father only in his incarnation and that after the exaltation Jesus went back to the stage of having the same authority, power, and glory as the Father.⁵³

However, anti-S proponents like Giles and Erickson need to clarify when or at what point in time Jesus ceased submitting to the Father. If Jesus ceased submitting to the Father after the resurrection, then what is his relationship with the Father like during the period after the resurrection but before the consummation? Or, if Jesus will cease submitting to the Father at his exaltation, then what does 1 Corinthians 15:28 mean since this passage clearly says that Jesus will submit to the Father at the time of the consummation? How does Giles reconcile his interpretation with this passage? Moreover, facing many passages that seem to indicate the Son's subordination—such as

⁵² Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 99–100.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 99–103.

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1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:3–14; Philippians 2:5–11; Hebrews 5:7–9; the Gospel passages regarding Jesus' being sent and his doing the Father's will, including John 14:28; Revelation 1:1; 2:28—anti-S proponents have a big lacuna to fill in order to explain away the meaning of the Son's subordination that these passages imply.

Overall, the pro-S side provides plenty of biblical support for its position. As early as 1994, John V. Dahms gathered various passages in the New Testament that imply or possibly imply the Son's eternal subordination to the Father.⁵⁴ Grudem has also made much effort in this respect. For example, he explores the meaning of the father-son relationship in the biblical world of the Old and New Testaments and highlights the authority-obedience aspect that Scripture shows concerning the father-son relationship.⁵⁵ He uses many biblical passages to show that the Son submits to the Father prior to creation, in the process of creation, during his earthly ministry, and at other stages of time.⁵⁶

However, the pro-S side is not free of lacunae. One of the major lacunae is this side's neglect of John 14:28, which should be one of the fundamental texts for developing the doctrine of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority. Above all, since there is no phrase explicitly stating that "the Son subordinates to the Father eternally in role, function, and authority" in Scripture, the pro-S position is a doctrinal inference from Scripture. Pro-S advocates need to realize this and more consciously engage in doctrinal development. They also need to strive for more coherent and refined statements based on the biblical narrative.

The literature review on both sides of the debate shows agreements and divergences as well as existent lacunae in the arguments. Apparently no one has written a dissertation about this debate or the lacunae in the debate.

⁵⁴ John Dahms, "The Subordination of the Son," 351–60.

⁵⁵ Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission," 227–32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 232–61.

The Terms

Terminology is important for communicating theology. Confusion results when the debating sides use the same term but with different definitions. Some terms need to be clarified before proceeding to the analysis of the debate.

Subordination and Submission

These two words have caused much controversy in the debate. Some scholars distinguish between “subordination” and “submission.” For example, Letham believes that the word “subordination” is misleading, so he prefers to use the word “submission” for describing the relationship of the Son to the Father.⁵⁷ Likewise, Scott Horrell suggests abandoning the term “subordination” for speaking of the divine immanent relationships.⁵⁸ Before making any decisions, we probably need to ask some questions.

First, what does this word “subordination” mean in English? Subordination is simply the noun form of “subordinate.” In the current online Merriam Webster dictionary, “subordinate” has three meanings: “(1) placed in or occupying a lower class, rank, or position; (2) submissive to or controlled by authority; (3) of, relating to, or constituting a clause that functions as a noun, adjective, or adverb.” It is derived from the Latin words *sub* and *ordinare*, meaning “sub-order” or “under-order.” The original meaning of this word may be neutral, but it has a negative connotation in contemporary English. In some dictionaries, it is indicated as synonymous to “inferior.”⁵⁹ Giles

⁵⁷ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 399, 490; Kevin Giles and Robert Letham, “*The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology and Worship: A Review Article with Response*,” *EQ* 78 (2006): 91. In a recent e-mail to this writer, however, Letham mentions that even the word “submission” is not preferable: “I have since come to the conclusion that submission is also misleading since we do not have the language adequately to express the hypostatic relations.” Letham, e-mail to this writer, May 8, 2017.

⁵⁸ Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” 72–73.

⁵⁹ In other languages, including the writer’s native language (Chinese), this

points out, “In everyday speech the words *inferior* and *subordinate* mean much the same thing. In almost every dictionary we are told a subordinate is an inferior and an inferior is a subordinate.”⁶⁰ As far as the plain, contemporary, everyday meaning of “subordination” in English is concerned, Giles is probably right.

However, besides dictionary meanings, “subordination” also has ecclesiological meanings. What does it mean in church history? How did the church fathers use it? How have earlier and contemporary theologians used it? The word “subordinate” in the form of verb is simply an English translation of the Greek word ὑποτάσσω or its synonyms and of the Latin word *subordinare*. One of the earliest and most famous examples of a theologian who believed in the Son’s subordination to the Father is Origen. His emphasis on the Son’s subordination to the Father is conspicuous and has been regarded as potentially having led to the later development of Arianism.⁶¹ Others in the early church period also hold certain degrees of understanding of the Son’s subordination to the Father. Richard Hanson summarizes, “There is no theologian in the Eastern or the Western Church before the outbreak of the Arian Controversy, who does not in some sense regard the Son as subordinate to the Father.”⁶² The radical subordinationism manifests in the so-called Arianism.⁶³ It was after the Arian Controversy that this word “subordination” became notoriously negative. However, in some church fathers like Hilary, the emphasis of the Son’s subordination to the Father (not only in economic sense) is retained.⁶⁴

word “subordinate” does not necessarily have such negative connotations.

⁶⁰ Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 48.

⁶¹ Origen’s influence on Arian theology is examined, discussed, and debated. Extensive treatment of links between Origen and Arianism lies outside the scope of this work.

⁶² Richard Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 64.

⁶³ Chapter 3 will discuss Arianism in more detail.

⁶⁴ Hilary says, “But the subordination of filial love is not a diminution of essence, nor does pious duty cause a degeneration of nature, since in spite of

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In the English-speaking ecclesia, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theologians such as Charles Hodge, Augustus H. Strong, J. N. D. Kelly, Philip Schaff, Louis Berkhof, W. G. T. Shedd, Carl Henry, and others all have used this English word “subordination (or subordinate)” to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, not only in the economic but also in the immanent sense.⁶⁵ However, in contrast to Arian subordination, they affirm a subordination in “personal subsistence,” “order and relationship,” and “operation.” In his “Introductory Essay” about Augustine’s *On the Trinity*, W. G. T. Shedd defends the consistency of Augustine’s idea of subordination with what is implied in the Nicene doctrine. Shedd remarks,

There are three kinds of subordination: the filial or trinitarian; the theanthropic; and the Arian. The first is taught, and the second implied, in the Nicene creed. The last is denied and excluded. Accordingly, dogmatic historians like Petavius, Bull, Waterland, and Pearson, contend that the Nicene creed, in affirming the filial, but denying the Arian subordination; *in teaching subordination as to person and relationship, but denying it as to essence*, enunciates a revealed truth, and that this is endorsed by all the Trinitarian fathers, Eastern and Western. And there certainly can be no doubt that Augustine held this view. He maintains, over and over again, that Sonship as a relationship is second and *subordinate* to Fatherhood; that while a Divine

the fact that both the Unborn Father is God and the Only-begotten Son of God is God, God is nevertheless One, and the subjection and dignity of the Son are both taught in that by being called Son He is made subject to that name which because it implies that God is His Father is yet a name which denotes His nature. Having a name which belongs to Him whose Son He is, He is subject to the Father both in service and name; yet in such a way that the subordination of His name bears witness to the true character of His natural and exactly similar essence.” *On the Council* 51 (NPNF² 9:18).

⁶⁵ Quotations from some of these theologians will be included in chapter 3.

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Father and a Divine Son must necessarily be of the very same nature and grade of being, like a human father and a human son, yet the latter issues from the former, not the former from the latter.⁶⁶

Philip Schaff, A. T. Robertson, George Bull, and other dogmatic historians unashamedly used the term “subordination” to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of person and relation not of essence. The question of whether or not the term “subordination” should be used to describe the eternal relationships within the Trinity did not seem to arise in their time. John Frame, a more recent theologian than those above, defends “a third kind of subordination that has been debated for many centuries and has been much discussed in recent literature. That might be called eternal subordination of *role*.”⁶⁷ He explains this type of subordination,

This kind of subordination is not the ontological subordination of Arius. Nor is it merely economic, for it has to do with the eternal nature of the persons, the personal properties that distinguish each one from the others. . . . We may put it this way: There is no subordination within the divine nature that is shared among the persons: the three are equally God. However, there is a subordination of role among the persons, which constitutes part of the distinctiveness of each. Because of that subordination of role, the persons subordinate themselves to one another in their economic relationships with creation.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ William G. T. Shedd, “Introductory Essay” in *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, ed. Philip Schaff, NPNF¹ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 3:4–5 (italics for emphasis, not original).

⁶⁷ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 719 (italics original).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 720. There is some confusion in Frame’s use of the word “nature”,

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Whether or not it is legitimate, the term “subordination” has a long history of being used to describe the eternal relationships within the Trinity. To abandon its usage in this regard would be a novel move, which itself requires careful considerations.⁶⁹

Moreover, another category of meaning that is more important than that of either the secular dictionary or ecclesiological usage is the biblical meaning of a word.⁷⁰ How does the Bible use the word “subordination”? What does it mean in the Bible? Again, “subordinate” is one translation of the Greek word ὑποτάσσω, which can be translated by all these words: “submit,” “subordinate,” “subject,” and “obey.”⁷¹ In Scripture, ὑποτάσσω is often used to describe subordination to “persons worthy of respect,” such as the husband, parents, masters, secular authorities, church officials, Christ, and God.⁷² It also has the sense of “voluntarily yielding in love” (1 Cor. 16:16; Eph. 5:21; 1 Peter 5:5).⁷³ Thus, in the dictionary of Scripture, ὑποτάσσω (“subordinate,” “submit,” “subject,” and “obey”) can be neutral and

which will be discussed later in chapter 3. In an online answer to a reader, Frame mentions that he does not want to be involved in the controversy of EFS since he retired in June 2016. However, he points out, “The EFS controversy was forced on the evangelicals by feminists.” John Frame, “John Frame on the Trinity,” November 21, 2016, <https://frame-poythress.org/john-frame-on-the-trinity/>.

⁶⁹ Trinitarian terminology is never an easy issue. Even the key term “person” in trinitarian theology is challenged and suspected. Theologians such as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner have tried to replace it with other expressions, but these attempts have not succeeded.

⁷⁰ There are differences between cultural and biblical meanings of a word. For example, the word “dependent” may sound negative in a culture that upholds independence and individual autonomy. However, in Scripture, it is positive when referring to one’s dependence upon God. In different belief systems, words can have different meanings. For example, the word “peace” means one thing in Christianity but another thing in Buddhism. Thus, it is very important to understand a word in its context without isolating it or attaching a foreign context to it.

⁷¹ BAGD, s.v. “ὑποτάσσω.”

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

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even positive. Rather than having the connotations of “oppressive,” “compulsive,” or “inferior,” biblical subordination or submission can be voluntary, loving, and joyful. This concept is very different from what the world perceives and understands, and is also far from the value of an egalitarian culture.

While acknowledging the troubles in our terminology, Carson points out, “It is difficult to read John’s Gospel and avoid the language of the obedience of the Son, the language of his subordination to the Father; indeed, it is difficult to avoid such terminology of the Son within the immanent Trinity, as we have seen.”⁷⁴ Carson also recognizes that “subordination” is not “a happy term to use” since it “is corrupted by the tincture of inferiority” in the current culture.⁷⁵ However, he concludes, “Again, if there is a certain *taxis* in the Trinity, then in some highly qualified ways it may not be inappropriate to speak of the obedience and subordination of the Son.”⁷⁶

The abuse and distortion of a term by the fallen world should not necessitate eliminating that term. The existence of abusive and oppressive hierarchal structures in the world does not mean that all hierarchal structures are abusive and oppressive. The authority-subordination structure in Scripture is not like those of the world but should instead be considered as the correct source for understanding the meaning of authority and subordination. Grudem says, “It seems to me that the term ‘subordination’ need not have oppressive connotations, and can be used to mean merely an

⁷⁴ Carson, “John 5:26: *Crux Interpretum* for Eternal Generation,” 96. He continues, “If we review once again all the ways in which the Son in John’s Gospel obeys, speaks as he is given words to say, comes and goes on the Father’s command, performs the Father’s will not only in coming into the world through the incarnation but also in going to the cross and in securing those whom the Father has given him, what term shall we use to describe his relation to the Father in all of its unidirectional obedience and dependence (another word on the edge of saying too much), if not subordination?”

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

‘ordering under’ in terms of authority in the relationship.”⁷⁷ Recognizing the inconsistent usage of the language in the debate, Michael Ovey points out, “We have used the term ‘eternal subordination,’ but the idea this is meant to express has been variously put: as the Son’s submission, subjection, or obedience to the Father in their eternal relationship.”⁷⁸ This seems to be the meaning of “subordination” that pro-S advocates understand and use.

We come back to the question “Should we abandon the word ‘subordination’ (or even ‘submission’) in describing the intra-trinitarian relationship?” Although Steven Boyer acknowledges this word’s “*implicit* connection to the Arian outlook,” he argues that “it is not intrinsically objectionable.”⁷⁹ He believes that in an egalitarian climate, “to speak provocatively of ‘subordination’ in the Trinity can be enriching and instructive, so long as the meaning of the term is carefully and conscientiously circumscribed.”⁸⁰

This writer is open to the discussion of whether or not the term “subordination” should be used to describe intra-trinitarian relationship, but for now the writer will keep the usage of this word for three reasons. First, complete elimination of “subordination” is a break from the long tradition of this word in history and may also jeopardize the biblical meaning of such a term. This writer is reluctant

⁷⁷ Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission,” 225.

⁷⁸ Michael Ovey, *Your Will Be Done*, 4. Later on the same page, Ovey continues, “In fact, when we talk of hierarchy, subjection, subordination, headship, submission or super-ordination, a key issue is whether the Son is in a relationship of eternal obedience to the Father. At their best, the different sets of language try to draw this out.”

⁷⁹ Steven Boyer, “Articulating Order,” 267.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 268. Boyer is aware of the problem of how to “circumscribe” this term. He discusses this issue in the subsequent section of the article, which is extremely insightful. His examination of all the terms used in this debate is very helpful and is one of the best analyses of trinitarian terminology in contemporary contexts, especially his identification of where the confusions of terminology arise. The writer encountered his article in the early stage of writing the dissertation and is much indebted to his work regarding the terminology.

to initiate such a development. Second, to describe the debate accurately, using the word that is central to the debate clearly is advantageous.⁸¹ Likewise, because the word has such a long history, this writer cannot replace it with another word without misrepresenting the ideas of theologians who have used this word. Third, the discussion of the usage of the words “subordination” or “submission” can continue.⁸² However, in order to discuss whether or not the word “subordination” should be abandoned, the word itself needs to be present in the discussion.

Should we abandon the term “subordination” while describing the immanent intra-trinitarian relationship? Should we distinguish between “subordination” and “submission”? These are decisions that require many considerations. Abandonment of the usage of this word in this regard would be a novel move and would need to be undertaken carefully. For the sake of describing the debate and the history involved, this writer maintains the use of “subordination” and does not sharply distinguish “subordination” and “submission” since both are translations of the Greek word ὑποτάσσω.

Essence (Essential), Nature, and Being

The English words, “essence (essential), nature, and being,” create much confusion in the debate of the Trinity and gender roles.

⁸¹ One recent change is noticeable. Grudem, a prominent pro-S advocate, seems to use the word “submission” more often than “subordination” now. In his presentation at ETS meeting in November 15, 2016, except in some quotations, Grudem never used the word “subordination”; he used only the word “submission” instead. However, he may be using the two words interchangeably.

⁸² For example, should the word “subordination” be used to describe the *immanent* intra-trinitarian relationship? This is a question that needs to be discussed, and actually leads to consideration of the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity. In a system that asserts the unity of the economic and immanent Trinity, the answer may be *yes*; while a conviction that holds the division of the economic and immanent Trinity, the answer may be *no*. Chapter 4 will discuss the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity.

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In the doctrine of the Trinity, all three terms have been used to translate the Greek word οὐσία, the one substance shared by the three persons. However, these three words have broader meanings in English. For example, they may simply refer to “fundamental,” “existence,” or “in nature.” Some scholars mix up the two categories of meanings and bring confusion to what they would like to communicate. For example, Dahms actually affirms that the three persons share “the same divine essence” and that they are one and equal in *essence*.⁸³ However, Dahms repeatedly mentions that he is arguing for the Son’s *essential* subordination to the Father,⁸⁴ unintentionally suggesting that the Son subordinates to the Father in *essence*! While discussing the Son’s subordination, other scholars also make statements similar to that of Dahms.⁸⁵

Likewise, one of Bruce Ware’s statements is ambiguous and may be easily misunderstood. He remarks, “An authority-submission structure marks the very *nature* of the eternal *Being* of the one who is three.”⁸⁶ Ware may simply mean that “an authority-submission structure” is in the existence of the Trinity. However, if the two words “nature” and “being” are understood as translations of οὐσία, this statement potentially conveys that there is a hierarchical structure in the οὐσία (substance) of the Trinity. In order to avoid ambiguity and confusion, this writer will use the Greek word οὐσία (or the transliteration *ousia*) rather than English words “essence,” “nature,” or “being” to refer to the one and same divine substance of God.⁸⁷

⁸³ Dahms, “The Subordination of the Son,” 363.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 351, 352, 363, 364.

⁸⁵ Examples include Norman Geisler, John Frame, and the *Sydney Anglican Diocesan Doctrine Commission Report*. Giles spots this problem and charges them with holding a subordinationism that subordinates the Son to the Father in essence (nature or being). See Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 22, 24–27. Chapter 3 of this dissertation examines in more detail this terminology confusion.

⁸⁶ Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, 21.

⁸⁷ One exception is the English word “substance.” The writer thinks it less ambiguous than the other three words and therefore will use it in situations requiring an English expression.

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Thesis

This dissertation will demonstrate that there are at least four lacunae in the current debate of the doctrine of the Trinity and gender roles. While examining these lacunae, the writer argues that the contemporary doctrine of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority is a doctrinal *development* responding to the prevalent egalitarian context based on the truth already contained in Scripture rather than a *departure* from biblical teachings.

Methodology

The literature on the doctrine of the Trinity is vast and so is the literature on the Trinity and gender. However, this dissertation will only focus on the recent debate among evangelicals about the Son's eternal subordination to the Father and gender roles. Thus, the writer will not deal with issues concerning the masculine language of the Trinity, the feminist understanding of the Trinity, other discussions outside evangelicalism, and so on, but will concentrate on the inter-trinitarian relationship and gender relations as debated among evangelical theologians.

There are several major works in the debate. The anti-S side includes Bilezikian's article "Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping" (1997); Giles' three books *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (2002), *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (2006), and *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (2012); and Erickson's *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (2009). The pro-S side has Grudem's *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (1994), *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: An Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions* (2004), "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission" (2012), and

his presentation of this topic in the 68th Annual ETS Meeting (2016); Ware's article "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles" (2006), his book *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (2005), and his presentation about this issue in the 68th Annual ETS Meeting (2016); and the recently published collection of essays *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life* (2015).⁸⁸ Based on these major works as well as other scattered responding articles, the writer will examine this debate and identify the major lacunae that both sides have failed to explore adequately.

Although this dissertation will center on these major works, other relevant literature will also be incorporated into the discussion. For example, because of their general acceptance by most in the debate, when engaging in the issue of relating the Trinity with gender roles, the writer will explore Karl Barth's contribution in this area. When the relation between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity is considered, Karl Rahner must be addressed. When discussing major biblical passages, the writer will employ important commentaries and other exegetical aids. When examining the doctrine of the Trinity, this writer intends to take a holistic approach, paying attention to the methodologies and voices of both Eastern Orthodox and Western theologians, reflecting the unnoticed presumptions and tendencies in the Western system of trinitarian theology, and integrating the contributions from both Eastern and Western theologians.

This dissertation will close with discussion of the exegetical issues in the debate because how those representing the two views treat Scripture largely shapes the debate. Since both sides acknowledge (or at least claim) the ultimate authority of Scripture, their understanding of what Scripture teaches about this issue is important for defending their respective views. Thus, the writer will focus

⁸⁸ Although he is one of the contributors to this book, Letham indicates that he does not share the book's position and does not belong to either side of the debate. Robert Letham, e-mail to this writer, May 8, 2017.

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on their respective exegesis of, interpretation of, and inferences from the relevant passages in the light of the context of the whole of Scripture. Placing this part at the end of this dissertation, this writer intends to show that Scripture should be the final judge for all doctrinal disputes.

Although some mention that reality is not so easy since Scripture does not state plainly and directly all one would like to know, the presupposition of this study is that by careful exegesis set within canonical understanding, biblical truth and knowledge are knowable. Sometimes one fails to understand, but that is not a problem of God's Word but the human problem of perception. The Word of God is always clear enough, but cultural backgrounds, prejudices and biases, assumptions and pre-understandings, ideological agendas, traditional mind-sets, natural thinking, and even common sense may prevent the interpreter from seeing the meaning of Scripture.⁸⁹ Moreover, one must adopt an attitude of prayer for the Spirit to illumine God's Word.

Certainly, there are things that we will never be able to comprehend, especially concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, which is a mystery. However, what God wants us to know is already revealed in Scripture. What He intends to reveal is revealed clearly. The Trinity is a mystery revealed, not exhaustively but clearly. God's revelation, his words, guard our knowledge of the Trinity so that we would not think of him as one being in four persons (either in an economic or immanent sense); so that we would not call Him Mother, Daughter, or Sophia (either in an economic or immanent sense); so that we would not believe in the three persons as Brother, Brother, and Brother (either in an economic or immanent sense). If we believe the verbal and plenary inspiration of Scripture (even with human language), we believe in God as eternal Father, eternal Son, and eternal

⁸⁹ This does not mean that one should approach Scripture without any pre-understandings. All come to the word of God with pre-understandings; however, one should let Scripture examine one's pre-understandings rather than letting those presuppositions dictate the meaning of Scripture.

Spirit. What God has revealed, we humbly receive and earnestly seek to understand; regarding what God has not revealed, we admit our ignorance. This dissertation does not attempt to offer answers for all the lacunae in the debate because some may need the collective efforts from the community of theologians, and others may have to remain as lacunae until the time when we do not “see in a mirror dimly” but “face to face” (1 Cor. 13:12).

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 has introduced the debate on the doctrine of the Trinity and gender roles, specifically the issue of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father and the woman’s submission to the man. It presents a brief history of the debate, clarifies some basic terms, compares and contrasts the views and positions of both sides, and examines the major lacunae in the debate.

Chapter 2 argues that it is legitimate to relate the Trinity with gender roles. There are four reasons. First, man and woman are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:26–28 is the major supporting text. The image of God is not restricted to either the substantive or relational aspect but includes both. The plurality in the triune God determines a creation of plurality in mankind, which reflects the trinitarian relationships. Karl Barth is the major theologian who brilliantly explores this realm. Second, the passage of 1 Corinthians 11:3 shows a parallel between the God-Christ and man-woman relationships. The task here is not to argue that the relationship between man and woman is one of leading-submitting but that the Trinity is related to the man-and-woman relationship. Regardless of the meaning of the word “head” in this passage, there clearly exists an analogy between God-Christ and man-woman relationships.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Since the point of argument is often what the word “head” may mean in this passage, many have ignored that there is a parallel between these relationships no matter what the word “head” may mean.

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Scripture itself relates the Trinity with the relationship between man and woman.

Third, there are historical precedents for relating the Trinity with man-and-woman relationship. Some church fathers such as Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom had been doing so. Fourth, there is coherence and correlation among the various doctrines. Doctrines are not isolated from each other.⁹¹ In this respect, the Western theological system shows its weakness. In the process of compartmentalizing doctrines, the connections among various doctrines may be severed. The disconnection among doctrines in the West is most intensively reflected in the separation of the doctrine of the Trinity from other doctrines. Contra this Western phenomenon, John Zizioulas, an Eastern theologian, provides a good example of understanding and presenting doctrines in a holistic and correlated perspective. If the doctrine of the Trinity is supposed to be related to anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, as some have noted, how surprising or illegitimate is it to relate the Trinity to gender roles?

The last section of this chapter responds to six potential criticisms of relating the Trinity to other doctrines and Christian practice and shows that some of these criticisms are legitimately applied to those works that misuse this methodology but are not applicable to the methodology itself. The problem is not that one should not relate the Trinity to other doctrines and Christian life but *how* to relate them. One needs to do this with caution and be guided by the teaching of the whole canon.

Chapter 3 first examines the ways that both anti-S proponents and pro-S advocates use historical evidence. Both sides cite the same church fathers to support their positions. Both have been charged with misreading and misrepresenting the positions of the theologians cited. Kevin Giles' method of using historical evidence is especially problematic; for example, he presents anachronistic portraits of

⁹¹ And yet care should be exercised in exactly how the doctrines are related.

church fathers and mixes his own interpretation and presupposition with his presentation of church tradition. What is the core problem with the ways both sides use historical evidence? Few scholars in the current debate call attention to the fact that the context for the church fathers' development of the doctrine of the Trinity differs from today's context.

In this chapter, the writer compares the current debate and the one in the fourth century. What are the divergences between the fourth-century debate and the current debate? First, contexts are different. For the church fathers in the fourth century, it was the controversy over Arianism; for the contemporary debate about the Trinity and the gender roles, it is the ideology of egalitarianism. The current debate about the Trinity and gender roles is driven by theological motivations different from those of the church fathers. In essence, the fourth-century pro-Nicene theologians were fighting for the equality of the three persons, but contemporary pro-S advocates are fighting for the distinctions.

Second, the terminology used is different. What did words such as οὐσία (translated as "substance," "nature," "being," "essence") and ὑπόστασις (translated as "person") mean for theologians in the fourth century? How are the connotations of these words different in the contemporary world? New terms have also been imported to describe the Trinity in the current debate, such as "role," "authority," and "function." Are these new terms legitimate? There are also inherent confusions in terminology that affect the progress of the current debate. For example, attempts are made to distinguish being (or ontology) from relation. However, if being means existence, then how can a being exist without relations with others? Persons exist as relational beings. Relation is part of being.⁹² These two probably can be divided in cognitive understanding but not in reality. However, this connection between relation and ontology, and the ontological

⁹² This is one essential point that John Zizioulas' *Being as Communion* communicates.

content of ὑπόστασις (person) leads to confusion, especially in the English language.

Finally, this chapter closes with a section about the development of doctrines. Doctrines do develop over time. John Henry Newman has been famous for arguing for a theory of the development of doctrine. He refutes a simplistic understanding of the Christian doctrine that assumes the teaching or doctrine of the church never changes.⁹³ One task of theology is to respond to the contemporary context with biblical truths. In this process of responding to various contexts, new terms are employed and doctrines obtain dynamic developments. The Son's eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority is a doctrinal development, which shows not only connections to the past development of the doctrine of the Trinity but also new characteristics particular to the current age. Development entails imperfection. Inconsistencies and limitations do occur, which require theologians to correct, improve, and refine. This is the process of doctrinal development.

Chapter 4 discusses the relationship between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity and its implications for the debate. Neither side has paid adequate attention to this relationship. A historical survey of the two terms—the economic Trinity (or *oikonomia*) and the immanent Trinity (or *theologia*)—and the division between them shows that the pro-Nicene solution for Arianism in the fourth century actually created a gap between the economic and immanent Trinity. Later theological development widened this gap, which potentially causes the marginalization of the doctrine of the Trinity.

⁹³ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1888; reprint, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 1989). His model certainly needs to be critically evaluated. See more about Christian doctrinal development in Vincent of Lerins' *Commonitorium*, Lewis Ayres' *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Malcolm Yarnell, *The Formation of Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: B&H, 2007).

Against this historical phenomenon—that the doctrine of the Trinity is isolated from Christian life and practice—Karl Rahner formulated his rule, “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa,” in order to reconnect the economic and immanent Trinity and thus reclaim the presence of the doctrine of the Trinity in Christian faith and life. Although many have criticized Rahner’s axiom, the writer will argue that the economic Trinity reveals and is the immanent Trinity in a true sense, though not in an exhaustive sense. This rule, its context, and surrounding issues are closely related to the current debate and are important for developing the contemporary doctrine of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority. Even if only the first part of Rahner’s axiom is applied, more powerful corrections can be produced to the seemingly off-balanced Western trinitarianism, in which *ὑπόστασις* is overshadowed by *οὐσία*, theological reflection and Christian practice often function under Christian “monotheism,” and today’s debate is possibly one of the consequences.

Here lies a lacuna that anti-S proponents cannot fix—the epistemology of the immanent Trinity. If the economic Trinity shows discrepancies from the immanent Trinity, then how do we know about the immanent Trinity? To be more specific, how do we surely know that Jesus and the Father are equal? The immanent Trinity may become unknowable. Or, the immanent Trinity may become a flat “equal-only” Trinity. The economic Trinity is our only access to the immanent Trinity—apart from it, we have nothing else to judge with certainty what the immanent Trinity is like.

However, on the pro-S side, although their position is more consistent with the Rahner axiom, the argument about the relationship between the Son and the Spirit needs to be refined. The recent introduction of the understanding that the economic Trinity is the analogy of the immanent Trinity is actually detrimental to the pro-S position. Pro-S advocates still need to investigate further the relationship between the economic and immanent Trinity and its implications for the current debate.

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Chapter 5 addresses the exegetical lacunae of the anti-S position. First, anti-S proponents like Giles have applied invalid interpretive principles. Giles frequently shifts the focus of the argument to tradition and avoids thorough discussion of the biblical texts themselves. Second, most of the biblical passages from which anti-S advocates seek support refer to the deity of Christ or the oneness and equality of the three persons. These passages do not legitimately oppose the meaning of the Son's submission in other biblical passages and thus are not counted as biblical evidence against the pro-S view.

Chapter 6 continues to examine the exegetical lacunae of the anti-S camp. Anti-S proponents have not offered a suitable explanation for the meaning of submission in 1 Corinthians 15:24–28, which clearly asserts the Son's subordination to the Father in the eternal future, and in certain passages such as Philippians 2:5–11 and the “submitting” passages in the Gospel of John, all of which imply the Son's subordination to the Father without limiting it to the Son's incarnation. This is another significant lacuna that anti-S advocates need to fill.

Chapter 7 discusses the exegetical lacunae of pro-S advocates. Biblical support is the strongest aspect of the pro-S case, although not without lacunae. Pro-S advocates' arguments have not deployed John 14:28, which should be one of the fundamental texts for developing the doctrine of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father. Studies on John 14:28 show that it is as significant as 1 Corinthians 15:24–28. Neglect of this text is an unfortunate lacuna on the pro-S side of the debate. Moreover, although no sentence in Scripture plainly states that “the Son submits to the Father eternally in role, function, and authority,” the reasonable inferences from relevant biblical passages and a canonical understanding point in this very plausible direction. Pro-S advocates should acknowledge that this doctrine is an inference rather than a direct teaching from Scripture. Some pro-S presentations of the distinctions and relationships among the three persons still do not correspond fully with the

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trinitarian relationships as portrayed in Scripture. Pro-S advocates need to strive for a more coherent presentation based on the whole biblical portrait of the Trinity. This chapter then reflects all the lacunae addressed, pointing out possible directions for further study, and concludes the dissertation.