The Trinity and the Eternal Subordination of the Son

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The doctrine of the Trinity is one of those core Christian beliefs that—on the basis of scriptural revelation, orthodox religious tradition, and common Christian spiritual experience—was carefully pondered, debated, and then formulated in the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, and Athanasian Creed. These “ecumenical creeds” are recognized and subscribed to by most Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Protestant churches as the true definition of who and what the Lord God Almighty, the One True God we worship and serve, truly is.

However, both in the past and in the present, some Christian teachers and groups have argued, contrary to the creeds, that there is an essential hierarchical structure within the Triune God, with the Father being supreme over both the Son and the Holy Spirit. In the fourth century, this subordinationist understanding of the Trinity was known as Arianism. Today, as propagated by certain evangelical teachers and scholars, it is known as the eternal subordination of the Son. Before we can address these deviations from Christian orthodoxy, we first need to review the doctrine of the Trinity itself.

The Trinity is a definition of the deity

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an object or thing; rather, it is a definition of God’s being and communal character. Dr. Robert K. Wright explains:

The Trinity is not a “thing.” It is a doctrine, a propositional description amounting to a definition of God. That is, for the Christian, the word Trinity is a synonym for God. It is our definition of the Deity. . . . The basic framework of the doctrine consists of six statements, each of them exegeted directly from the Bible. They are: 1) The Father is Jehovah, 2) the Son is Jehovah, and 3) the Holy Spirit is Jehovah. These describe the eternal unity of the One God. Then; 4) the Father is not the Son, 5) the Son is not the Spirit, and 6) the Spirit is not the Father, distinguishing the Three Persons with the Being, or Substance of God.

For this reason, the Athanasian Creed warns us against either “confusing the Persons [or] dividing the Substance” of God. Within God’s eternal being, there are three centers of consciousness who, while they each exhaust the other’s awareness, still think of themselves as I and Thou. Jesus’ own expressions in the great high priestly prayer in John 17 show this clearly.1

It is evident from such New Testament texts as Matthew 11:25–30; 28:18–20; John 1:1–18; 5:16–30; 10:22–38; 12:44–48; 16:12–15; Philippians 2:5–11; and Hebrews 1:1–14 that the three persons are coequal and coeternal; that each person fully shares the divine life and attributes of the One True God; and that, while each person may have a primary operation in the divine works of creation and redemption, the others participate in and support these works because they are the works of the One Triune God.

Lorraine Boettner states:

Each of the Persons participates to some extent in the work of the others . . . Hence we say that while the spheres and functions of the Three Persons of the Trinity are different, they are not exclusive. That which is done by one is participated in by the others with varying degrees of prominence. . . . In Scripture we find the plan of redemption takes the form of a covenant not merely between God and His people, but also between the different Persons of the Trinity, so that there is, as it were, a division of labor, each Person voluntarily assuming a particular part of the work. . . . In the work of redemption the situation is analogous to this—through a covenant voluntarily entered into, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit each undertake a specific work in such a manner, that during the time this work is in progress, the Father becomes officially first, the Son officially second, and the Holy Spirit officially third. Yet within the essential and inherent life of the Trinity the full equality of the Persons is preserved.2

This covenant of redemption among the three persons, and not some hierarchical structure within the Triune God, should be seen as determining which person has taken up a given task or role in creation and redemption.3

The distinction of the ontological and economic Trinity explained

The historic, orthodox understanding of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is that, within the ontological Trinity (i.e., the theology in the terminology of the Eastern church), in eternity and prior to creation, the Son is in all things equal to the Father, except he is not the Father. In time and space, during the incarnation and for the purpose of human redemption, the Son was voluntarily subordinate (in function, not essence) to the Father; this expression of the Trinity is designated by the Church Fathers as the economic Trinity (i.e., the oikonomia). The ecumenical creeds and many of the Church Fathers insisted that this distinction between the theology and the oikonomia was crucial for true and solid interpretations of the scriptural texts regarding the person and work of Christ and for avoiding various forms of subordinationism.

Wright makes the following comment regarding the necessity of maintaining a proper distinction between the ontological and economic Trinities:

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If each Person is Jehovah, each Person must be equally eternal and share the whole of the being of God. Accordingly, the many attributes of God as a whole are said to belong to the Son and the Spirit also. The Athanasian statement refers to many of them, and a comprehensive list appears also in such accounts as the opening description in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Since finiteness (the attribute of having limited being) belongs to the Creation only, we should heed the Athanasian Creed when it says of the Persons that “we worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the Persons, nor dividing the Essence” (Art. 3–4). . . .

Because the Ontological Trinity exists in eternity, and the Economic Trinity describes activities in time, it will be obvious that to impose temporal relations on the eternal being of God will violate the Creator-creature distinction. The subordinate obedience of the [incarnate] Son growing up in Nazareth or on the Cross itself, is not to be reimposed backwards on the relationship between the First and Second Persons in eternity. The Ontological Trinity contains no finite or temporal relations in itself, apart from God’s plan for the future of the finite world. God’s plan is not his ontology, but only his foreknowledge of a created future. God’s Being logically precedes his Knowledge. In fact, God’s knowledge includes his knowledge of his own being. The future plan for the creation flows from God’s Being, not vice versa. The temporal relations of the economy cannot be imposed on the ontology in eternity. The economy manifests the plan in eternity, but its subordination cannot be imposed on the Persons in the eternal ontology.4

A failure to maintain the proper distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity is one of two key reasons underlying the promotion by certain evangelical Protestants of the current heresy of the eternal subordination of the Son.

**A meditation on the ontological Trinity from 1 John**

Key texts in 1 John help us to understand that, while the ontological and economic Trinities must be properly distinguished, they are vitally connected. The action of the latter in creation and redemption flows out of the communal character and covenant of the former, revealing the self-giving love and mutual agreement of the Three Persons in the tasks they took up in creation and redemption:

We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes, touched him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This one is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that he is the one who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and the Son. (1 John 1:1–3)5

God the Son, who became a human being in order to save us and reconcile us to God the Father, existed in a face-to-face relationship with the Father. . . .

Jesus himself revealed that he was not only loved and esteemed as the Father’s Son, but also that, because the Son is an equal and trustworthy partner, the Father gave him full authority and entrusted him with the grand task of revealing the Father and his eternal purposes. Jesus himself stated, “My Father has entrusted everything to me. No one truly knows the Son except the Father, and no one truly knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matt 11:27).

This is not the pronouncement of some high-ranking assistant to a superior heavenly CEO. No, indeed—these are the words of a Son who, if I may make the analogy with some reservation, is presented by Matthew as a full and equal partner with his Father in the “family business” of rescuing and restoring the world they created together (cf. Gen 1–2; John 1:2–3, 10; Col 1:16; Heb 1:10; John 5:19–23; 14:9–11; 2 Cor. 5:19).

Furthermore, Matthew 28:18–20 and other New Testament texts plainly demonstrate that the Son fully and equally shares with the Father, before the incarnation, all divine attributes and prerogatives. John Jefferson Davis states:

A text that has apparently not thus far received the attention that it merits in this is the Great Commission statement of the Risen Christ in Matthew 28:18: “All authority (pasa exousia) in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” Christ does not say that some authority has been given to him, or much authority, but all authority. Christ can not be eternally subordinate to the Father as to authority, and at the same time truthfully claim that all authority in heaven and on earth is his. It will not do to argue that the “giving” by the Father implies greater
inherent authority. As Philippians 2:5 states, equality with the Father was the Son’s by right; he shared all the divine prerogatives with the Father prior to the incarnation. Philippians 2:5, Matthew 28:18, and Revelation 5:6, 13 teach the Son’s coequal authority before the incarnation, after the resurrection, and subsequent to the ascension, now and forever in heaven.7

If this were not so, both the truth and certainty of the Gospel itself would be seriously undermined.

Irenaeus, the great second-century Christian apologist and theologian, insisted that only one who was truly God could reveal God to us. Commenting on Irenaeus’s insight, which was incorporated into the later Nicene formulation by Athanasius, Thomas F. Torrance has stated:

Unless there is a substantial bridge between the visible and the invisible, the tangible and the intangible, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, there can be no sure or firm ground, it was argued, for authentic human knowledge of God as he really is in himself. In fact, if there were no such bridge, the Gospel would be finally detached from reality, empty of truth and validity, and its account of the saving acts of God would be no more than a mythical projection out of human fancy, similar to that of the Gnostics who separated the Redeemer from the Creator and even Jesus from Christ. . . . This was precisely what Irenaeus found to be the central issue of the Gospel, in the incarnation of the very Word, Mind and Truth of God himself in Jesus Christ: “The Lord has taught us that no one can know God unless God himself is the Teacher, that is to say, without God, God is not to be known.” A real revelation of God to us must be one which God brings about through himself. This is precisely what we find in the evangelical account of the relation of mutual knowing between the Son and the Father (Matt. 11:27; Lk. 10:22), which implies, Irenaeus points out, that there is a mutual relation or proportion in being as well as in knowing between them (Against Heresies, 4.11.1–5). With the incarnation, however, that relation in mutual knowing and being exclusive to the Father and the Son applies to Jesus Christ the Son of the Father become man, so that he constitutes in himself the incarnate Son of God the all-important mediation between God and man, and thus between the invisible and the visible, the intangible and the tangible, and between the comprehensible and the incomprehensible. It may even be said, according to Irenaeus, that “the immeasurable Father is measured in the Son, for the Son is [the] measure (mensura/metron) of seeing [in] that he comprehends him” (Against Heresies, 4.6).8

Both John and Paul describe Jesus as God’s “one and only Son” (John 1:1–13) and as God’s “firstborn” (Col 1:15–20). Thus, the Son most certainly is not a created being, not even of the highest rank under God himself, but is fully equal with God the Father. In agreement with the Father, he jointly created the universe. James White comments:

Not only did He make all things, but Paul says that all things were made for Him! Christians instinctively know that we exist for God’s glory, pleasure, and purpose. Our hearts automaticall-

Finally, we are told all of creation “holds together” or “consists” in Christ. Echoing John’s assertions about the Logos, . . . Paul places within the realm of Christ’s power the very maintenance and continuation of the entirety of the universe! He makes everything “fit” and remain in its proper place. Is this not the function of God himself? It assuredly is.9

Arians and Jehovah’s Witnesses would have us believe that the word firstborn implies that the Son is the highest of created beings, adopted and appointed by God as the intermediary between God and other created beings. The Greek word prototokos (firstborn)—which is the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew bekor—literally meant “first to open the womb.” It also had a metaphorical or symbolic meaning pointing to a special bond of love between a father and son, and also to the fact that, under Old Testament law, as the son bore the father’s name and was his rightful heir and representative, he was to be accorded the privileges, authority, honor, and respect that would have been given to the father himself:

As a title of honor for Jesus, prototokos expresses more clearly than almost any other the unity of God’s saving will and acts: “the firstborn of all creation”, “the firstborn from the dead” (Col. 1:15, 18). Creator and Redeemer are one and the same, the all-powerful God in Jesus Christ “the first and the last”, “the beginning and the end”, who binds his own to himself from all eternity, and is their surety for salvation, if they abide in him.10

And what does God himself have to say regarding the Son as his Firstborn? As recorded by the author of Hebrews:

But about the Son he says,
“Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever;
a scepter of justice will be the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy.”
He also says,
“In the beginning, Lord, you laid the foundations of
the earth,
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish, but you remain;
they will all wear out like a garment.
You will roll them up like a robe;
like a garment they will be changed.
But you remain the same, and your years will never end.”
(Heb 1:6–12 NIV)

It is not rationally conceivable that any superior, self-conscious deity would ever truly and freely concede that any other being,
however high the rank, was that deity’s equal or as worthy of worship, obedience, or service. Otherwise, how could God maintain God’s rank as the primary deity? While these texts clearly distinguish the Father and Son, they also demonstrate that these two persons are coequal and coeternal, participate together in the works of creation and redemption, and are therefore to be equally worshipped, honored, and served by angels and humans.

**Connecting trinitarian love, Christian ethics, and the trinitarian covenants**

First John 4:7–17 sheds light on not only the inner life of the ontological Trinity, but also on what we have referred to as the “trinitarian covenants” and to the “official order” of the economic Trinity. Following God’s example, we are exhorted to love each other with a mutual love that is other-centered, seeking the well-being of others without concern for personal profit.

If this is the kind of love that expresses the very being of God, then within the Divine Being there must be a fullness and plurality of persons who exist in an eternal union of other-centeredness, mutual respect, and self-giving love that promotes the well-being of the others. This concept of trinitarian love serves as the foundation of Christian holiness and ethics. L. T. Jeyachandran explains:

> In the course of a Bible study for college students in Delhi, a Hindu girl asked me what I consider to be a brilliant question: “How can you Christians say God is good? Good is the opposite of evil; evil is not eternal; therefore, good cannot be eternal as well.” … We cannot define good with reference to evil because good is the original of which evil is the counterfeit—a problem parallel to defining the infinite in terms of the finite. Evil is an aberration. We need to look for a positive definition of good without reference to evil.

Very significantly, the answer lies in the trinitarian being of God. Love is the epitome of all virtue and the highest expression of holiness. And God should not have to depend on his creation to actualize his capacity to love, for that would make creation as important as the Creator because the Creator would be incomplete without his creation. But the Bible introduces love as an interpersonal quality requiring a subject-object relationship that is available in the Trinity because of the Father-Son relationship through the Holy Spirit. The trinitarian God is complete in his love relationship with others…This is the one, eternal, abiding reason for the creation of the world and of human life. … Before the creation of the world, the Father, Son, and Spirit set their love upon us and planned for us to share and know and experience the trinitarian life itself. To this end the cosmos was called into being, the human race was fashioned, and Adam and Eve were given a place in the coming of Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in and through whom the dream of our adoption would be accomplished.13

**God’s eternal love and the trinitarian covenants**

As with so much of Christian theology, everything begins with and flows out of the revelation given to us in Genesis 1–3:

> Then God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created human beings in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26–27 TNIV)
From this text, we learn that (1) both man and woman, as human beings, are made equally in the image of God; (2) that this *imago dei* comprises both ontological and relational elements; and (3) as confirmed by the cultural mandate given in Genesis 1:28–29, both man and woman are equal partners and coworkers under God’s rule, responsible for the cultivation and development of the earth for the mutual benefit of humanity and the creatures placed under their care by God.

In this text, we see that the creation of the world and humanity flows out of the love of the triune God. Moreover, from this same Genesis text, we see that this work of creating and ordering the earth as a suitable home for humanity is carried out by the three persons on the basis of mutual agreement — i.e., a covenant — with the three persons working willingly and harmoniously toward the accomplishment of the will of the One True God — persons who, though distinct, are fully equal in divine essence and power and authority, and who do not function as mere lackeys of some superior.

The key to this interpretation is both in what is said and not said in the first clause of 1:27. God said “Let us make human beings in our image,” not “We will make human beings in our image.” This subtle difference is of the greatest import. If it were true as that there is a hierarchical structure or order within the Triune God, with the first person (the Father) being supreme over the second and third persons (the Son and the Spirit), who must do his bidding — as Arius and the “new evangelical subordinationists” have taught — we would expect the Scripture to say “We will make” rather than “Let us make.”

For example, the chief executive officer (CEO) of a company, exercising his superior will and authority in a company decision, would never say, “Let us do this or that.” Such language refers to a decision made on the basis of discussion, mutual agreement, and consent by equal members of an executive board before the action can be implemented. On the other hand, “We will do such-and-such” is indeed the language of a CEO in complete charge who determines what will or will not be done. Therefore, in an analogous sense, the other-centered love of the Triune God and the covenant of creation are the basis for the creation of both the universe and humanity as described in Genesis 1–2, not some executive decision on God the Father’s part in which the Son and Spirit had no say, but simply had to obey.

The trinitarian doctrine of *perichoresis* has to do with the communal, interpersonal indwelling and sharing of life and work among the three persons and has an important bearing on the trinitarian covenant of redemption. *Perichoresis* literally means “dancing in a circle.” In a sense, according to the great theologians of the Eastern church such as Athanasius and Gregory of Nazianzus, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are like three ballet dancers holding hands, performing together in harmonious, joyful freedom. Shirley Guthrie explains the meaning and significance of *perichoresis* as follows:

From the perspective of Western monotheism, this image of God seems to suggest not one but three personal gods. But *perichoresis* invites us to think a new way about the very meaning of “one” and “personal.” The oneness of God is not the oneness of a distinct, self-contained individual; it is the unity of a community of persons who love each other and live together in harmony. And “personal” means by definition *inter*-personal; one cannot be truly personal alone but only in relation to other persons. Such is the unity and personal character of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. There is a deep, intimate, indissoluble unity between them. There are not three independent persons who decide to get together to form a club (or a dance group!) that might break up if the members decide to go it alone. They are what they are only in relationship to each other. Each exists only in this relationship and would not exist apart from it. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit live only in and with and through each other, eternally united in mutual love and shared purpose.

Like every other key aspect of Trinitarian doctrine, *perichoresis* has its roots in the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Consider Jesus’s response to Philip in John 14:8–11:

> Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied.” Jesus replied, “Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and yet you still don’t know who I am? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father! So why are you asking me to show him to you? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words I speak are not my own, but my Father who lives in me does his work through me. Just believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or at least believe because of the work you have seen me do.” (John 14:8–11)

In what is known as the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus speaks about the coming of the Holy Spirit and giving the disciples wisdom and insight into God’s work of redemption and reconciliation through the death and resurrection of the Son:

> There is so much more I want to tell you, but you can’t bear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own but will tell you what he has heard. He will tell you about the future. He will bring me glory by telling you whatever he receives from me. All that belongs to the Father is mine; this is why I said, “The Spirit will tell you whatever he receives from me.” (John 16:12–15)

Now these texts regarding the relationships and works of the three persons are nearly impossible to understand unless *perichoresis* as defined by Guthrie is true. This means that, even in those places in Scripture where it seems that one person, such as the Father, appears to be the primary speaker and actor, the other persons are participating as equal partners in loving, mutual consensus. No one person exercises a superior will, power, and authority over the others.

So, what is the true significance of *perichoresis* for us in the church? Again, Guthrie makes this insightful and powerful explanation:

> Now there is no solitary person separated from the others; no above or below; no first, second, and third in importance; no ruling and controlling and being ruled and controlled; no position of privilege to be maintained over against the others; no question of conflict concerning who is in charge; no possible rivalry or competition between competing individuals;
no need to assert independence and authority of one at the expense of the others. Now there is only the fellowship and community of equals who share all that they are and have in their communion with each other, each living with and for the others in mutual openness, self-giving love, and support; each free not from but for the others. . . .

If in God’s own deepest inner being God is such a community-seeking God, then that is also what God is in relation to us. Gone is the hierarchical, monarchical, patriarchal God who asserts, defends, and maintains sovereign freedom and power at the expense of God’s creatures. The freedom and power of the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is freedom and power not to dominate and control, but freedom and power to be God-with-us and for us. It is not freedom and power to do anything and everything God pleases, but freedom and power to be a loving and just covenant-making God who wills only our good. It is freedom and power exercised not to keep us dependent and powerless slaves but set us on our feet and empower us to be God’s faithful friends, companions, and partners. The freedom and power of this God, therefore, is not something we must fear, secretly resent, and rebel against because it robs us of our human dignity and freedom; it is the source of true human dignity and freedom.17

Another important text is Genesis 3:15, known as the protevan- gelium, the germinal pronouncement of the Gospel. This is further expanded in Genesis 12:1–3; then 2 Samuel 7:4–17 and Psalm 89, then Isaiah 7:10–14 and 42:1–7, finally culminating in the explanations of the incarnation of God the Son as Messiah, the Savior and Lord of all in Matthew 1:18–25 and Luke 1:67–75.

After God pronounces his judgment on Satan for his leading Adam and Eve into sin, he then declares, “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen 3:15 NIV). The chief speaker here is “the Lord God.” At first glance, this appears to be a reference to God the Father, who in turn seems to speak independently of the other persons, apparently without their mutual consultation and agreement. However, to understand this text in that manner would divorce it from the controlling framework of its immediate context as well as from the controlling principle of the divine perichoresis.

Consequently, the designation “the Lord God” has a double reference in Genesis 3:22–24: first, to God the Father who, speaking on behalf of the entire Godhead, assesses the consequences of the fall, and, seeking to prevent further defilement and corruption, counsels and urges the others that immediate action must be taken. “Look, the human beings have become like us, knowing good and evil. What if they reach out, take fruit from the tree of life, and eat it? They will live forever!” Second, in 3:23, when “the Lord God” banishes Adam and Eve, the three persons in mutual consent act together to halt the degenerative process set in motion by human rebellion.

So, contrary to what some would have us believe, the Father does not act unilaterally and independently of the Son and the Spirit. As we follow the flow of salvation history from Genesis 3:21 to Acts 3:21, the covenants of promise (i.e., the Abrahamic Covenant, the Davidic Covenant, and the New Covenant) come to fruition in Jesus Christ, culminating in the age of the Spirit-birthed and empowered church in which every member of the body is involved in Christ’s ongoing ministry of reconciliation based on the calling and gifting of the triune God—not on race, gender, nationality, or social status (cf. Gal 3:26–4:7; Rom 4:1–17; 1 Cor 12:3–28; Eph 2:11–22; 4:11–16). However, do not miss this important point regarding salvation history as we have described it: All of this is the outworking of the trinitarian covenant, made before the creation of the universe and humanity, according to the foreknowledge of God—this and this alone.

Notes

3. For a careful, well-documented, and practical presentation of what the Scriptures actually teach regarding the unity, diversity, and equality of the three persons, I highly recommend James R. White’s The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1998). Designed to help Christians refute the heresies regarding the Trinity propagated by Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, it is also helpful in dealing with some of the arguments promoting the erroneous doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son.
4. Wright, The Two Trinities, 7–8.
5. All Scripture citations are from the NLT except where noted.
6. The Greek word is pros, which is normally translated as “with” in English versions. However, “face to face” is a more accurate and meaningful translation, especially in this Johannine text and its counterpart in John 11.
14. “New evangelical subordinationists” is a designation used as a shorthand description for certain evangelical Protestants who argue that there is an authority-subordination relationship between the Father (who is supreme in rank and authority) and the Son and Spirit (secondary in rank and authority) that is eternal and unchangeable and is reflected and recapitulated in the role relationship existing between men and women in the church, home, and society.
15. This analogy from the business world, of which I have some knowledge and experience, is given with reservation. All analogies, as the Nicene Church Fathers pointed out, have severe limitations when applied to the being and works of the Triune God. Furthermore, the authority structure in businesses has shifted in the last twenty years or so from a more hierarchical and centralized form to a more decentralized and shared form of management. Still, I think this analogy does point out a flaw in the arguments of the new evangelical subordinationists.