

Just as the Father, So the Son: The Implications of John 5:16–30 in the Gender-Role Debate

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Introduction

In the fifth chapter of John's gospel, the Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of "making himself equal to God." Today, a woman who assumes a position of ordained leadership in the Church may be accused of "making herself equal to men."¹ Although most Christians agree that men and women are spiritually equal before God, some nevertheless insist that women are subordinate to men in function in the home and in the Church.² In order to codify the functional subordination of women biblically, some scholars who support hierarchy in male/female relationships use what they claim to be the subordination of the Son to the Father in the Trinity as a divinely inspired model of male-female relationships.

The subordination of the Son in the Trinity has historically been rejected by Church fathers such as Athanasius, Augustine, and Calvin and the Reformed councils and confessions because this view of the Trinity undermines Jesus' status in the Godhead.³ Likewise, most Christians who believe that men and women are created as equals oppose the ontological and functional subordination of women because this view undermines women's status in the body of Christ. Yet, there is division even among these scholars as to the nature and relationship between the Father and the Son. While some have written entire books that counter the belief that there is subordination in the Trinity,⁴ others believe that the relationship between the Father and Son is irrelevant to the current gender role debate altogether.⁵

Still, the analogy becomes relevant when it is used to exclude Christian women from positions of leadership in the Church, to define male and female roles in marriage, and to place Jesus Christ in a subordinate position in the Godhead. Therefore, defining the relationship among the Trinity, particularly between the Father and the Son, has come to determine the way we define our relationships with one another. Male and female, we are made in the image of God; therefore, we should look for our true reflection in our Creator. This reflection transcends gender but does not exclude it.

One of the most revealing passages of Scripture defining the relationship between God the Father and God the Son is found in John 5:16–30. Herein, Jesus states that he and the Father are inseparable and equal in deity. In fact, Jesus argues that his equality *in function* with the Father is what demonstrates the equality of his divine status. If a parallel is to be made between the relationship between Father and Son and the relationship between men and women, the same holds true: the spiritual equality of Christian men and women is *revealed* in their functional equality.

The Son Equal to the Father

In the fifth chapter of John, Jesus is being harassed by the Jewish religious leaders not only for defying the first-century Jewish Sabbath regulations, but also for calling God his "Father": "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God" (John 5:18). What angered the Jewish religious leaders was that Jesus, by calling himself God's "Son," was making himself equal to God. If the father/son relationship in first century Judaism implied subordination, then Jesus' addressing himself God's "Son" would not have offended the Jewish religious leaders. But it did offend them precisely because sonship implied equality.

According to B. B. Warfield, the term, "son," was used in Scripture and understood in Biblical times to mean "likeness." Warfield states, "Jesus was, rightly, understood to call God 'his own Father,'...not in a merely figurative sense...but in the real sense. And this was understood to be claiming to be all that God is. To be the Son of God in any sense was to be like God in that sense; to be God's own Son was to be exactly like God, to be 'equal with God.'"⁶ The Greek word "equal," or *ison*, is used to refer to "equal, the same."⁷

Not all scholars agree, however, that in this passage Jesus is claiming a position of equality with the Father; some conversely see him claiming a position of difference and subordination.⁸ For example, after the Jews accuse Jesus of "making himself equal with God," Jesus answers them by saying, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees the Father doing" (John 5:19). When Jesus responded by saying, "the Son can do nothing by himself," some scholars believe that he was *correcting* the Jewish leaders' mistaken notion that he was "equal" to the Father and establishing his subordination to the Father.⁹

However, when Jesus responds to the Jews that he can "do nothing by himself" but "can only do what he sees his Father doing," he is not negating his equality but affirming it. Jesus is not refuting the claim that he is equal to the Father; he is refuting the claim that *he made himself equal* to the Father, as if he were independent of him. Jesus claims that he can do nothing by himself *not* because he is weak or subordinate but because he is in essence and function *one* with the Father, and the two cannot be separated. Jesus tells the religious leaders in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one," and in John 8:58, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" If Jesus had wanted to minimize his status and emphasize his subordination to the Father, he would never have uttered these statements which incited the Jewish leaders on both occasions to attempt to stone him (10:31; 8:59). Ultimately, Jesus'

emphatic pronouncements of equality with the Father were what incited the Jewish leaders to have him crucified (Mark 14:62–64). The Jewish leaders who plotted Jesus' death did so not because they misunderstood his description of his relationship to the Father, but because they fully understood what he was saying.

The definition of the English word “subordinate” is “placed in or belonging to a lower order or rank; of less importance; secondary; subservient or inferior, subject to or under the authority of a superior.”¹⁰ Though most evangelical scholars would not describe Jesus as “inferior” or of “less importance” to the Father, some would describe the Son as “subject to” the Father. However, Jesus never used the definitions of subordination when describing his relationship with his Father, though he completely submitted himself to his Father's will.

The most revealing glimpse we get of the relationship between the Son and the Father is in Jesus' prayer before his arrest and crucifixion. He prayed, “Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...may they also be in us...that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:22). Jesus did not pray, “Father, just as you are above me and I am below you,” or “Just as you are the leader and I am the helper...” Instead, Jesus said that the Father is “in” him and he is “in” the Father. No subordinate could say to his superior that he is “one” with his boss and certainly not that he is “in” him. Nor could a subordinate claim dual ownership with his superior, as when Jesus said of his Father, “All I have is yours, and all you have is mine” (John 17:10). Moreover, it is rare that a relationship forged upon a hierarchical order produces such love and intimacy as existed between the Father and the Son. Jesus said to the Father, “You have loved me...you have loved me before the creation of the world...I know you...you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21, 23, 24).

Because the Father loves the Son, the authority of the Father was and is and always will be the Son's. We read in numerous passages that Jesus was not merely “under” the authority of the Father, but that he “had” the authority of the Father on earth as in heaven.¹¹ The Father, in fact, had given all authority to the Son. Jesus said the following: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt. 28:18); “The Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins” (Matt. 9:6); “He has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man” (John 5:27); “I have authority to lay it [my life] down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:18); “For you granted [the Son] authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him” (John 17:2).

Jesus could not have performed the miracles he performed, nor could he have redeemed the world via the crucifixion, if the authority of the Father was not his. However, some may argue that, even though the Son had the authority of the Father, this

authority was *given to him* by the Father, thus placing the Son in a subordinate position. But this understanding is based upon an assumption—upon the human tendency to believe that to give power is somehow to lose it, and to receive power from another implies that you are inferior to the person giving it to you.¹² The authority of the Father is not diminished because it is given to

the Son, nor is the status of the Son diminished because his authority is given to him by the Father. Rather, receiving from the Father empowered the Son to do the work of the Father. In fact, it was the sharing of power that revealed the Father and Son as equals.

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Therefore, Jesus refuted the religious leaders' claims that he was grasping his own equality with God by explaining that his authority and equality had been given to him by the Father and his authority and power were the same as the Father's. It was not the Son who had made himself equal to the Father; the Father and Son had been equals before the foundation of the world (John 1:1–2).

Read carefully Jesus' reply to the religious leaders: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing because whatever the Father does the Son also does” (John 5:19). First, Jesus refutes the religious leaders' claim that he is working independently of the Father and then he throws in a curve ball by drawing their attention to what he does: absolutely everything that the Father does:

For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it. Moreover, the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the son just as they honor the Father...For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him the authority to judge because he is the Son of Man...a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out. (John 5:21–28)

Like Father, like Son. What Jesus *did* demonstrated who he *was*. This is what he was trying to get across to the religious leaders who questioned his equality with God. Jesus said, “For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36). If the religious leaders had known the Father's works, they would have recognized the Son's work and identified him accordingly as united and equal with the Father.

In fact, the Jews at the time of Christ identified the one true God by his doing two functions: *creating* all things and *ruling* all things (Pss. 110:1; 8:6).¹³ These two identifying functions of God are described repeatedly throughout the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. However, the learned religious leaders who studied the Torah did not recognize Jesus' identity, despite the fact that Jesus ruled over the sea, created wine from water, produced a

banquet for 5,000 from five loaves and three fishes, raised dead people to life, and sent demons into the netherworld¹⁴—all acts of *creating* and *ruling*.

Yet, unlearned Jewish men and women put their trust in Jesus and thereby recognized his equality to his Father (Luke 1:43; John 1:41; Matt. 16:16; John 4:28–29; 11:25). Common fishermen, such as John, came to recognize rightly the Son as the “Word” of God and realized by the Holy Spirit that “through him all things were made” (John 1:3). Simon Peter and Martha called him “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16; John 11:27), and a woman delivered from seven demons, Mary Magdalene, was the first to witness, believe, and announce the resurrection of the Son (Luke 8:2; Mark 16:9–10). Even a divorced Samaritan woman who was living with a man who was not her husband believed Jesus’ claim to be the Messiah and “many of the Samaritans from that town believed in [Jesus] because of the woman’s testimony” (John 4:39). Moreover, his followers came to understand and believe that the Son had authority to judge and give eternal life—just as the Father does (John 5:27; 17:2).

The Father Equal to the Son

Just as the Son does not act independently of the Father, the Father does not act independently of the Son. The Son could not have redeemed the world apart from the Father, yet the Father could not have redeemed the world apart from the Son. Prior to the Son’s incarnation on earth, the Father had demonstrated in all his interactions with the Israelites, not only his power and justice, but also his patience and mercy. In Isaiah, Yahweh is identified with the “Suffering Servant” later to be revealed as the Christ (Isa. 53:11; Phil. 2:6–11). However, the appearance of Jesus to first-century Jews (as well as Gentiles) was, according to Richard Baukham, “unexpected,” and yet it was not inconsistent with the character of God.¹⁵ Those who truly knew the Father would have recognized the Father in his Son, not only in the Son’s acts of rulership and creation (e.g. healing the sick, raising the dead, and turning water to wine), but more profoundly in his acts of humility and servanthood (e.g., washing his disciples’ feet and enduring crucifixion). Jesus’ acts of self-sacrifice and mercy are reminiscent of his Father’s acts of self-sacrifice and mercy. God the Father consistently implored his wayward people to return to him and faithfully forgave those who rejected and abused him (Exod. 34:7; Num. 14:18; 9:17; Ps. 86:5; 99:8; Dan. 9:9; Eph. 4:32). However, since the Fall, we have associated power and authority with rulership, and weakness and subordination with servanthood, when the opposite is true. God’s greatest act of power and authority was in his ultimate and heroic act of servanthood and self-sacrifice in Jesus Christ.

In addition, since Athanasius, theologians have often made the distinction between temporary and eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. For example, while some theologians believe that Jesus was temporarily *and* eternally subordinate to the Father, others believe that Jesus was *only* temporarily subor-

dinate to the Father when on earth while being eternally equal to the Father in heaven. This belief is based on Jesus’ dependence upon the Father, his taking on the role of servant (Phil. 2:7), and his humiliation on the cross. However, when Jesus died on the cross, he did not become inferior to the Father. No subordinate or assistant or mere envoy could fulfill the requirements of the law and reverse the “curse” of the Fall. Only God could do that, and he did through his Son and with his Son.

The Son did not become a subordinate; it was much worse than that: he “became a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). It was precisely because he became a curse for us, demonstrating the greatest act of self-sacrifice, that he became Victor “far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come” (Eph. 1:21). When Jesus willingly died in our place, he did not assume a secondary position with his Father in order to atone for our sins. Jesus said to the religious leaders, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). He did not say, “Once I have ascended to heaven and have left this temporal human state, the Father and I will be one.” According to Jesus’ own words, the Son and the Father are one and equal *on earth* as they are in heaven.

However, though the Son was never subordinated to the Father, the Son willingly subjected himself to the humility of being human and to the humiliation of being crucified. In doing this, the Son was not unlike his Father, for the greatest acts of God toward his people were not exclusively demonstrated in power and rule, but were also profoundly demonstrated in acts of mercy and forgiveness (e.g. Ps. 85:1–3). Therefore, the Son’s “humiliation belongs to the identity of God as truly as his exaltation does.”¹⁶

Jesus said that he and the Father were one and inseparable. So it would follow that, if Jesus suffered for our redemption, the Father suffered as well—not physically but yet vicariously through his Son. Therefore, the Son is not inferior to the Father, nor is the Father superior to the Son. Instead, they are just as Jesus described throughout his earthly ministry: they are *one*—fully dependent upon each other—interdependent. The Son depended completely on the Father to provide for him, and the Father depended completely on the Son to extend his provision to the world, for those who are equals depend upon one another.

This is why the cross was such a profound sacrifice for the Son. The crucifixion was the one horrific point in time, and the only time, when the Son did *not* receive provision from the Father. Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). In a great reversal, God did not provide for the Son; *instead the Son became the provision* in that he provided salvation for the world through himself. Scholars who contend that the Son was somehow diminished on the cross and was in the ultimate subordinate role do not see that it was on the cross that the Son actually took on the role of the Provider in that he was the Slain Lamb—the Ultimate Provision for our sins.

And yet, if the Father and Son were inseparable, where was the Father when his Son cried out in abandonment? If they were one, what was the Father thinking and feeling as his Son took on

the full weight of the cross and the curse? We often neglect the Father when we remember Calvary. We have, in fact, long forgotten that, when the Son willingly went to the cross for our sins, it was the Father who led him there (Matt. 26:39). Just as Abraham took his son, his own flesh and blood, and in agony laid him on the wood and lifted the knife, so the Father vicariously endured the same suffering on the very same mountain in Jerusalem. For a father to watch his son die—to allow his son to die—is as unimaginable as the son having to endure it, if not more so. Both the Father and the Son willingly submitted themselves to the horror of attaining our salvation, and they both did it willingly and in full cooperation. Therefore, the glory that is the Father’s is the Son’s, and the Father and Son are one.

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One

The oneness between the Father and the Son is founded upon equality: equality in identity (“I and the Father are one”) and function (“whatever the Father does the Son also does”), and the “glue” which holds the oneness of the Father and Son together is their dependence upon one another. In our fallen world, we view dependence as a losing of power and a kind of subordination. If we yield authority to one another, we believe that we somehow lose our authority or part of our individuality and rights in the process. But in God’s economy, mutual dependence and submission empower rather than subordinate.

Therefore, Jesus’ prayer before his arrest and crucifixion holds profound implications for human relationships. Jesus prayed: “My prayer is not for them [the disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20–21).

The way we interpret this *oneness* is critical to the way we honor Jesus Christ and the way we honor the image of God reflected through us as male and female. According to many hierarchical theologians, this *oneness* is achieved through the roles of superior and subordinate: in the context of the Trinity, the Father eternally rules and the Son is eternally subordinate in authority, and in the context of male/female relationships in the conservative Christian home and church, men rule and women

are always subordinate. Most egalitarian theologians, on the other hand, view the oneness of the Father and Son as a relationship built on interdependence and intimacy between equals.

It is unlikely that the perfect love expressed between the Father and Son could exist in the context of a chain of command with no room for free exercise of the will. Such love, by its very nature, is birthed in the context of freedom, mutual affection, respect, and self-sacrifice. The temptation of Jesus was a legitimate temptation because Jesus had to choose to do the will of the Father or not. The Son was not forced to go to the cross because his Father had the last word; he went willingly because he loved the Father just as the Father loved him. Consequently, it was for love—love for his Son—that the Father willingly gave everything to him, including “all authority on heaven and earth” (Matt. 28:18). The Father did not force or demand the Son to do anything; the Son accomplished everything willingly because he knew how much the Father loved him (John 17:24).

Conclusion

In John, chapter 5, Jesus began his response to the Jewish religious leaders by saying he could do nothing without the Father, and yet he describes himself doing the very things that only the Father can do. How could the Jewish leaders have known he was equal to the Father? All they had to do was observe his work and open their ears to his word, for it was in his works (his function) that his equality (his identity) with the Father was demonstrated.

Accordingly, when Jesus said, “I can do nothing by myself,” Jesus was not refuting the claim that he was equal to the Father; he was refuting the claim that he *made himself* equal to the Father, as if he were independent of him. By demonstrating the works of the Father, the Son revealed his equality with the Father. This equality is based on interdependence with the Father—not independence from him or subordination to him.

Likewise, Christian men and women are not to act independently of one another, but, rather, we are to act interdependently with each other as equals. Our tasks may be different according to our gifts, yet we are equal in function: we are to *function as servants* one to another in our homes and in our churches (Matt. 20:25, 26). Moreover, our function reveals our true identity: we are sons and daughters of God made in God’s image to create, lead, and serve, and our authority is not derived from our gender but from Jesus Christ (Gen. 1:26; Acts 2:1–4).

Just as the Father provided for the Son to live in equality with him, so Christ has provided for men and women to live in equality with one another. Therefore, just as those “who [do] not honor the Son [do] not honor the Father who sent him” (John 5:23), so, too, those who do not honor the authority Christ has given to women do not honor themselves, for “we are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

This oneness is not achieved through hierarchy, but, according to Christ, it can only be achieved through love (John 17:23). We are called as Christian men and women to love passionately, to

serve selflessly, and to make sacrifices for one another willingly, just as the Father did for the Son and the Son did for the Father. According to Scripture, greatness is found in servanthood, and authority is found in acts of sacrificial love and humility. We see this in the Father's act of giving his Son to the world as an atoning sacrifice and in the Son's willingness to become this sacrifice. The Father and Son did this for you and for me, for we are the children of God.

Therefore, as men and women who are heirs to God's blessing and who have been granted authority through Christ Jesus, we of all people have no business lording over one another, denying one another, manipulating and controlling one another. Instead, Christ calls all of us—male and female—to execute our God-given authority in order to love one another just as the Father and Son demonstrated love for us.

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Endnotes

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