

# Is God Like a Totem Pole or a Circle? Why We Need to Insist on Nicaean Orthodoxy to Avoid Falling Into Heresy<sup>1</sup>

WILLIAM DAVID SPENCER

Is God more like a totem pole or a circle? That is to ask, is God a being in tandem, a hierarchical Godhead with degrees of rank, glory, and even divinity: the Father at the top, the Son in the middle, and the Holy Spirit on the bottom? Or, is the Trinity an equal community—a permanent triunity of one great God, in three completely coeternal, completely coequal persons (or personalities, or faces)?

A more contemporary way to ask is: Is the Trinity more a family or a business? In a family, different members can come to the fore depending on what the family is addressing. In a business, the chairperson of the board is over the chief executive officer, who is over the plant manager.

One evangelical brother who espouses the totem-pole model in the Trinity describes the divine relationships this way: “The Father is supreme over all, and in particular, he is supreme within the Godhead as the highest in authority and the one deserving of ultimate praise.”<sup>2</sup> He also writes:

An authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three Persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. As such, the Son submits to the Father just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence. The implications are both manifold and wondrous.<sup>3</sup>

Where do such “manifold and wondrous” “implications” take place for this writer? He explains they are “in our own relationships in the home and in ministry,”<sup>4</sup> when “wives submit with joy and gladness to the husband’s leadership in the home.”<sup>5</sup>

For him, such a totem pole model, supposing an eternal, one-way “authority-submission structure” in the Godhead reflects in a one-way, permanent “authority-submission structure” of men over women. Men always “exercise authority” and women always “submit,” as he thinks is done in the Godhead.

In the other model, the sphere, the Trinity is pictured not as a totem pole, but as an equal community—a permanent triunity of one great God in three completely coeternal, completely coequal persons.

This position has been captured for posterity by the followers of the great defender of the Council of Nicaea, Athanasius, when they formed his teachings into “The Athanasian Creed,” which became a universal creed in Christendom in the late AD 400s or early 500s (some one hundred years or so after Athanasius’s death) and is used in churches all over the world, perhaps even in

some readers’ churches. This great and ancient statement of faith says of the Trinity: “But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal”; “The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternal, but one eternal”; “So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God.” “And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the view of the disciples of Athanasius, the champion of Nicaean orthodoxy, one divine Person is not regarded as having a greater degree of glory, praise, or worship. And this creed makes no reference to the exercising of an eternal one-way authority that is then applied to the home and to limit the ministry of women.

Today, however, the totem pole model has become very widespread and is seeking to influence every male, and especially every female, in the Christian community by confronting them with an increasingly powerful set of voices purporting to speak for biblical sexuality, such as the professor we cited earlier.

As we see, the root of its assumptions is the idea that the Bible teaches a one-way domination/subordination structure in the Godhead reflected in domination/subordination domestic and ecclesiastical relationships between the sexes. “Male headship” is its rallying phrase, which it claims is mandated by that eternal hierarchical order within God’s nature and, therefore, ordained by God’s good pleasure. And females—while equal—are different from males, and, because of that difference, are ordained from all eternity to be subordinate.

Does that sound relevant? It does to me, because it affects everything we do and say in the church and everything we teach our children to do in the home.

So, the question for us is clear. We need to ask: What does the Bible say about the Trinity? Do we have any indication of which of these models is right?

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## What does the Bible say about the Trinity?

First of all, we should note that the Bible does not begin with words like, “Long ago, far before our time, God dwelt in peaceful bliss, needing no one and nothing. God was always in three Persons or Personalities, all in perfect harmony . . . etc., etc.”

No. Genesis tells us nothing about God before creation, but simply starts with these words: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” What beginning is it talking about? God’s beginning? Of course not! God has no beginning. Clearly, it is talking about our beginning. The Bible initiates its revelation to us describing our beginning and nothing before that. Similarly, the Bible ends with Jesus’s promise, “I am coming soon,” followed by our appropriate response to that statement, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus,” and a benediction: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God’s people, Amen” (Rev 22: 20–21). What happened before and what happens afterwards has little data tucked into the Scriptures. God dispenses information to us on a need-to-know basis, and, as for the eternal things about God before creation, God seems to have decided we do not need to know. After all, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus, “I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe, how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven” (John 3:12–13).

So, when the Bible introduces Jesus, it does so by terse statements on the equality of Jesus in the Godhead, such as Philippians 2:5–7, which is not primarily intended to impart information, but to serve as an illustration urging us to be humble. Look at what it says: “In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, John 1:1 begins with a brief statement that, when God began to create the world, the Word, that active agent of the Trinity, was face to face with God, and therefore distinct, but, at the same time, that Word was God, and, therefore, with God when our world began, actively creating so that nothing came into being the Word did not create, and this was the distinct person of the Godhead who was born into our world as Jesus Christ (John 1:1–11).

John 1:18 repeats the counsel Jesus gave to Nicodemus, that “no one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

Therefore, the Bible focuses in on the incarnation. Jesus Christ took on human flesh in order to do the central task in God’s plan to reconcile this rebellious world to Godself.

So, 1 Timothy 3:16 tells us that Christ Jesus “appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.” This is where its focus lies, and it stays unwaveringly centered on Christ’s search-and-rescue mission, as Jesus works

to bring all under his control and then bring it to his heavenly Father, the One from whom all the obedient will inherit the heavenly kingdom. As the replacement for the first failing human, the “Second Adam” will submit the entire created realm to God, putting our world back into order, as Paul explains in 1 Corinthians

15:24–28:

God dispenses information to us on a need-to-know basis, and, as for the eternal things about God before creation, God seems to have decided we do not need to know.

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

### The debate over 1 Corinthians 15: 24–28

Hierarchical thinkers have centered on these verses as a key passage describing the eternal relationship between God the Father and God the Son. For example, another evangelical professor explains these verses this way:

Here is an indication of what will happen after the final judgment, when all enemies are destroyed and we enter into the eternal state. Just to be sure there is no misunderstanding, Paul specifies that it was always the Father who always had ultimate authority, for it was the Father who “put all things in subjection” to the Son—all things, that is, but of course *not the Father!* Paul explicitly says, “He is excepted who put all things in subjection under him.” The Father has never been subject to the Son, “He is excepted.”

And then Paul specifies that once every enemy has been conquered and even death has been destroyed, the submission of the Son to the Father will not cease even at that time, for even then, “the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all” (v. 28). The Son has been subject to the authority of the Father since before the foundation of the world, and here Paul specifies that the Son will continue to be subject to the authority of the Father forever.<sup>8</sup>

This language of eternal subordination of the Son to the Father is picked up by another set of writers who claim, “And of course, this very reality of being in submission to the Father marks the Son’s relationship with the Father for all of eternity future.”<sup>9</sup> And they cite the same passage. So, in the view of such hierarchical thinkers, Paul is teaching the Corinthians and subsequent readers in these verses that the Son’s submission goes on forever.

However, verses 27–28 are part of a defense Paul is making in 1 Corinthians 15 that there is indeed life after death, so that the Christians of Corinth understand that the mission of Jesus

Christ to earth did not end with his death, but did, indeed, continue after a resurrection. In fact, Jesus's task was not simply to lead humanity in righteous and obedient living, as was the first humans' pre-fall task, but something even more. In becoming a last or second Adam, Christ's mission was greater, having now to redeem fallen humanity.

The great theologian of the Reformation John Calvin, also addressing these verses, realizes this, urging readers that, even before his day, some of the "ancient writers who pay no attention to the person of the Mediator, obscure the real meaning of almost all the teaching one reads in the Gospel of John, and entangle themselves in many snares." So confusion on this passage is not new and, therefore, "we ought also to understand what we read in Paul: after the judgment 'Christ will deliver the Kingdom to his God and Father' [1 Cor. 15:24p.]"

As Calvin begins to unpack the meaning for us, we see immediately his focus on Christ's "office as the Mediator" takes him to an understanding that is completely different than that of these hierarchical voices.

Calvin explains that, rather than a permanent state of eternal subjugation to the Father, Christ, "having completed this subjection" of the world, will have accomplished his mission, and will "yield to the Father his name and crown of glory, and whatever he has received from the Father, that 'God may be all in all' (1 Cor 15:28)." Calvin wants us readers to understand that, to perform this mission, Christ had to become our "Mediator" and our "Lord," each being a title, Calvin explains, that "belongs to the person of Christ only in so far as it represents a degree midway between God and us."

But, once Christ has completely fulfilled the role of humanity's "Lord," Calvin explains, "Then he returns the lordship to his Father [who is also called 'Lord' in the Bible, e.g., Matt 22: 44] so that—far from diminishing his own majesty—it may shine all the more brightly. Then, also, God shall cease to be the Head of Christ, for Christ's own deity will shine of itself, although as yet it is covered by a veil." Calvin adds, the incarnate "Christ, having then discharged the office of Mediator, will cease to be the ambassador of his Father, and will be satisfied with the glory which he enjoyed before the creation of the world."<sup>10</sup>

John Calvin is clearly not agreeing that the Son is in eternal subjection to the Father, a subjection that continues "forever," or for "all of eternity future," but rather this person of the Trinity ceases to be subjected and reclaims the "glory" that Paul explained was emptied out in Philippians 2:6–8, in order for this face, or permanent personality, or person of the Godhead to incarnate and save us by dying for our sins.

The great late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Princeton theologian Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield also views "Lord" as "a term of function," but one that includes "dignity," in Christ's mission, as can be seen in his explanation of why "Paul might very well call Christ 'Lord over all' but not 'God over all.'" He notes:

"Lord over all" would have meant, however, precisely what "God over all" means, and it is singularly infelicitous to give the impression that Paul in currently speaking of Christ as

"Lord" placed him on a lower plane than God. Paul's intention was precisely the opposite, viz., to put him on the same plane with God; and accordingly it is as "Lord" that all divine attributes and activities are ascribed to Christ and all religious emotions and worship are directed to him. In effect, the Old Testament divine names, Elohim on the one hand, and Jehovah and Adhonai on the other, are in the New Testament distributed between God the Father and God the Son with as little implication of difference in rank here as there.

Does this wording suggest Warfield does see any difference in rank? Not at all. He explains:

The only distinction which can be discerned between "God" and "Lord" in his usage of the terms is a distinction not in relative dignity, but in emphasis on active sovereignty. "God" is, so to speak, a term of pure exaltation; "Lord" carries with it more expressly the idea of sovereign rulership in actual exercise. It is probably that Paul's appropriation specifically of the divine designation "Lord" to Christ was in part at least occasioned by his conviction that [Christ], as God-man, has become the God of providence in whose hand is the kingdom.

Therefore, for Warfield, "In a word, the term 'Lord' seems to have been specifically appropriated to Christ not because it is a term of function rather than of dignity, but because along with the dignity it emphasizes also function."<sup>11</sup>

Clearly, both Calvin and Warfield affirm that the submission of Christ in the earthly role of the Second Adam and in the task to reconcile humans to God was temporary, not eternal.

Let me caution readers at this point that I record these observations with absolutely no intention to minimize the Bible's picture of the exalted position of the unincarnated Father, whom we see, in Revelation 4–5, sitting on the throne of heaven, the "seven spirits," depicting the Holy Spirit and the Lamb with the marks of having been slain being present as well, while twenty-four elders who represent faithful humanity relinquish their own honors as tribute, as they extol: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their beings" (Rev. 4:11).

Yet, even in this scene in heaven, Jesus Christ is distinguished by the sacrifice for humanity, and, indeed, in passages like Romans 9:5, the humanity of Christ is what is being emphasized, even while his Almighty power and position are being celebrated: "Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen!"

There is not a competition going on in the Trinity for which person secures the highest praises. There is mutual love and mutual glorification (as we see in Jesus's beautiful prayer in John 17:1–5), and the kind of tenderness within the Godhead that we need to emulate in our relationships. The Trinity is altogether lovely.

### **So, what should we do about all this?**

A few years ago, as a result of a conversation with Christians for Biblical Equality President Mimi Haddad, I drafted a new creed to affirm the traditional understanding we see in the Athanasian

Creed, and I brought together a team of respected scholars to make certain what I was drafting was as accurate to an historic orthodox and evangelical understanding as we could muster up.

This team included Christians for Biblical Equality founder Catherine Kroeger; Mimi Haddad; my wife, Aída Besançon Spencer; Kevin Giles; I. Howard Marshall; Millard Erickson; Stanley Gundry; Steven Tracy; Alan Myatt; Royce Gruenler; and Alvera Micklesen, who went carefully over the language to make certain it remained accessible to all readers. These scholars represented classical studies, biblical studies, theology, and church history. We went through many drafts, back and forth, back and forth, refining and refining.

When we were finally finished, we put it up on its own website for all to examine and anyone who agrees to sign. If you who are reading my article are in agreement, you can go to the website and sign your name—akin to putting a “like” on a friend’s Facebook page.

We call our creed, “An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity,” and it reads as follows:

We believe that the sole living God who created and rules over all and who is described in the Bible is one Triune God in three coeternal, coequal persons, each person being presented as distinct yet equal, not as three separate gods, but one Godhead, sharing equally in honor, glory, worship, power, authority, rule and rank, such that no person has eternal primacy over the others.

In the explanation I provided for it, one can see the impact of Athanasius, the great defender of the Creed of Nicaea (May, AD 325), as well as the influence of the Athanasian Creed on the final clause of the Statement (which Alan Myatt contributed). Both the statement and its theological explanation can be accessed at [www.TrinityStatement.com](http://www.TrinityStatement.com).

Throughout church history, orthodoxy (that is, right belief) and orthopraxy (right action) have always been meant to go together, hand in hand.

Today, as throughout history, it is important to make certain we preserve the historic understanding of the Trinity as stated in these universally accepted creeds, “The Creed of Nicaea” and “The Athanasian Creed.”

At the same time, it is important in our own practice in the home and in the church not to limit the ministry of more than half of the body of Christ—the female half—but to help everyone exercise fully the gifts God has given each in ministry, in humble, respectful, mutual submission to one another, as we all submit to Christ.

## Notes

1. Along with new data I have added to it, this article was adapted from a workshop entitled “Who Is the Trinity? Why Is It Important for Egalitarians to Know?” given at the 2013 CBE conference, “Take Every Thought Captive to Christ: Ideas Have Consequences,” in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (recording available at [equalitydepot.com](http://equalitydepot.com)), along with some material from my presentation at the Other Voices in Interpretation Section of the 2012 annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, “Approach and Content: What Was Included in the Statement and Why I Oriented the Theological Explanation of An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity by Athanasius’ Arguments in the *De Synodis*.”

2. Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Reverence* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 51.

3. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, 21.

4. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, 136.

5. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit*, 138.

6. Wikipedia contributors, “Athanasian Creed,” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasian\\_Creed](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasian_Creed) (accessed 2013).

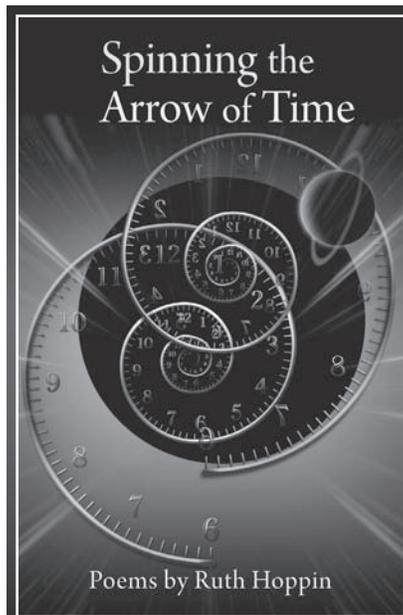
7. Scripture quotations are TNIV, unless otherwise noted.

8. Wayne Grudem, “Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father,” in Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House, eds., *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 252.

9. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective* (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2007), 170.

10. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, book 2, ch. 14, sec. 3 (485–86).

11. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 224–26.



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