

THE SUBORDINATION OF THE SON

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That the Bible teaches some kind of subordination of the Son to the Father is not doubted. All agree that the NT emphasizes that in the divine activities of creation, revelation, redemption and judgment the Son always functions in subordination to the Father. Representative passages include (1) with respect to creation, 1 Cor 8:6: "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things . . . , and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we exist" (cf. John 1:3; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2); (2) with respect to revelation, John 8:28: "I . . . speak . . . as the Father taught me" (cf. 8:38; 12:49; 14:10); (3) with respect to redemption, 1 John 4:14: "The Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world" (cf. John 3:16; Rom 8:3, 32; Gal 4:4); (4) with respect to judgment, John 5:22, 30: "The Father . . . has given all judgment to the Son. . . . As I hear I judge" (cf. Acts 17:31).

Many other passages teach some kind of subordination. Of special interest are (1) the numerous passages—some forty-two in the fourth gospel—that state in one way or another that the Father sent the Son; (2) passages in which the authority and activity of the Son are attributed to endowment from the Father (cf. Matt 11:27; 28:18; John 5:19-30); (3) the repeated phrase "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" or some variant of it (cf. Rom 15:6; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Eph 1:3; Col 1:3; 1 Pet 1:3; Rev 1:6; cf. Mark 15:34 [Matt 27:46]; John 20:17; Heb 1:3, 9; 2:17; 5:1; 10:7, 9); (4) John 14:28: "My Father is greater than I."

Biblical support for a doctrine of subordination of the Son to the Father is extensive. But is that subordination merely economic, as many affirm? I submit that it is essential and eternal.¹ Though the doctrine of the (eternal) generation of the Son² suggests eternal subordination, if it does not imply it, to say nothing of the terminology of "Father" and "Son," I devote my study to the particularly relevant passages of Scripture.

I. PASSAGES IMPLYING ETERNAL SUBORDINATION

1. *1 Cor 15:24, 28.* The *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the essential subordination of the Son is 1 Cor 15:24, 28: "Then comes the end, when he

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¹ In spite of his recognition that Tertullian had said that the Son is "made a second in manner of existence—in position, not in nature" (*Apol* 21), C Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Philadelphia Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969) 104, states "A consistently biblical doctrine of the trinity would have implied the complete rejection of all subordinationism"

² See J V Dahms, "The Generation of the Son," *JETS* 32/4 (December 1989) 493-501

(Christ) delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. . . . When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will be subjected to him who put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone."

These verses imply that the last of the eschatological events prior to the eternal state will be the subjection of the Son to the Father and that this will be the condition forever thereafter. And surely his final relationship to the Father will not be inferior to the relationship he had with the Father in his preexistent state (cf. John 17:5; Phil 2:6-11).

The attempt to avoid such a conclusion has often been made. Marcellus of Ancyra (died c. 374) interpreted the passage to mean that "the Son represents a temporal, revelational interim."³ For him, only the *Logos* is eternal. "The Son of God" refers only to the incarnate *Logos*. Augustine held that "in so far as he is God" he is not put under the Father, but in so far as he is a man, a servant and a priest, "he with us will be put under him."⁴ John Calvin asserted that the subjection of the Son will be "in respect of his human nature." "Christ's humanity will then no longer be interposed to keep us back from a closer view of God." He will not "resign the kingdom, but will transfer it in a manner from his humanity to his glorious divinity."⁵ C. Hodge advances the interpretation that "the subjection here spoken of is not predicated of the eternal *Logos*, the second person of the Trinity. . . . The word *Son* here designate(s), not the *Logos* as such, but the *Logos* as incarnate. . . . It is not the subjection of the Son as Son, but of the Son as Theanthropos."⁶

All such interpretations implicitly deny the unity of the incarnate Son. Whether they may be accurately described as Nestorian or not, they introduce essentially the same error.

A somewhat different way of avoiding essential subordination is to hold that "*it is only meaningful to speak of the Son in view of God's revelatory action, not in view of his being.*"⁷ "Functional Christology is the only kind which exists."⁸ "The Father and the Son can be meaningfully distinguished only in the time of revelatory history."⁹ "The 'Son of God' . . . is God as God reveals himself in redemptive action."¹⁰ "According to Paul, he (the Son of God) will be absorbed in God when redemptive action has reached its goal."¹¹ Cullmann fails to note that John 1:1; 17:5 speak of the Son prior to

³ G C Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1972) 430

⁴ Augustine de Trin 1 10-11

⁵ J Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1948) 2 26, 32-33

⁶ C Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1959) 333-334

⁷ O Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (2d ed., London SCM, 1963) 293-294 (italics his)

⁸ Ibid 326-327

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Ibid 294

¹¹ Ibid 305 How his statements in "The Reply of Professor Cullmann to Roman Catholic Critics," *SJT* 15 (1962) 40, can be harmonized with the statements I have quoted is beyond me

God's revelatory and redemptive action and with respect to his being at that "time." In fact the progress of thought in the prologue of John's gospel implies that it is only meaningful to speak of the Son's unique revelatory action in view of his being. Indeed one wonders how Cullmann escapes monarchianism.¹²

Another attempt to avoid an eternal subordination of the Son is by separating Christ's being from his work. M. E. Thrall states: "(Paul) is referring only to the conclusion of the work of the Son within the present created universe."¹³ According to L. Morris, "Paul is not speaking of the essential nature of either the Son or the Father. He is speaking of the work that Christ has accomplished and will accomplish."¹⁴ F. W. Grosheide makes a similar affirmation, through contrasting Christ's office to his being: "The apostle does not imply that the Son will be subjected to the Father. . . . The Mediator will lay down his office at the feet of the Father, when he has finished his work as such."¹⁵ But Paul speaks of the subjection of the Son, not merely the subjection of the work or office of the Son. And though it is important to distinguish between the being of the Son and his work (and/or his office), to suggest that what happens to his work or office has no connection with what happens to his being implies an ultimate dualism. In contrast thereto, Paul implies that the delivering up of "the kingdom to God the Father" (1 Cor 15:24) is concomitant with the subjection of the Son (v. 28).¹⁶

Some have suggested that eternal subjection to the Father conflicts with the eternal kingship of Christ taught in Luke 1:33; 2 Pet 1:11.¹⁷ But this is not necessarily so. (1) For kings to become subject to the Roman emperor and yet retain their kingdoms was common enough. (2) "The Israelite monarch . . . may represent God's rule (Prov. 8:15), it may even reflect the true theocracy."¹⁸ (3) According to Phil 2:11, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and . . . every tongue . . . confess that Jesus Christ is Lord," but this is to be "to the glory of God the Father."¹⁹

The attempts put forward to avoid the view that 1 Cor 15:28 implies the essential and eternal subordination of the Son do not survive scrutiny. Rather, as A. W. Wainwright has stated, "Paul seems to be teaching a subordination which is ultimate and absolute."²⁰

¹² Cf H Ridderbos, *Paul An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1975) 69

¹³ M E Thrall, *The First and Second Letters of Paul to the Corinthians* (Cambridge Cambridge University, 1965) 109

¹⁴ L Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (2d ed., Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1985) 213

¹⁵ F W Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1953) 369, cf E Stauffer, *New Testament Theology* (London SCM, 1955) 229

¹⁶ If Christ's work or office can be completely divorced from his nature, he can never be trusted

¹⁷ E g Grosheide, *First Epistle* 369-370

¹⁸ Berkouwer, *Return* 441

¹⁹ Cf F F Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians* (London Oliphants, 1971) 148, Ridderbos, *Paul* 561, W Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1968) 369

²⁰ A M Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London SPCK, 1969) 187, cf G Deling in *TDNT* 8 43, E Schweizer in *TDNT* 8 382-383

2. *John 17:24*. Jesus is represented as praying: "Father, I desire that they also whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world."

In the light of 17:5 ("Father, glorify me with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made") it is clear that his eternal glory is in view. And that this glory is said to be the Father's gift to him implies an eternal subordination.

B. F. Westcott sought to interpret otherwise. He insisted:

The "glory" of the Word, apart from the Incarnation, is not said in the language of the New Testament to be given to Him, though the Father is the "one fountain of Godhead" The glory here spoken of is the glory of a restored and consummated harmony of God and man, which is made the final object of believers, even as it is already potentially given to them (v 22)²¹

But the following points must be noted. (1) That his eternal glory is not said to be given to him elsewhere in the NT does not preclude its being said in John 17. (2) To state that the Father is the "one fountain of Godhead" implies a kind of subordination. (3) The glory spoken of in John 17:24 is not the glory of a restored harmony of God and man. It is "the glory which I (Christ) had with thee before the world was made." Indeed, as J. H. Bernard noted, "a clear distinction seems to be indicated between the δόξα of v. 22 which had been given to the disciples, and the δόξα of v. 24, which they might hope to contemplate hereafter, but which was only given to Christ."²² Bernard concludes that v. 24 proclaims "a 'giving' of glory by the Father to the Son before the Incarnation."²³ And H. B. Swete is led to assert: "The Father . . . gave him in the act of generation, His own Godhead and glory."²⁴

3. *Eph 3:21*. "To him be glory in (*en*) the church and in (*en*) Christ Jesus to all generations for ever and ever (lit. 'to all the generations of the age of the ages')."

By "to all the generations of the age of the ages" (cf. Ps 44:18 LXX; 1 Esdr 4:38; Dan 7:18 LXX) the idea of perpetuity in the fullest sense of the word is intended. The expression is "designed to emphasize the concept of eternity."²⁵

The glorification of God "in Christ Jesus" implies that Christ is subordinate to the Father in all the ages to come. And, since what he is to be in

²¹ B F Westcott, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1950) 248

²² J H Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St John* (Edinburgh T and T Clark, 1928) 2 580

²³ *Ibid*, cf J C Fenton, *The Gospel According to John in the Revised Standard Version* (Oxford Clarendon, 1970) 177, R E Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (Garden City Doubleday, 1966) 2 772, C K Barrett in *Neues Testament und Kirche Fur Rudolf Schnackenburg* (Freiburg Herder, 1974) 77-78

²⁴ H B Swete, *The Last Discourse and Prayer of Our Lord* (London Macmillan, 1913) 183

²⁵ H Sasse in *TDNT* 1 199, cf M Barth, *Ephesians* (Garden City Doubleday, 1974) 1 376 For another interpretation see T K Abbott, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians and the Epistle to the Colossians* (Edinburgh T and T Clark, 1897) 104

the future cannot be less than what he was in ages past, it can be assumed that he has been subordinate to the Father in all those ages past.

It has been suggested that the implications of Eph 3:21 may be discounted because the verse is doxological. And some commentators "claim that it is characteristic of this writer to accumulate words of an imposing nature in order to convey a general sense of impressiveness without analyzing their particular significance."²⁶ It has been stated accordingly that "the rich liturgical language of the epistle should not be pressed too closely."²⁷ Perhaps the author did desire to convey a sense of impressiveness. But what evidence is there that he did not realize, and/or did not intend, the particular significance of what he wrote? That there is rich liturgical language, or at least language with rich liturgical possibilities, is obvious. But where is the evidence that it should not be pressed too closely?²⁸

There is good reason to believe that Eph 3:21 implies that the Son is essentially and eternally subordinate to the Father.

4. *Phil 2:9-11*. "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that (*hina*) at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father."²⁹

This passage affirms that the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord is either with the result that the Father is glorified or with the purpose that he be glorified. In either case it is implied that the glorification of the Son is subordinated to the glorification of the Father.³⁰

But does this describe what is to eventuate in the present age only? Some have argued that Paul has only the present age in view. They point out that the ascension of Christ and his session at the Father's right hand constitute the exaltation of Christ of which Phil 2:9 speaks. Such passages as Eph 1:22 ("[God] has put all things under his feet") and 1 Pet 3:22 ("[He] is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities and powers subject to him") lend support to this view.

There is reason to believe, however, that the NT passages that speak of Christ as having triumphed over all that is in heaven and on earth and under the earth are not to be understood to mean that his triumph has had its full effect. Indeed according to 1 Cor 15:25 "he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." And according to Heb 2:8-9 "we do not yet see everything in subjection to him. But we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor." Because Philippians 2 anticipates the bowing of every knee and the universal confession of Christ's lordship it has in view

²⁶ C L Mitton, *Ephesians* (London Oliphants, 1976) 136

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ Unless they can produce such evidence, it may be suspected that those who make such statements (1) do not relish some of the implications of the respective material or (2) themselves indulge in the use of impressive and/or liturgical statements that they do not altogether mean

²⁹ Cf *Ascension of Isaiah* 11 23 ff

³⁰ See R P Martin, *Carmen Christi* (Cambridge Cambridge University, 1967) 266-267

a triumph that has had its full effect. And it is such triumph that is said to be "to the glory of God the Father." Of course it may be contended that his triumph will have its full effect in this present age. But since the passage begins with "Christ Jesus . . . in the form of God," which is apparently a statement about his preexistence,³¹ it is reasonable to interpret vv. 10-11 as descriptive of his eternal state of exaltation when his triumph has had its full effect. To illustrate his humility (vv. 4-5) it would not have been necessary to include vv. 9-11, but to have concluded with the setting forth of an exaltation that is not final and eternal would have been inept in view of v. 6.³²

R. P. Martin states: "It may be doubted whether . . . vv. 9-11 . . . teach a subordination of Christ to God."³³ He holds that "to the glory of God the Father" "may simply state that Christ is no rival of God, no 'second God,' although in fact co-equal with God and partner of His throne."³⁴ But such an interpretation does not give due consideration to "the Father," with which the clause concludes. I suspect that Martin fails to realize that "co-equal" may not mean "equal in every respect."

I submit that a responsible reading of Philippians 2 finds the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son implied in it. As J. J. Muller has said in commenting on this text: "The glorification of the Father is the ultimate purpose of all things."³⁵

II. PASSAGES POSSIBLY IMPLYING ETERNAL SUBORDINATION

1. *Mark 13:32 (Matt 24:36)*. With respect to the *parousia* Jesus said, "Of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father."

In this verse "there is stress on the Son's subordination to the Father."³⁶ But is this a subordination of the incarnate Son only³⁷ or of the eternal Son as well? Scholars have often assumed that the subordination is of the Son as incarnate only,³⁸ but there is some reason to believe otherwise. "The Son" suggests that the deity of Christ is in view, quite apart from whether that deity is incarnate. Moreover "the Son" occurs in the "trinitarian" formula of Matt 28:19: "baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the

³¹ For a discussion of its meaning see *ibid* 99-133

³² According to O Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (New York Harper, 1967) 307, "these powers (in view in Phil 2 19 ff) are already subject to Christ, and yet they must be subjected to Christ once again at the end of the ages" Though this statement has much to commend it, it fails to distinguish the coronation of Christ from subjection to him (cf Heb 2 8-9)

³³ Martin, *Carmen Christi* 248

³⁴ *Ibid*, cf p 283

³⁵ J J Muller, *The Epistles of Paul to the Philippians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1955) 89, cf E Schweizer in *TDNT* 8 382-383

³⁶ E Schweizer in *TDNT* 8 372, cf G Schrenk in *TDNT* 5 992, F Hahn, *The Titles of Jesus in Christology* (New York/Cleveland World, 1969) 311-312

³⁷ Cf Schweizer in *TDNT* 8 372

³⁸ Cf e g D Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1972) 323, W L Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1974) 482, E Schweizer in *TDNT* 8 372

Son, and of the Holy Spirit."³⁹ And even if this formula is a Church construction, as many scholars hold, it is not without significance for the understanding of "the Son" in Matt 24:36. Moreover the only other synoptic passage in which "the Son" occurs absolutely—Matt 11:27 (Luke 10:22)—may imply the preexistence of Christ, according to some scholars.⁴⁰ Furthermore it is widely believed that Matt 11:25–27 is a wisdom saying and implies that Jesus considers himself to be the Wisdom of God spoken of in Job 28; Proverbs 8; Sirach 1, 24; Wisdom 7–9; *Apocalypse of Baruch* 3.⁴¹ But if so, he is claiming to be both preexistent and begotten of "the Lord" prior to the creation of the world (see Prov 8:22–26; cf. Sir 1:4, 9; 24:3, 8–9; Wisd 7:25; 8:3). Indeed subordination, if not implicit in being generated by "the Lord," seems to be assumed in Prov 8:27–31.

It is probable that the eternal subordination of the Son is reflected in Mark 13:32 (Matt 24:36).

2. *Mark 14:62 (Matt 26:64; Luke 22:69)*. (Cf. Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33–34; 5:31; 7:55–56; Rom 8:34; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet 3:22.)

At his trial before the high priest, Jesus is represented as saying concerning himself: "You will see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). In this statement, and in the others referred to above, the fulfillment of Ps 110:1 ("The Lord says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand'") is in view.

Concerning Mark 14:62 A. W. Wainwright asserts: "If any form of subordination is suggested by the phrase 'right hand of power,' it is of the slightest nature."⁴² But even if slight it is there, just as it is in all the texts in which Jesus is spoken of as sitting at God's right hand. Of course it may be argued that eternal subordination is not in view. On the other hand his being at the right hand of God seems to be represented as prevailing in all ages to come. Not even the *parousia* interrupts it. Rather, Mark 14:62 (Matt 26:64) represents him as being at the right hand of God as he returns.⁴³ "Those who now (at His trial) judge him will see him with unmistakable clarity enthroned at God's side. . . . The truth concerning Jesus' person and work is clearly revealed at the Parousia."⁴⁴

We find it hard to believe that at the *parousia*, when we shall see him as he is (1 John 2:28; 3:2), what we shall be seeing will be essentially different

³⁹ It is significant that J D G Dunn, *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1980) 49, admits that Matt 28:19 "foreshadows, in at least some degree, the later trinitarian understanding of God"

⁴⁰ See Cullmann, *Christology* 288

⁴¹ See Dunn, *Christology* 198–201. Dunn disagrees, but states that in the verses following (vv 28–30) "it is quite clear that Jesus speaks as *Wisdom* and not merely as *Wisdom's* envoy" (p 200, italics his)

⁴² Wainwright, *Trinity* 179

⁴³ "Till" in Ps 110:1 (quoted in Acts 2:34, Heb 1:13 [cf 10:13]) is not to be understood to mean that he will cease being at the right hand of God when his enemies are made his footstool

⁴⁴ Lane, *Mark* 537

from his eternal reality.⁴⁵ But, if so, Mark 14:62 and the other passages that speak of Christ being at the right hand of the Father are evidence for the eternal subordination of the Son.

3. *John 1:1*. "In the beginning was the Word (*Logos*), and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Unless it can be assumed that the Word's being and existence have been eternally independent of God, a doctrine that seems to be denied by 1:14, 18 (cf. 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9; 5:18) where his generation is taught,⁴⁶ the very term "Word" suggests self-expression and self-revelation and, therefore, subordination.⁴⁷ Moreover v. 3 ("All things were made through him, and without him not anything was made that was made") seems to say that the *Logos* was the agent of God in creation⁴⁸ and so to imply subordination of the Son. That he is said to be God does not detract from such a judgment.⁴⁹

Moreover the prologue of the fourth gospel owes much to what is said about Wisdom in pre-Christian Jewish literature. Indeed A. T. Hanson says, "It seems that in his account of the incarnation of the *Logos* John is attempting a takeover bid for all that Wisdom meant to Israel of old."⁵⁰ And F. F. Bruce affirms that for John (and for other NT writers) "Jesus Christ was the incarnate Wisdom of God."⁵¹ As we have seen, Jewish writings spoke of Wisdom as generated by God and, apparently, as subordinate to God.

4. *John 14:28*. In his supper discourse (John 13-16) Jesus is represented as saying to his disciples, "The Father is greater than I."

Various scholars insist, for no good reason that I can discern, that the statement does not hold with respect to his "essential Being."⁵²

A variety of considerations suggest otherwise, however. As B. F. Westcott has pointed out: "We must believe that there was a certain fitness in the Incarnation of the Son. . . . So far . . . as it was fit that the Son should be Incarnate and suffer, and not the Father, it is possible for us to understand that the Father is greater than the Son as Son."⁵³ And J. O. F. Murray comments: "We find it very hard to realize that it is no less divine to

⁴⁵ I H Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1978) 172 n 29, argues persuasively that "him" in 1 John 3:2 is the Son, not the Father

⁴⁶ See J V Dahms, "The Johannine Use of *Monogenēs* Reconsidered," *NTS* 29 (April 1983) 222-232

⁴⁷ *Per contra* cf Cullmann, *Christology* 265

⁴⁸ Cf F F Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1983) 32, Taylor, *The Person of Christ in New Testament Teaching* (London Macmillan, 1958) 109

⁴⁹ Cf J O F Murray, *Jesus According to St John* (London/New York Longmans, Green, 1938) 259 "It is no less divine to obey than to command"

⁵⁰ A T Hanson, *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* (London SPCK, 1980) 106

⁵¹ E K Simpson and F F Bruce, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Ephesians and the Colossians* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1957) 195

⁵² E g L Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (NICNT 4, Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1971) 658, D A Carson, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus* (Grand Rapids Baker, 1980) 81, A R C Leaney in *John and Qumran* (ed J H Charlesworth, London Geoffrey Chapman, 1972) 47, E H Bickersteth, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids Kregel, 1965) 101

⁵³ B F Westcott, *The Gospel According to St John* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1954) 2 196 Westcott adds "in Person if not in Essence," but does his person not include his essence?

obey than to command: that there must be Sonship in the Godhead as well as Fatherhood, a principle of subordination as well as a principle of authority.⁵⁴ I would add that if Christ reliably reveals God, as John 1:18 implies, his subordination as incarnate must illustrate subordination in his essential being.⁵⁵

There is nothing in the saying itself, nor in the immediate context, to indicate that the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father is in view. But theological considerations derived from the Scriptures, and especially from John's gospel, seem to imply that what is said is not only true of the incarnate Christ but is also true of the eternal Son.⁵⁶

5. *1 Cor 8:6*. "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist."

There are passages in which Paul clearly implies the deity of Christ (cf. esp. Col 1:19; 2:9; 2 Cor 5:19). There are passages in which he may even be calling Christ God (cf. Rom 9:5; 2 Thess 1:12; 1 Tim 3:16; Titus 2:13). But in the passage before us he carefully distinguishes Christ from "God, the Father." As H. Conzelmann has stated: "The interpretation of . . . 'Lord' . . . is deliberately set in contrast to that of the concept 'God.'"⁵⁷ Moreover the relationship of "all things" to Christ is carefully distinguished from the relationship of "all things" to God, the Father, so that a subordinate position on the part of the Son is implied.

The fact that the Christian view is being contrasted with non-Christian views (v. 5) suggests that essential subordination, not merely economic subordination, is intended. And even if vv. 5-6 represent the argument of certain Christians in Corinth,⁵⁸ is it likely that Paul would allow what is only relatively true concerning deity to stand over against pagan views thereof? Ephesians 4:5-6; Phil 2:11 (cf. also John 17:3) demonstrate that the distinction between Father and Son in 1 Cor 8:6 is not merely a view held by certain Christians in Corinth.

The essential subordination of the Son seems to be implicit in 1 Cor 8:6.

6. *Phil 4:19-20*. "My God shall supply every need of yours according to his riches in (en) glory in (en) Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

⁵⁴ Murray, *John* 259, cf. Cullmann, *Christology* 266

⁵⁵ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed., Philadelphia Westminster, 1978) 91, *Essays on John* (Philadelphia Westminster, 1982) 19-34, Taylor, *Person of Christ* 104-105

⁵⁶ Taylor, *Person of Christ* 105, states "The subordination is an eternal relationship which is manifested amid the conditions of His human existence. It is as far as possible from the 'subordinationism' of the Arian controversies and the 'adoptionism' current in Spain and France towards the close of the eighth century." Cf. C. Welch, *In This Name* (New York Scribner's, 1952) 143 n. 6, Brown, *John* 2:655

⁵⁷ H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1975) 144, cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New York/Evanston Harper, 1968) 193

⁵⁸ Cf. Grosheide, *First Epistle* 192

Though other interpretations of "in glory" (v. 19) have been offered,⁵⁹ Rom 9:23; Eph 3:16 indicate that "riches in glory" is equivalent to "riches of glory." Moreover the distance from "supply every need of yours" indicates that "in Christ Jesus" is to be connected with "glory" rather than with "supply every need of yours"—to say nothing of the fact that Eph 3:21 speaks of God's glory "in Christ Jesus" (cf. 2 Cor 4:6), so that Phil 4:19 should be understood to mean that the wealth of God in view is the glory that he has "in Christ Jesus."

Though doxologies of the kind occurring in v. 20 are not uncommon in the Pauline epistles (cf. Rom 11:36; Gal 1:5; 1 Tim 1:17; 2 Tim 4:8), the reference to glory therein can hardly be unrelated to the "glory" mentioned in v. 19.⁶⁰ But if so, and if v. 19 refers to the glory God has in Christ Jesus, v. 20 has to do with the perpetuation of that glory forever. And this in turn implies the eternal subordination of Christ to the Father.

III. PASSAGES REPRESENTED AS DENYING THE THESIS OF ETERNAL SUBORDINATION

1. *John 5:18*. B. B. Warfield quotes this verse ("The Jews sought . . . to kill him, because he . . . called God his Father, making himself equal [*ison*] to God") as evidence that there is no essential subordination of the Son. He says that Jesus "was understood to be claiming to be all that God is . . . , to be exactly like God."⁶¹ But *ison* does not necessarily mean sameness or equality in every respect, as Matt 20:12 demonstrates. And the use of the term "Father" in the statement that led to the charge ("My Father is working still, and I am working") suggests that *ison* does not mean "exactly like" in this context. Moreover what immediately follows makes it clear that the Son is not "exactly like" the Father: "The son can do nothing on his own account, but only what he sees the Father doing. . . . I can do nothing on my own authority" (vv. 19, 30; cf. vv. 20–29).

2. *John 10:30*. L. Morris assumes that this verse ("I and the Father are one") is to be understood as precluding any subordination in "Christ's essential being."⁶² But this assumption is ruled out by the immediately preceding statement: "My Father, who has given them (my sheep) to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand." Even if he does not include himself in "all," subordination is implied when he states that the Father gave him his sheep. And why would he need to say that "no one is able to snatch them out of my Father's hand" if v. 30 precludes any thought of essential subordination—unless he confuses essential subordination and economic subordination?

⁵⁹ See R P Martin, *The Epistle of Paul to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1965) 183–184

⁶⁰ Cf *ibid* 184 *Per contra* cf J M Boice, *Philippians An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1975) 299–300

⁶¹ B B Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952) 52–53

⁶² Morris, *John* 658–659

Furthermore, according to R. E. Brown, in the background of John 10:30 is the conception of a sent one, a *šāliah*, who "ranks as his (master's) own person," though "the sender is greater than the one sent."⁶³

As A. W. Wainwright comments, John 10:29–30 shows "the supremacy of the Father" but also "the unity of Father and Son."⁶⁴

3. *1 Cor 2:10–11*. In support of his view that essential subordination is not characteristic of any of the persons of the Godhead, B. B. Warfield says of 1 Cor 2:10–11 ("The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God, except the Spirit of God"):

Here the Spirit appears as the substrate of the Divine self-consciousness, the principle of God's knowledge of Himself. He is, in a word, just God Himself in the innermost essence of His being. As the spirit of man is the seat of human life, the very life of man itself, so the Spirit of God is His very life-element. How can he be supposed, then, to be subordinate to God, or to derive His being from God?⁶⁵

But where does 1 Cor 2:10–11 imply that "the Spirit appears as . . . the principle of God's knowledge of Himself," that he "is God Himself in the innermost essence of His being," or that he is God's "very life-element"? Warfield seems to assume that what is said of the spirit of man in these verses is univocally true of the Spirit of God rather than analogically true.⁶⁶ Indeed, as F. W. Grosheide points out, "the relation of the human spirit to man is expressed in a way which differs from the relation of the divine Spirit to God." He notes that "it is impossible to take the words *the Spirit which is from God* (in v. 12) of the self-consciousness of God."⁶⁷ And H. L. Goudge comments: "The consciousness of a man can scarcely be said to 'search' into his counsels. . . . To 'search' implies personal existence."⁶⁸ We only add that "searches" in 1 Cor 2:10 hints at subordination.

4. *Phil 2:6*. "Though he (Christ Jesus) was in the form of God, (he) did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped."

Though there are other interpretations, many commentators hold that the preincarnate Christ is being represented as equal with God. We have seen that John 5:18 ff. apparently implies that equality with God⁶⁹ is not incompatible with subordination to the Father. But more important, as we have seen, is that Phil 2:10–11 anticipates the eschatological exaltation of

⁶³ Brown, *John* 2:632, 655. The quotations are from *b Qidd* 43a, *Gen Rab* 78:1 on Gen 32:17.

⁶⁴ Wainwright, *Trinity* 193.

⁶⁵ Warfield, *Biblical* 53.

⁶⁶ Cf. A. Robertson and A. Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (2d ed., Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1955) 45.

⁶⁷ Grosheide, *First Epistle* 69–70.

⁶⁸ H. L. Goudge, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (5th ed. rev., London: Methuen, 1926).

⁶⁹ E. Kasemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 14, is also instructive.

⁶⁹ John 5:18 *ison tō theō*, Phil 2:6 *isa theō*.

Christ "to the glory of God the Father"—that is, an exaltation in which he is subordinate to the Father. And it is inconceivable that in his final destiny Christ will be less exalted than he was before the foundation of the world, so that the equality of God set forth in Phil 2:6 must be one in which there is also subordination to the Father.⁷⁰

5. *Phil 2:8*. "Being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross."

This verse could be taken to mean that he had not been humble and obedient prior to his being in human form.⁷¹ But that an eternal attitude is being exhibited in a particular act of humility and obedience is not precluded.⁷² Indeed it may be argued that there must be such an eternal attitude if we are to hold that the character of the Son never changes (cf. Heb 13:8).

6. *Heb 5:8*. "Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

This statement could be taken to mean that obedience did not characterize the preincarnate Christ.⁷³ We contend, however, that what is meant is that he "learned . . . what obedience to God involved in practice in the conditions of human life on earth."⁷⁴ Indeed, obedience on the part of the preexistent Son is implied in Heb 10:5-7: "When Christ came into the world he said . . . , 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God.'"⁷⁵ This means that we must at least leave open the possibility that obedience is an eternal characteristic of the Son—to say nothing of the problem involved in holding that the Son became obedient at some stage, whether preincarnate or incarnate.

So far as we are aware we have considered all the Biblical passages that could be construed as teaching or implying that there is no essential subordination of the Son to the Father and have found that none of them really does so. On the other hand we have found a number of passages that clearly imply his eternal subordination, plus a number of additional passages that could be so interpreted. If the Scriptures are an infallible authority, there is no alternative but to believe that the Son is essentially and eternally subordinate to the Father.

IV. SOME THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Those who deny the doctrine of the essential subordination of the Son to the Father apparently do so for one or both of two reasons. (1) They fear that the doctrine implies that Christ is not the full and final revelation of deity,

⁷⁰ See Martin, *Carmen Christi* 274 ff

⁷¹ Cf Berkouwer, *Return* 433

⁷² Cf W Grundmann in *TDNT* 8 18 n 50

⁷³ Cf Berkouwer, *Return* 433

⁷⁴ F F Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1964) 103 K H Rengstorf in *TDNT* 4 411 opposes any idea that "moral growth in the sense of an increasing capacity for obedience" is in view, but see Cullmann, *Christology* 97-98

⁷⁵ Bruce, *Hebrews* 234

and, as a concomitant, they fear that such a doctrine means that the relationship of the Christian to Christ is not a relationship to the fullness of deity. But such fear is only justified if one does not know, or does not take seriously, that the essence of the Father, the essence of the Son, and the essence of the Holy Spirit is one and the same divine essence. (2) They assume, consciously or unconsciously, that inequality in existence is incompatible with equality of essence—an assumption that derives from rationalism.⁷⁶

It is apparently due to such reasons that "starting from Augustine . . . it has been among theologians a more or less foregone conclusion that each of the divine persons (if God freely so decided) could have become man."⁷⁷

We contend that the doctrine of the eternal and essential subordination of the Son is an important doctrine for several reasons.

1. *If the Bible teaches the (eternal) generation of the Son, as it does,⁷⁸ it is reasonable to hold that eternal subordination is concomitant therewith.* Eternal generation provides the ontological basis for eternal subordination, and eternal subordination lends significance to eternal generation. Of course one's doctrine of eternal generation must accord with, if not imply, the essential equality of Father and Son, and one's doctrine of subordination must be compatible with such a doctrine of eternal generation.⁷⁹

Augustine held to the doctrine of the generation of the Son, but its only significance for him seems to have been that it provides a basis for the distinction between Father and Son.⁸⁰ But if that is its only significance, it really adds nothing that would not be included in a dogmatic statement that the Son is not the Father and the Father is not the Son. It is a superfluous doctrine, to say nothing of the fact that it emasculates the Biblical emphasis on the Father's sending of the Son.⁸¹

And eternal subordination need not imply an Arian view of the Son of God. As C. Welch affirms: "The doctrine of the processions does involve a sort of 'subordinationism,' but this is qualitatively different from the subordinationism of Arius, in which the Son and Spirit are created; i.e. are not of the essence of God."⁸²

⁷⁶ Many evangelical scholars have a superficial understanding of rationalism

⁷⁷ K Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York Seabury, 1974) 11, cf M Wiles, "Some Reflections on the Origins of the Doctrine of the Trinity," *JTS* 8 (April 1957) 102-103, C W Lowry, *The Trinity and Christian Devotion* (London Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1946) 87

⁷⁸ See Dahms, "Generation" 493-501

⁷⁹ Arius could affirm the doctrine of the generation of the Son (cf "The Private Creed of Arius, A D 328," P Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* [New York Harper, 1877] 2 28-29), but only because he used the term inaccurately

⁸⁰ See Augustine *de Trin* 1 4, 2 5, 4 20

⁸¹ According to Augustine *de Trin* 2 4, "the Son was sent by the Father and the Son" P K Jewett, *Man as Male and Female* (Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1975) 187 n 19, describes the generation doctrine as "obscure" Is it only tradition that keeps him from jettisoning the doctrine? Contrast "Barth's doctrine of the eternal obedience of the Son of God in the being of the triune God" (E Jungel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids Eerdmans, 1976] 40 n 151)

⁸² Welch, *In This Name* 143 n 6, cf Taylor, *Person of Christ* 104-105 In support of the view that the subordination of the Son is only economic, it is sometimes held that the functions required

2. *If Father and Son are alike in every respect, there is no conceivable way in which they could have fellowship with each other.* Fellowship and, indeed, any kind of personal interaction require some kind of dissimilarity. Generation (and spiration) provide a basis for dissimilarity in the Godhead. Subordination indicates the nature of that dissimilarity.

3. *If Father and Son are essentially alike in every respect, the Son could never subordinate himself to the Father without denying his own nature.* To suggest that his decision to do so is an eternal decision does not help matters. It simply implies that he is eternally denying what he is. God has freedom and can do new things, but not contrary to his nature.⁸³

4. *If there is no essential subordination of the Son, rather than revealing deity (cf. John 1:18) Jesus often misrepresents deity.* He does so when he speaks of the Father as "my God" (John 20:17). He does so when he speaks of being sent by the Father. He does so when he prays to the Father. He does so when he says that he is dependent on the Father for his authority (John 5:27, 30; cf. Matt 28:18).⁸⁴

5. *The denial of essential subordination has serious implications for ethics.* Fundamental to Biblical teaching concerning ethics is the doctrine that we are to be like God (Lev 11:44; Matt 5:48; Eph 5:1; 1 Pet 1:15-16; cf. 1 John 3:3; etc.). What is right for man is analogous to what is true of God. This means that if there is no subordination in the deity there is ultimately no justification for a Christian to recognize the authority of any other human being in the home, the school, the Church, the state. The Biblical prescriptions in these respects (Romans 13; Ephesians 5-6; Colossians 3-4; Hebrews 13; 1 Peter 2-3; etc.) are not really justified. The fall is not a sufficient justification for them (1 Timothy 2). If there is no essential subordination in the Godhead, or at least what is analogous to subordination, Biblical social ethics is unintelligible.⁸⁵

For theological as well as exegetical reasons, the doctrine of the essential and eternal subordination of the Son must be embraced. It must be carefully elaborated lest one fall into error, but the rejection thereof involves one in serious difficulties both theological and moral.

to effect creation and redemption were distributed among the several members of the Trinity by mutual agreement (cf. Warfield, *Biblical* 54, J. B. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962] 87, 275). But the Scriptures provide no warrant for such a doctrine.

⁸³ We concur with Welch, *In This Name* 184 "We must make the doctrine of immanent Trinity conform exactly in content to the economic Trinity."

⁸⁴ It is significant that Col 2:9 does not speak of the whole fullness of the Father indwelling Christ, not even of the whole fullness of God, but of "the whole fullness of deity."

⁸⁵ Of course there are other teachings concerning the Godhead that are also significant for Christian social ethics (cf. e.g. John 3:35, 5:20, 23).