

# Trinity, Gender, and Subordination: Series Outline

Posted by David W. Congdon on 'The fire and the Rose' blog

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I have decided to come out of blog semi-retirement to contribute to Rachel Held Evans's [Week of Mutuality](#). My contribution will be an essay that I wrote in the spring of 2011 on the topic of trinity and subordinationism. As is my *modus operandi*, the essay is too long for a single post, so I will split it up into several smaller posts.

A brief word on the context of this essay is in order. Though I live (for the moment) in Princeton, my wife and I are from Portland, Oregon. One of the largest and most well-known churches in Portland is [Imago Dei](#), and we have friends and family who are part of this community. Over the past few years this community has wrestled with the question of women in ministry.

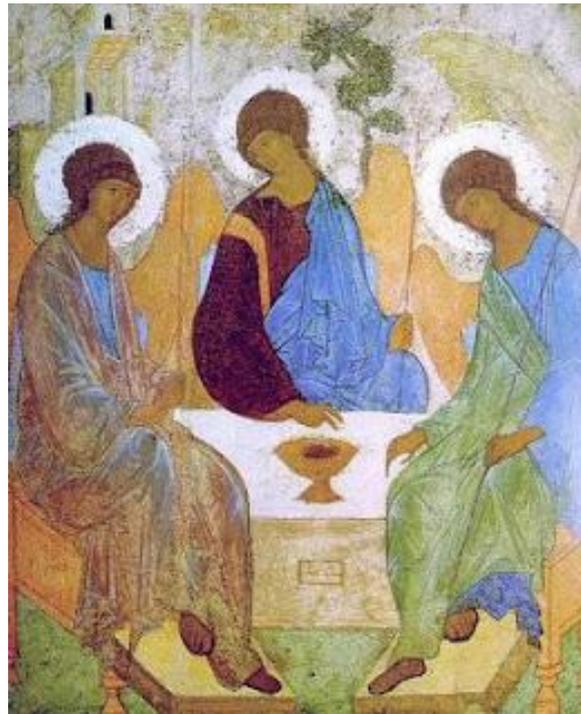
A couple years ago I was asked to contribute to a response to [Imago Dei's position paper](#) on this question, which put forward a position of so-called "soft complementarianism." In response to this document, I drafted a hundred-page document arguing for a position I called "radical equality" on the grounds of a missional hermeneutic. I am currently working on expanding that into a full-length monograph, so I will not reproduce that material here.

Instead, I will post a *second* (and much shorter) essay that I wrote in response to one paragraph of Imago's position paper. This paragraph grounds the subordination of women in the subordination of Son and Spirit to the Father:

We believe that both men and women are equally made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and equal partners in Christ (Gal. 3:28). As in the Trinity, there is equality of persons, but diversity in function. There is a relationship between the equal persons of the Trinity that includes leadership and submission. God the Father sends the Son and the Spirit (Isa. 48:16; John 5:23-36; 14:26; 15:26). The Son and the Spirit submit to the Father, but each is equally God. All believers must joyfully submit to the triune God.

It is unfortunate that a response to this line of inquiry is even necessary. The position is so theologically dubious that one can only explain its prevalence among conservative evangelicals as a sign of the theological vacuum that exists within evangelicalism today. It is truly a dire state of affairs within the church when Christians appeal to the doctrine of the trinity to support gender subordination. Unfortunately, there continues to be a need to demonstrate the obvious—in this case, to demonstrate why this position is theologically deplorable. We can only declare a firm and resounding "No!" to this line of thinking.

I am, of course, not the first to write about this problem. Kevin Giles has made it his mission to expose this error of modern evangelicals, especially in his recent books, [The Trinity and Subordinationism](#), and more recently, [Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity](#). The latter book is especially relevant to my essay, since the last chapter discusses subordination and obedience in Karl Barth's theology (though I wrote my piece without knowing about this book). Giles is not at all a Barth scholar, and he admits reading Barth more or less for the first time in researching for this book. His chapter bears all the marks of a Barth novice and lacks the historical and textual nuance necessary to appreciate what Barth is trying to achieve. Giles is fully invested in traditional



orthodoxy, and this makes it hard to enter into the strange world of Barth's theology. That being said, he offers a charitable reading of Barth that ranges across the whole *Church Dogmatics*, and he is to be commended for engaging Barth so carefully. My contribution here aims to support Giles's criticism of modern evangelical theology, but through a more sophisticated reading of Barth.

Besides the work of Giles, there are also the recent [Kantzer Lectures by Bruce McCormack](#). The first lecture addresses the state of the doctrine of God in contemporary evangelical theology. McCormack looks at two problems, one of which is the use of the trinity to support gender roles. His analysis of the problem corresponds very closely to my own—not surprisingly, since he is my *Doktorvater* and the one who has influenced me the most in all matters theological. My entire approach to this problem I owe to him. That being said, I wrote my piece a few months before he gave his lecture, and I was not aware of its content before he presented it.

In responding to the evangelical position on trinity and gender, I will first articulate what I think is the most persuasive version of the eternal subordination of the Son, viz. the position advanced by Barth. I will demonstrate that Barth's account, despite its apparent similarities to the complementarian argument, absolutely precludes drawing any conclusions about male-female relations. In fact, Barth's account of trinitarian subordination actually *undermines* the evangelical position, even though, paradoxically, it is an instance of ontological, and not merely functional, subordination.

I will then address the two presuppositions upon which the evangelical position is based:

- (a) a "social" doctrine of the Trinity, and
- (b) a divine-human analogy of being (*analogia entis*).

I will further demonstrate that these same presuppositions have been and continue to be used in support of egalitarianism, but I will conclude by arguing that neither presupposition is theologically valid.

In short, my thesis is this: *the doctrine of the Trinity tells us absolutely nothing regarding the question of gender roles and women in ministry*. The Trinity has no relation to the debate between complementarianism and egalitarianism. Any use of the doctrine for these purposes is indicative of a mistaken understanding of the triune being of God.

#### **The outline of this series:**

1. [The Immanent and Economic Trinity: Thinking Responsibly about God](#)
2. [Subordination without Subordinationism: The Witness of Karl Barth](#)
3. [The Problem of Social Trinitarianism](#)
4. [The Problem of Analogy](#)
5. [A Different Perspective and Conclusion](#)

# Part 1: Immanent and Economic Trinity

*This is part one of my series on “Trinity, Gender, and Subordination,” which is my contribution to Rachel Held Evans’s [Week of Mutuality](#).*

## The Immanent and Economic Trinity: Thinking Responsibly about God

There is a “right” way and a “wrong” way to use the doctrine of the trinity in support of complementarianism. I use “scare quotes” because, in the end, I will argue that there is really no right way to use trinitarian doctrine for this end, but there is nevertheless a *better* way to make the case.

The bad argument is, unfortunately, all too widespread and hard to avoid without a certain level of theological sophistication. It is, to put it simply, the ancient heresy of *subordinationism*—perhaps not put so baldly, but at least strongly implied. Kevin Giles and Philip Cary, among others, have criticized this tendency within evangelicalism at length. For the sake of argument, I take it for granted that no one at Imago ascribes to subordinationism. However, in order to clarify the distinction between subordination and subordinationism, we need to briefly define our terms.

Subordinationism is the position (consistently rejected by the ancient church) that the Son and/ or Spirit are *ontologically* subordinate to the Father. The Council of Nicaea rejected this position with respect to the Son by employing terms like “homoousias” (“of one being”) and “begotten not made.” The former refers to the shared “substance” of divinity between Father and Son, the fact that both are equally eternal and thus equal in glory and power. The latter refers to the fact that, while the Father is indeed the source of the Son’s *generation*, the Father does *not* “create” the Son. Only finite beings are created; the Son is generated, and the Spirit proceeds or is spirated. These terms are utterly unique with respect to the being of God.

At this point, it’s worth digressing for a moment to reflect on the East-West divide within the church. The Western church’s reflections on the trinity have their starting-point in the unity of the *ousia* or essence of God. In the West, the first thing to say about God is the “one being” that is in some sense logically prior to the “three persons.” This begins in the work of Augustine and is systematized by Thomas Aquinas, who develops a significant amount of his doctrine of God based entirely on the simple unity of God’s being before ever treating the three persons.

In the East, by contrast, the point of departure is located in the three “hypostases” or “persons” (later Greek theologians would speak of the “persons” as *tropos huparxeos*, “modes of existence”). The unity of God’s being is a unity of persons in their eternal triunity. While the West presupposes a “pre-personal *divinitas*,” the East presupposes a tri-personal *ousia*.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the West had to explain how God could be *three*, the East had to explain how God could be *one* (hence, for example., Gregory of Nyssa’s treatise, “On Not Three Gods”).

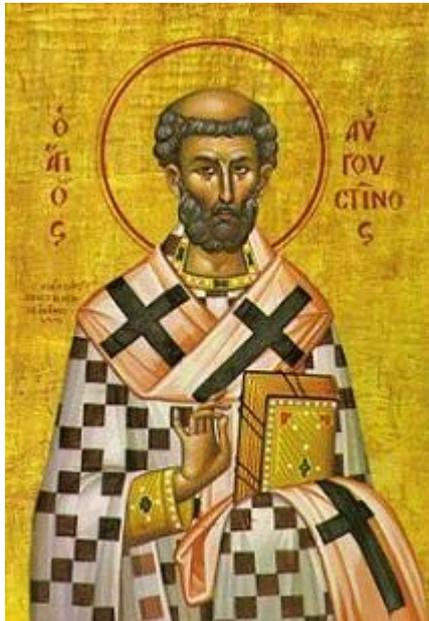
Both of these tendencies or preferences have problems. The Western problem was its potential for ontological subordinationism, and this due to its distinction between a prior essence of divinity that stands “behind” or “above” the tri-hypostatic identity of Father, Son, and Spirit. As Bulgakov helpfully puts it, the relationally distinct persons “appear in the capacity of accidents, although substantial ones”—i.e., to be “Father” is to have the ontic accident of fatherhood added to the essence of *divinitas*. In this accidental differentiation between the persons, there is a distinct potential for “ontological subordinationism,” since the origination of the hypostases involves a “decreasing progression of Divinity: the Father = the fullness of the nature, Deitas; the Son = Deitas minus the power to generate; the Holy Spirit = Deitas minus the power to generate and the power to originate by procession.”<sup>2</sup>

The Eastern model of the trinity emphasized the intrinsically communal and triune character as fundamentally basic to God’s being, but it did so in a rather speculative fashion. That is to say, the trinitarian relations of God were posited and analyzed apart from the economy of grace wherein those trinitarian relations are actually made manifest. The Western model does not entirely avoid this problem either, however. Both East and West failed to adequately make the self-revelation of God in the economy the point of departure for trinitarian reflection. More specifically, they failed to make Jesus Christ as the very image and incarnation of God determinative for what we can and should say regarding the being of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The point of this digression is not to say whether East or West is more correct. It is simply to point out that the appeal to the doctrine of the trinity is not an appeal to a self-evidently straightforward teaching

about God. Complementarians are generally part of the Western tradition, but that does not mean the Greek theologians of the East can be ignored or dismissed. Moreover, as I will show later, the complementarian use of trinitarian doctrine actually depends upon a very recent development in Western theology that is highly problematic.

It is probably safe to assume that no evangelical advocates of complementarianism intend their use of the trinity to mean *ontological subordinationism*. What they mean instead is a *functional subordination* (note the lack of the “ism” to indicate that it is non-ontological). Father and Son are



differentiated in terms of command and obedience, even if their being is ontologically equal. Before I present the best form of such an argument—one in which the dogmatic point is at least sound but its application to gender is not—let me first evaluate the complementarian use of a functional subordination in God.

What we have to clarify first is whether the functional subordination within God is being properly articulated, that is, whether it is located in its proper dogmatic context. To do this, we need to remember the two key “rules” of trinitarian theology:

- (1) the doctrine of appropriations and
- (2) the Augustinian axiom against tritheism.

The doctrine of appropriations identifies certain attributes or actions as pertaining in a unique way to one particular trinitarian “person” or “mode of being” (*Seinsweise*, which is Karl Barth’s term to replace person, about which I’ll have more to say later).

So we often speak of the Father as Creator, the Son as Reconciler, and the Spirit as Redeemer. We appropriate suffering and death to the Son, the giving of life to the Spirit. These appropriations are generally rooted in the biblical

witness, and they pertain to the economy of God’s works *ad extra* (i.e., in relation to the world). This is clearly the side stressed by the complementarian focus on trinitarian *functions*. For example, it is the “function” of the Son to be obedient to the Father’s will unto death, which means that obedience is “appropriated” to the Son.

If we only articulate the appropriations or functions within the trinitarian life of God, we can quickly land ourselves in “heretical hot water,” so to speak. A doctrine of appropriations on its own quite easily leads to tritheism, in which there are three gods at work rather than one.

Against this, we must take heed of the Augustinian axiom against tritheism: *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*, “the external acts of the trinity are indivisible.” This rule of trinitarian theology means that what each trinitarian person or mode of being does *ad extra* is inseparable from the other two persons. In other words, the actions of the Son in the world are also the actions of the Father and the Spirit; the same applies to the other trinitarian persons.

This Augustinian rule is related to the ancient doctrine of divine *perichoresis* or inter-penetration within God’s being. According to this doctrine, each person or mode of being participates in the other two persons or modes. The axiom of Augustine derives from this ontological point the functional or economic claim that every action of God is an act of all three together. To appropriate one action to one person never means that the other two are not equally involved in its execution. If there were indeed an act belonging to *only* one person, the result would be tritheism, or at least ditheism.<sup>3</sup>

The question has to be asked: have the complementarian advocates of functional subordination rightly articulated the indivisibility of God’s triune agency? Have they emphasized the tri-personal *functions* without attending equally to the *singular activity* of God *ad extra*? Is the complementarian use of trinitarian doctrine limited to the doctrine of appropriations without its Augustinian counterbalance? This is a line of questioning that I think has been largely ignored altogether in this conversation. It is one to which I will return towards the end when I put forward the decisive theological critique of this position.

For the moment, let’s bracket the question of the Augustinian axiom and God’s singular agency *ad extra*. The question that really concerns us here is whether functional subordination is theologically

sound. In order to address this question, we have to examine our theological *methodology*: how is it that we can say this or that about God, and are we actually speaking *about God*? In trinitarian terms, this means we have to examine the relation between “immanent” (or eternal, *ad intra*) trinity and the “economic” (or historical, *ad extra*) trinity. Put differently, what is the relation between “God in relation to Godself in eternity” and “God in relation to the world in history”?

The question of the immanent and economic trinity is crucial here, because if functional subordination can only be located in the economic trinity—it’s only how God acts in relation to us—then it has no real ground in who God truly is. It turns functional subordination into a merely phenomenal appearance but does not describe the actual being of God.

This, of course, places us in a tricky position. **On the one hand, we don’t want to ontologize subordination and thus land ourselves in the heresy of subordinationism. On the other hand, if functional subordination only appears in the economy of God within history, then we end up positing a split between God’s immanent being-in-itself and God’s economic being-for-us. Such a split undermines theology’s claim to speak truthfully of God.**

**The result is that we can have no confidence that what God reveals in history, which we encounter in Jesus Christ as attested in Scripture, is actually descriptive of who God is for all eternity. Put simply, the divide between immanent and economic undercuts the very heart of the gospel and places a deep uncertainty at the centre of our faith.**

If the complementarians wish to make trinitarian claims about God, then they will have to locate God’s functional subordination not only in time but in eternity, not only in the economic but in the immanent trinity. The only theologian who has successfully accomplished this is Karl Barth, and it is to his account of the trinity that I turn in the next post.

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<sup>1</sup> Sergius Bulgakov, *The Comforter*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 123.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>3</sup> There are certainly dangers in using the Augustinian axiom. Eberhard Jüngel warns against the separation between the immanent and economic trinity, between God *ad intra* and God *ad extra*, implied by the Augustinian rule. The effect of Augustine’s axiom, combined with the patristic assumptions regarding divine immutability and impassibility, was that the actions of Father, Son, and Spirit were viewed as “mere appropriations.” In other words, “we can perceive only a single action of God, whereas what is truly trinitarian was restricted to the immanent life of the Godhead, which led to a practical unitarianism and reduced trinitarian thought to a more or less obsolete scholastic formula.”

That is to say, if the economic actions of God are accomplished by the trinity as a unified agent, it can imply that the *differentiation* between Father, Son, and Spirit is only “real” in the immanent and eternal being of God. This is what Jüngel means by a “scholastic formula,” something having to do with God’s inner being alone, and thus disconnected from the concrete action of God in the world (i.e., disconnected from Jesus).

Jüngel avoids these problems by establishing a new axiom as the “theoretical foundation” for his doctrine of the trinity: “The Trinity is a mystery of salvation.” With this thesis, he explicates the actions of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on the basis of God’s work of reconciliation in the salvation event of Jesus Christ, such that the work of each mode of being in the mystery of salvation is not a mere appropriation but definitive for God’s eternal existence. Something along these lines is the position I would myself advocate as the proper basis for a doctrine of the trinity. See Eberhard Jüngel, “The Relationship between ‘Economic’ and ‘Immanent’ Trinity”, *Theology Digest* 24 (1976): 181.

## Part 2: Subordination without Subordinationism

This is part two of my series on “Trinity, Gender, and Subordination,” which is my contribution to Rachel Held Evans’s *Week of Mutuality*.



### Subordination without Subordinationism: The Witness of Karl Barth

Barth is famous for inaugurating the “revival of the trinity” in modern theology. He began his massive *Church Dogmatics* not with an abstract reflection on method and the possibilities of speaking about God, but instead with a robust doctrine of the trinity.

As important as this was, Barth did not remain content with the position he laid out in *CD I/1*. Twenty years later, in volume IV of the *Dogmatics*, he began a “a massive recapitulation and a thorough revision of Barth’s entire dogmatics.”<sup>1</sup> While he does not set forth a separate doctrine of the trinity in this volume, he does nevertheless engage in a complete overhaul of his earlier position. The details would take too long to develop here, so I will settle for broad strokes and some key quotes to get at the heart of the change.

The basis for the change was set forth in *CD II/2*, where Barth puts forward his mature doctrine of election. Barth makes the historical person of Jesus Christ the subject and object of election. What this means is that God in

eternity already includes the historical Christ. Jesus was “in the beginning with God,” as John’s Prologue puts it. Barth’s move here was to make God’s self-revelation in history determinative for who God is in eternity. God’s actions in the economy are not simply reflective, but are in fact *constitutive*, of God’s immanent being in eternity.

What happens in *CD IV* is that Barth then develops this in a narrational sense, which is to say, he explicates the historical identity of God’s being by reflecting on the narrative of God’s economic actions as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The relations of Father, Son, and Spirit are determined by the history of salvation actualized in the life of Jesus Christ. Perceptive readers will immediately see what Barth is then able to do. If the narrated life-history of Christ, in which he is sent by the Father and empowered by the Spirit, is itself determinative of God’s eternal being, then the functional subordination that we encounter in the biblical narrative is itself ontologically grounded in God’s immanent triune being. Barth’s way of developing this is to speak of the *command* of the Father and the *obedience* of the Son (with the Spirit being the effective agent of both the command and the obedience). The Son, Jesus, is characterized by his total humility and his complete obedience to the point of death. Barth thus writes:

If the humility of Christ is not simply an attitude of the man Jesus of Nazareth, if it is the attitude of this man because . . . there is a humility grounded in the being of God, then something else is grounded in the being of God Himself. For, according to the New Testament, it is the case that the humility of this man is an act of obedience. . . . If, then, God is in Christ, if what the man Jesus does is God’s own work, this aspect of the self-emptying and self-humbling of Jesus Christ as an act of obedience cannot be alien to God. But in this case, we have to see here the other and inner side of the mystery of the divine nature of Christ and therefore of the nature of the one true God—that He Himself is also able and free to render obedience.<sup>2</sup>

What Barth is saying here is that humility cannot be confined to the man Jesus but is proper to and grounded in the very being of God. Obedience is *internal* to God’s own eternal identity.<sup>3</sup> “In itself and as such, then,” according to Barth, “humility is not alien to the nature of the true God, but supremely proper to Him *in His mode of being as the Son*.”<sup>4</sup>

In case there were any doubt about the location of functional subordination in the being of God, Barth goes on to state without equivocation:

We have not only not to deny but actually to affirm and understand as essential to the being of God Himself an above and a below, a *prius* and a *posterius*, a superiority and a subordination. . . . His divine unity consists in the fact that in Himself He is both One who is obeyed and Another who obeys.<sup>5</sup>

There is an above and a below in the eternal being of God, “a superiority and a subordination” he says. Subordination is not only part of the narrated history of Jesus, but it is truthfully said of God’s inner, immanent being. The trinitarian history of the Father’s commanding will and the Son’s obedient will is determinative of who God actually is. At the same time, this functional subordination does *not* indicate any ontological superiority of the Father over the Son. The Father’s command and the Son’s obedience are all part of one trinitarian history of salvation.

In his mode of being as the Son He fulfils the divine subordination, just as the Father in His mode of being as Father fulfils the divine superiority. In humility as the Son who complies, He is the same as the Father in majesty as the Father who disposes. He is the same in consequence (and obedience) as is the Father in origin. He is the same as the Son, i.e. as the self-positing God (the eternally begotten of the Father as the dogma has it) as the Father is as the self-positing God (the Father who eternally begets). Moreover, in His humility and compliance as the Son, He has a supreme part in the majesty and disposing of the Father. The Father as the origin is never apart from Him as the consequence.<sup>6</sup>

Barth’s point here is that the Father’s command as “origin” and the Son’s obedience as “consequence” are equally divine in the being of God. The Son’s humility and obedience gives him “a supreme part” in the glory and majesty of God. The Son is equal to the Father precisely *in* his willed subordination. His obedience *is* his equality. **What we therefore find in Barth is an ontologically-grounded subordination within the triune divine life without any ontological subordinationism. Whereas subordinationism posits an ontological disparity within God’s being, Barth’s trinitarian subordination depends upon and is the basis of true ontological equality and unity within God’s being.** Father, Son, and Spirit are only equal *in* the subordination and submission of the Son to the Father through the power of the Spirit.

All of this would seem to be clearly in support of the complementarian position. *And it would be, if it were not for one crucial point: Barth’s rejection of social trinitarianism.* Barth’s doctrine of the trinity changes with respect to the methodology by which he develops it. But one thing remains the same throughout, namely, the *single subjectivity* of God.

In this regard, Barth remains firmly in line with the orthodox tradition of the church. There is *one* divine will, *one* divine being. The tri-personal character of God is never in conflict with the oneness of God’s eternal identity.

This is why Barth replaces the language of “persons” of the trinity with the alternative conception, “modes of being.” He does this because the modern concept of person is not the concept held by the ancients when they spoke of Father, Son, and Spirit as “hypostases” of the one God. To explain this—and thus to demonstrate why the complementarian appeal to the trinitarian being of God is theologically impossible—we need to turn to the two-part critique of the complementarian presuppositions that lie behind their appeal to functional subordination.

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<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans. Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 46.

<sup>2</sup> Barth, *CD IV/1*, 193.

<sup>3</sup> Barth can say that this is the case *without* having to say that God changed by becoming incarnate. This is because God’s being is determined by an eternal act of election in which God determines God’s own self to be who God will become in time and space in the history of Jesus Christ. God’s eternal act of election is an act of self-constitution which means that God is in eternity who God *will be* in history. For this reason, the Logos is not an abstract *Logos asarkos* but instead the *Logos incarnandus*. For the fullest explication of these ideas, see the work of Bruce L. McCormack. See especially the following essays: “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (New

York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92-110; "Karl Barth's Historicized Christology: Just How 'Chalcedonian' Is It?" in *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 201-33; and "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 185-242.

<sup>4</sup> Barth, *CD IV/2*, 42. Emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>6</sup> Barth, *CD IV/1*, 209.

## Part 3: The Problem of Social Trinitarianism

*This is part three of my series on “Trinity, Gender, and Subordination,” which is my contribution to Rachel Held Evans’s [Week of Mutuality](#).*

### The Problem of Social Trinitarianism

Barth could never have affirmed the complementarian use of his trinitarian doctrine for the simple reason that the complementarian position is premised on certain claims that he firmly rejected. The most important such claim is what we might now call “social trinitarianism.” Social trinitarianism is the doctrine that Father, Son, and Spirit are three independent centers of consciousness with their own distinct intellects, wills, and energies of operation. The three persons of the trinity are united as a perichoretic communion of distinct persons, in contrast to the traditional unity in terms of the one divine nature or substance. The point of a social trinitarian theology is to argue that what is “social” within God can be applied to human society. Social trinitarianism is therefore intrinsically an ethical or political theology. The position was developed in its present form by Jürgen Moltmann in his influential book, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, where he places social trinitarianism in opposition to the “abstract monotheism” that he claims has characterized most of Christian theology. While the complementarians share very little with Moltmann in terms of theological commitments, it is the Moltmannian doctrine of social trinitarianism that the complementarians presuppose in making their claims about the trinity and gender relations.

Like social trinitarianism, the complementarian position depends on the ability to map intra-trinitarian relations onto intra-human relations. The relation between Father and Son is supposed to tell us something about the relation between men and women. The logic of this move depends upon viewing each divine “person” as a distinct subject who then relates to the other divine persons the way we relate to other human beings. If the Father, Son, and Spirit constitute a single agent, then any relations between them would be entirely irrelevant for human relations; there would be no point of similarity between God and humanity. The trinitarian relations are thus only significant for human society if each “person” is an independent center of consciousness. Hence, the complementarian position depends upon the social trinitarian doctrine.

Social trinitarianism becomes possible only because of a conceptual fuzziness regarding the word “person.” Because Father and Son (and Spirit) are understood as divine *persons*, it is assumed that we can learn something from them about how to relate as *human* persons. This is only possible because, in both cases (divine and human), the word “person” has here been defined in terms of a center of consciousness, an “I,” with intellect and will. However, as Kathryn Tanner rightly points out, “this is to give the trinitarian term ‘person’ (a rather ill-defined placeholder for whatever there might be three of in the trinity) the modern sense of ‘human person’ and then insist on taking it quite literally.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the move from divine person to human person *presupposes the prior move from human person to divine person*. It is only because the divine person has been defined according to our notion of a human person that the divine relations are then able to inform human relations. Social trinitarianism—and thus also social-trinitarian complementarianism—depends upon *projecting* upon God what we think a person is, in order then to model ourselves upon this very projection. It is an entirely circular argument. It makes God in our own image in order then to find our image in God. Social trinitarianism, in short, is a form of natural theology.



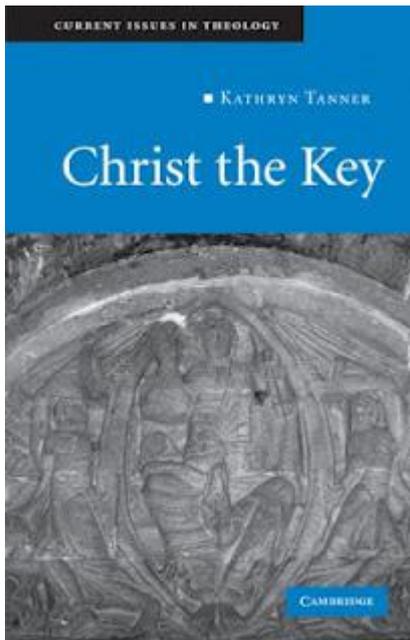
The problem is that our modern psychological notion of “person” (understood as a “personality”) has nothing in common with what the tradition meant by *persona* (in Greek, translated initially as *prosopon*, but much more commonly as *hypostasis*) in the context of the trinity. The word *persona* as it was used by the Latin theologians referred to an individual essence (individual *substantia*), that is, a particular modality of a nature. The ancient Greek theologians recognized that the word *hypostasis* (often translated into English as “substance” or “essence”) captures the meaning far better than the usual word for “person,” *prosopon*, which refers to the mask worn by an actor to play a part on stage. Certainly such a meaning cannot be applied to the trinity. In any case, when the Latin *persona* became translated into the modern word “person” (in German, *die Person*; in French, *personne*), it began to be interpreted in light of our modern understanding of the term. The result has been conceptual confusion. Barth is very helpful here:

What is called ‘personality’ in the conceptual vocabulary of the 19th century is distinguished from the patristic and mediaeval *persona* by the addition of the attribute of self-consciousness. This really complicates the whole issue. One was and is obviously confronted by the choice of either trying to work out the doctrine of the Trinity on the presupposition of the concept of person as thus accentuated or of clinging to the older concept which since this accentuation in usage has become completely obsolete and is now unintelligible outside monastic and a few other studies.<sup>2</sup>

Barth decides to avoid both options—neither going with the modern meaning of “person” nor trying to rehabilitate the ancient meaning—by instead speaking of “modes of being” (*Seinsweisen*). The fear that this leads Barth to modalism is unfounded. Modalism is the “heresy” that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only “modes” of one eternal being as this being appears to us in time and space. God is only trinitarian in the economy. Behind the economy, however, in the immanent nature of God, there is no trinitarian differentiation, only a single divine being. Modalism is thus a split in God’s being between the immanent and the economic, such that what we encounter in the economy is not truly revelatory of who God is in eternity. Barth has no such problem. For him, God is triune “all the way down”; there is no height or depth of God which is not constituted in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit. And that is because there is no height or depth in God that is not determined by God’s self-revelation. There is no God “behind” the trinitarian God we encounter in history. The Father, Son, and Spirit revealed to us simply *is* God in eternity. Barth, in fact, goes quite a bit further than the ancient Latin theologians, in that he discards the split between the abstract, impersonal *divinitas* and the concrete trinitarian persons. Barth seeks to overcome entirely the classical substance ontology that conceives of divinity as a general ontological concept that is logically prior to the particular instantiations it takes as Father, Son, and Spirit. There is no abstract divinity-as-such; there is only this eminently concrete and specific reality of the triune God. Barth replaces the language of substance with the more modern and helpful language of *subject*. God is a “single subject” rather than a “single substance.” His definition of the trinity is therefore *a single subject in three modes of being*. The trinity is the *one God in threefold self-repetition*.

The decisive error of social trinitarianism in all its forms is its adoption of the modern notion of person

as definitive for what we mean by the “divine persons.” The result of such a move is *tritheism*. If there are three self-conscious I’s in God, then there are three deities. Social trinitarianism is a disguised form of polytheism. The attempt to make *perichoresis* do the work of uniting God into a single agent is an impossible use of the concept. It was classically used in a purely analytic sense: it described the unity that already characterized the persons of the trinity. Perichoresis cannot then be used to *create* a unity that is not already present. Even if such a theological move is attempted, however, the prior definition of Father, Son, and Spirit as three distinct self-conscious agents undermines the very notion of perichoresis from the start. The doctrine of perichoresis refers to the ineffable interpenetration of each divine person in the other two, such that no separation of agency is possible. In other words, it serves to support the Augustinian axiom discussed above—precisely the axiom that social trinitarianism rejects!



In a social trinitarian model, perichoresis is merely a uniting of wills or an intimate communion. Divine unity is reduced to relations of self-giving love. The result is that “the persons of the trinity seem more like separately constituted human persons acting harmoniously together in a jointly agreed upon common project.”<sup>3</sup> But here again, the notion of perichoretic unity is being defined by what *we* understand to be unity *among human beings*. Our notion of a “common will of the people” has been applied to the will of the trinitarian persons. This is in stark contrast to what the doctrine of the trinity ought to say. The will of the Son corresponds to the will of the Father “because in a significant sense *they have only one will*. Instead of a fellowship of wills, one finds an identity of will.”<sup>4</sup> Once each divine person has been modeled after a human person, however, it’s only natural that divine unity comes to mirror our vision of human unity. Social trinitarianism projects upon God the kind of utopian community—whether hierarchical or egalitarian in nature—that we envision for ourselves. Tanner states the problem well: “the danger of such a strategy is that the trinity fails to do any work; it does not tell one anything one did not already know.”<sup>5</sup>

What social trinitarianism can never achieve is the notion of God’s single subjectivity. It is irreconcilable with Augustine’s axiom that Father, Son, and Spirit act as a single agent in the economy. There are not three intellects, three wills, three self-consciousnesses in God. There is one self-consciousness, one “I,” that acts in a triune way—one God in threefold self-repetition. “Because all the other members of the trinity are in that person, when one person of the trinity acts the others are necessarily acting too.”<sup>6</sup> A human person is never dependent for his or her own existence upon the existence of another, such that when one person acts, another person acts as well. And yet this is precisely what the doctrine of the trinity claims regarding God, but in a way that is far more mysterious and incomprehensible. There is no deliberation between Father, Son, and Spirit, as there is with human beings. There is no conflict of interest that Father and Son have to work out between them. Thinking about the trinity along these lines brings us deep into the waters of polytheistic mythology. More disturbing still, it results in an essentially Marcionite break between the Old and New Testaments. The starting-point for any doctrine of the trinity has to be Israel’s belief in YHWH as the Lord. As R. Kendall Soulen puts it, “YHWH is the triune God.”<sup>7</sup> Any theology that requires the violation

of this identification of Father, Son, and Spirit with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob cannot be considered a Christian doctrine.

To reiterate: the complementarian appropriation of trinitarian theology presupposes that the relation between Father and Son is a relation that can inform the relation between men and women. There are many problems with this move—the others I will touch on in the following sections—but the root issue is the assumption that a personal relation within God is similar to a personal relation among human beings. But in order for this analogy between God and humanity to work, one has to univocally (i.e., literally or directly) apply a definition of human personhood to God. By defining God according to humanity, social trinitarian arguments necessarily end up rejecting the radical ontological differentiation between God and humanity. A relation that ought to be indirect and analogous becomes direct and univocal. This brings us to the problem of the divine-human analogy more broadly.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 220.

<sup>2</sup> Barth, *CD I/1*, 357.

<sup>3</sup> Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 231.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>7</sup> R. Kendall Soulen, "YHWH the Triune God," *Modern Theology* 15, no. 1 (1999): 25–54.

Posted by [David W. Congdon](#) at 5:00 PM

## Part 4: The Problem of Analogy

*This is part four of my series on “Trinity, Gender, and Subordination,” which is my contribution to Rachel Held Evans’s [Week of Mutuality](#).*

### The Problem of Analogy

I have identified social trinitarianism as the crucial factor in the complementarian position. I have also identified this position as theologically unfounded, based on an illegitimate application of human personhood to God. Social trinitarianism results in a mythological, tritheistic, and Marcionite conception of God. But this does not exhaust the problems with the complementarian use of trinitarian doctrine.

I have classified these additional concerns under the heading of analogy. By “analogy” I mean the move between speaking about God and speaking about humanity. As I have already implied, such speaking cannot be univocal—because then God and humanity would be basically identical, as is the case with the social trinitarian concept of “person”—nor can it be equivocal, because that would mean we could never actually speak about God. If our language is equivocal, then it has no real meaning; there would be no actual relation between God and humanity. But God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ establishes precisely such a relationship, and for that reason, meaningful speech about God is indeed possible. The result is that we can speak analogically.

But what kind of analogy are we talking about? If the analogy only comes into effect via revelation, then it is only available on the basis that God chooses to make this analogy possible. The analogy is not a general possibility that any person can articulate. If revelation in Jesus Christ is the starting-point, then the analogy is only possible on the basis of *faith*. It is only because God has spoken to us in the Word that we can then speak truthfully about God in our words. This is what Barth calls the “analogy of faith” (*analogia fidei*). Truthful speech *about* God depends upon a reconciled relationship *with* God. We can only begin to know God once we discover that God already knows us in Christ. As Paul states, “you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God” (Gal. 4.9). To know God is to know that we are loved and saved by God. What this means, in effect, is that we only know who God is and how God relates to us in light of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We don’t have access to a God outside of or behind the incarnate God. Something can only be analogous to God if it is in accordance with what God has made manifest in Jesus.

Why this brief discourse on analogy? Because the logic of the complementarian argument—which tries to establish an analogy between Father-Son and male-female—violates the analogy of faith. This takes a variety of different forms. I’ve already addressed the social-trinitarian basis for this move, but let’s look at it from another perspective. By drawing the analogy to *men and women*, the complementarian position posits an analogy of *being* rather than an analogy of *faith*. The analogy of being (*analogia entis*)—to which Barth was adamantly opposed—is the notion that there is an inherent likeness between humanity and God. The analogy of being posits an analogy between human *being* and divine *being*, irrespective of faith. Classical proponents of the analogy of being locate the connection in our reason (our *logos*) that participates in the divine reason (the *Logos*). Others make an immortal soul the basis for the analogy. What I am suggesting is that complementarianism is implicitly locating an analogy to God in our gender differentiation. Unlike some versions of the *analogia entis*, the complementarians are, presumably, not trying to use this gender binary as an apologetic basis for reaching knowledge of God outside of faith. And yet their version remains a species of the *analogia entis* insofar as the analogy is grounded in a particular feature of humanity-in-general, namely, our sexual differentiation as male and female. Our being as male and female is supposed to correspond to God’s being as Father and Son. Even if the fulfillment of the analogy only arises within the church, the possibility of this analogy is already latent within our natural being. In other words, complementarianism tries to find a point of analogy in creation rather than in reconciliation. It is not an analogy given in revelation and made possible through faith.



What unites all versions of the *analogia entis* is the notion that our analogy to God is a feature of our being created “in the image of God.” The doctrine of the *imago dei* is a very convoluted affair in Christian history. There is very little agreement among textual and theological scholars about what the term ought to mean. What is certainly clear is that a change happened in early Christian theology. Instead of asking “how do we image God?” the church began to ask instead, “What makes human beings different from the animals?” The assumption was that the image is something we *are*, something we *possess*, rather than something we *do*; it was a noun (“the image”) instead of a verb (“to image”). The result was the identification of some structure in our being that could conceivably correspond to God’s being. The notion that the image could be lost through sin and restored only through reconciliation was inconceivable. And yet it is precisely this more dynamic understanding of the image that makes the best sense of the biblical witness.

Rightly understood, the *imago dei* answers the question, “What does it mean to be like God?” with the answer, “Be holy, because I the LORD your God, am holy” (Lev. 19.2). And we must also remember Exodus 31.13: “You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, *who makes you holy*.” For Christians, God’s act of making us to be holy occurs in the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ. This is why we find Jesus described as the true image of God (2 Cor. 4.4, Col. 1.15). We are to be conformed to his likeness. All of this is brought together, in light of Christ, in Colossians 3.9-11 (emphasis added):

Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge *according to the image of its creator*. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but *Christ is all and in all!*

What it means to be “in the image of God” is not having rationality or (gendered) relationality—something intrinsic to us, something we possess—but rather coming to live in reconciled relationship with the Creator, becoming-holy, becoming-righteous, becoming-new. In other words, the *imago dei* has nothing to do with some inherent feature of our humanity; it is not an attribute that characterizes us by nature. It is instead a gift that comes to us by *grace*. We receive it as part of our conformity to Christ through faith. We only image God when we image Jesus, and we only image Jesus when we receive the new life that he provides and participate in the ministry of reconciliation. This has nothing to do with being male or female, since all persons are equally sinful and so equally reconciled to God. The *analogia entis* tries to find a point of contact between God and humanity outside of Jesus Christ; the *analogia fidei* recognizes that we only image God—i.e., we are only analogous to God—when we become participants in the mission of God through the saving work of Christ.

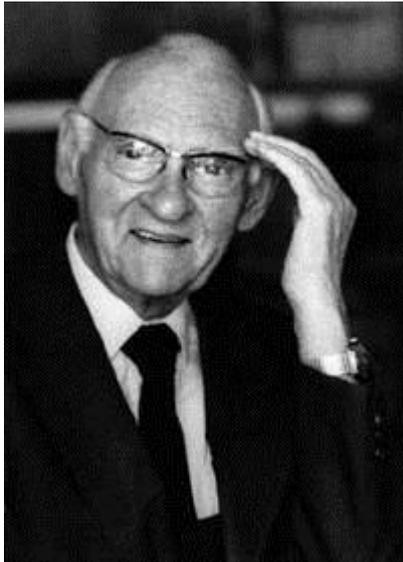
But let’s bracket the issue of the *analogia entis*. Even if an analogy of being is not involved, there is still a fundamental problem with the analogy itself. Why are Father and Son supposed to correspond to male and female? How did we even come up with such an analogy? Obviously, both Father and Son are masculine images, and Jesus is quite literally a man. On what grounds does anyone make the connection between the Son and women? Of all the connections one could theoretically draw, this one makes the least amount of sense. Maybe the gender analogy is based on the fact that the Holy Spirit has a history of being understood in feminine terms. That would be rather surprising,

considering these are complementarians who refuse to use feminine language for God at all. Moreover, the Spirit in the biblical witness does not possess the kind of concrete interpersonal agency that would provide an analogue for human relations. And there is no history of obedience and submission on the part of the Spirit, nothing that would provide any support for the complementarian position. So the appeal to the trinity to support gender subordination depends finally upon the identity of the Son.

Returning to the main question, then, how does the Father connect with men and the Son with women? Is it simply because we see superiority and submission in the Father-Son relation? Besides the fact that this presupposes the social trinitarianism criticized above, *it is an entirely formal conception of this relation*. Nowhere in scripture do we find abstract discussion of the Father's superiority and the Son's submission. What we find are concrete accounts of specific actions and relations for the sake of specific ends. Jesus is not subordinate to the Father in the abstract; he is subordinate because, as the gospel of Matthew puts it, "he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (Matt. 16.21). Jesus is sent (*missio*) on a mission of obedience to the point of death. The fact of his *submission* cannot be abstracted from his *mission*. His subordination has the cross as its indispensable content. Likewise, the Father is not superior in the abstract; the Father is superior as the one who sends the Son into the world. The Father's superiority has the mission of the Son as its indispensable content. Both aspects absolutely preclude any generalization of their roles within the history of salvation. The "roles" of the trinitarian modes of being cannot become a formal template for human "roles," gendered or otherwise.

We can demonstrate this rather easily through a little *reductio ab absurdum*. Where exactly are we to find an analogue for women in the obedience and submission of Jesus? Jesus is subordinate in terms of his obedience unto death, but let's sincerely hope there is no attempt at an analogy there. Jesus is the revealer of God and the apostle to the world. Ironically, wouldn't that mean women are the true apostles and ministers? Jesus says that "I and the Father are one." Does this identification apply to men and women? Jesus prays to the Father. Are women supposed to pray to men? We could go on and on. The point is that the analogy between Father-Son and men-women is clearly arbitrary, formal, and in the end, meaningless. The whole basis for the analogy is wrong-headed from the start. The complementarians have a position they want to find theological justification for (viz. the subordination of women). They look around and happen to see subordination in Jesus' relation to the Father. They then use this to legitimate their model of gender roles. The circularity of the argument is painfully obvious, just as it was in the social trinitarian position discussed above. The complementarians find in God confirmation of what they already believe to be true.

The only non-arbitrary basis for an analogy between human relations and the Father-Son relation is found in the fact that the Son took on human flesh in the incarnation. It is Christ's humanity that then establishes a connection with other human beings. But this immediately poses a problem for the complementarian position, no matter how one looks at it. If we view Jesus' gender as significant, then he becomes the analogue for men; if we view his humanity in terms of its salvific significance—in which case men and women are included equally—then he becomes the analogue for all human beings (i.e., within the church) irrespective of gender differentiation. Either way, any attempt to make him the model for women in particular appears baseless. At least the connection between the Son and the church makes sense from the biblical text. Paul speaks of Christians as those who are adopted by the Father and become co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8.16-17; Gal. 4.7). If we are going to speak about a particular group of people who are subordinate, it can only be *the church as a whole that is subordinate before the Lord*, not women who are subordinate to men.



On this point, the evangelical complementarians have something to learn from Catholic complementarians. Catholics have their own way of drawing gender-based analogies from Christ. They aren't any less problematic overall, but they are less arbitrary. Catholics don't use the intra-trinitarian relations at all; their commitment to the orthodox doctrine of the trinity precludes any social trinitarianism from the start. Instead, they take for granted the so-called "law of nature" that defines the man as the active giver and the woman as passive receiver—represented in the different sexual organs of men and women. They then see this natural law exemplified in the relation between God and Mary: God as the active initiator and Mary the humble receiver ("let it be with me according to your word"). God represents the "male" function of activity, and Mary represents the "female" function of receptivity. This then maps on to relations within the church—except *not* in the way one might expect! Catholics do not make the mistake of applying the God-Mary relation to actual men and women in any straightforward sense. They don't need a theological reason for complementarianism, because they believe God has already ordained a self-evident law of nature. (There are many good reasons for Protestants to reject this notion of a law of nature, but that's another conversation for another time.) Instead, Catholics use the God-Mary relation as the analogue for the God-Church relation *as a whole*. The entire church, men and women, are called to be "feminine" by receiving God's grace. Hans Urs von Balthasar even calls the church "the woman-in-community."<sup>1</sup> We could say, according to the Catholic understanding, that we are to be "masculine" in our active ministry towards others, but "feminine" in our receptivity before God.

Among modern Catholic theologians, Balthasar is perhaps the one who has reflected on this "polarity of man and woman" the most. For him, it is central to the very drama of salvation. Like almost all Catholics, he takes this gender binary to be "a fundamental feature of human nature."<sup>2</sup> In his explication of the male-female relation, he defines man as "word" (German: *Wort*) and woman as "answer" (*Ant-Wort*). He connects this distinction to the Genesis creation account, where the man is the one who names the animals, while the woman is the response to the man's word: "If man is the word that calls out, woman is the answer that comes to him at last."<sup>3</sup> The woman's fruitfulness "is an answering fruitfulness, designed to receive man's fruitfulness . . . and bring it to its 'fullness.'"<sup>4</sup> He makes a similar connection to the parallel terms *Litz* ("look") and *Ant-Litz* ("face"). The man is the look, the woman the face that returns the look. For Balthasar, it is a fact of nature that the man is superior and the woman is subordinate. The woman only responds to the man; she cannot be an initiator herself. There is an order "built into" the structure of nature itself. It is a "natural datum," he says, which neither sin nor redemption changes.

What's important to note is that it is only *after* he has developed this account of human nature that Balthasar then adds: "This [account of male and female as word and answer] yields an analogy for the relationship between God and the creature."<sup>5</sup> In other words, there is no claim to find the basis for male-female relations in the trinitarian relation between Father and Son. The analogy goes the *other direction*. Catholics take the "fact of creation" as their starting-point, and only from that perspective do they go on to find confirmation of this relationship in other examples from Scripture and theology. The advantage of this approach is that Balthasar makes none of the questionable analogical moves noted above, *except (crucially!) for his embrace of the analogy of being*. On that point, Catholics are united against Barth and the Reformation. Nevertheless, his account does not make the mistake of social trinitarianism, nor does he try to map the Father-Son relation onto the male-female relation. Balthasar

represents one of the only logically respectable alternatives to a full-fledged position of radical equality. If one is going to try to argue for complementarianism on theological grounds, one has to take creation or nature as one's starting-point. One has to embrace an *analogia entis*. This will mean sacrificing Jesus Christ as the normative center of one's theological anthropology.

We are thus faced with a crucial decision: either the event of salvation accomplished in Christ is determinative for human relations (thus resulting in radical equality), or it isn't, and instead there is a bifurcation between creation and reconciliation. This essay is premised on the claim that only the former route is theologically responsible for Protestant Christians committed to Jesus as the self-revelation of God. As problematic as it may be, the Catholic position at least makes internal sense. What makes *no sense at all*, however, is the evangelical complementarian attempt to find a theological justification for its account of gender roles in the trinitarian relations.

There are many problems with the analogy between the trinity and humanity—many more than I can adequately discuss here. The time has come to evaluate the underlying problem with every such analogy: the disregard for the ontological divide between God and the world. The attempt to find some analogue in the trinitarian being of God for human social relations is fundamentally misguided, because it fails to take into account the wholly otherness of God. Words like “Son,” “person,” “relation,” etc., lull us into thinking that we can compare God's intra-trinitarian relations with relations between human beings. But this forgets that all such language is a feeble and fallible human attempt to speak about a reality that is radically different from anything we experience or imagine. Our language about God is *never* a *direct* expression of who God is and what God is like. God's self-revelation, while granting us true knowledge of Godself, does not mean that our concepts are themselves revelatory; our words are at best a finite, provisional, and contextual witness to the reality of God. We must not allow the authority of Scripture or the familiarity of the church's language blind us to the fact that our words have *only analogical significance*, meaning that God is both similar and dissimilar to what our words normally mean. And while the similarity is important—grounded as it is in Christ himself—the dissimilarity is crucial, since God is *absolutely transcendent* and totally other than the world. God is of a completely different ontological order from humanity.

This is why, in the final analysis, no gendered comparisons can be made between God and humanity. There simply is *no analogue* to human gender to be found in God. God is wholly beyond human attributes like sexual differentiation. The distinctions between men and women, masculine and feminine, have no connection to or grounding in the being of God. On this point, the tradition has consistently insisted that God is absolutely beyond gender. Gregory of Nyssa makes this quite explicit: “The divine is neither male nor female (for how could such a thing be contemplated in divinity?).”<sup>6</sup> The traditional use of the masculine pronoun for God has *no gendered meaning whatsoever*. God is not male, nor does God have “male” characteristics. Conservatives sometimes claim that the use of feminine imagery for God is an illegitimate anthropomorphizing of God. But that argument holds true for masculine imagery as well. It is the radical transcendence of God that allows *both* masculine and feminine words to describe God—precisely because *neither* is directly applicable to God.

In the end, the argument from the trinity is a complete dead-end. There is no way to determine human social relations from intra-trinitarian relations. We are prevented from making any such move. Whatever “person” means in relation to Father, Son, and Spirit, it does not and cannot mean the same for human persons. Even if there is a relation of superior to subordinate between Father and Son, these are modes of *one and the same divine subject*; they do not relate to each other as separate individual subjects brought together through a fellowship of wills. Whatever “subordinate” means within God's being, therefore, it does not and cannot mean the same for human beings, nor could it possibly apply to a particular gender (or any other set of people).

To return to where we began, the problem with all these analogies is that they are not grounded in the analogy of faith. What the *analogia fidei* makes clear is that our speech about God—that is, our understanding of how God relates to us and how we relate to God—has to be seen in the light of our reconciliation to God in Jesus Christ. And what we learn from Christ is not that superiority and subordination are mere characteristics of God. On the contrary, the relation of superior and subordinate within the trinity only has theological significance as part of the event of reconciliation. They are not attributes to be applied to us; they are aspects of a salvation narrative in which we are called to participate as faithful witnesses. The Son is only subordinate to the Father for the sake of his mission as the one “obedient unto death”; his subordination is integral to the divine will to reconcile

the world to God. Christ's submission is entirely "for us and for our salvation," as the creed puts it.

The complementarian attempt to use this submission as a model for gender relations ends up separating the *form* of Christ's mission (submission to the Father) from its soteriological *content* (reconciling us to God). But this is to arbitrarily and illegitimately isolate an aspect of Jesus Christ's history—dislocating it from its proper location within the event of salvation and turning it into an example for us to imitate. The problem is that Christ's submission to the Father is not a model to follow; it is a mystery to praise. The complementarian use of this narrative for human relations does not respect the exclusive nature of this Father-Son relationship. Not only is it ontologically other than any human relationship, it is part of a salvation occurrence that we simply cannot and must not try to apply to ourselves.



In conclusion, the only way to relate the trinity to human beings is not by moving from God to humanity, but by *bringing humanity to God*. It is not the intra-trinitarian relations, but the trinitarian movement into the world in Christ, that establishes our likeness to God. We become analogous to God only by participating in the mission of God. Tanner is very helpful here:

My own strategy for closing the gap [between God and humanity] looks to what the trinity is doing for us—what is happening in the life of Christ, in short—to answer the question of how the trinity applies to human life. Human beings are not left to their own devices in figuring out what the trinity means for human relations. Instead, the trinity itself enters our world in Christ to show us how human relations are to be reformed in its image. . . . The trinity in the economy does not close the gap by making trinitarian relations something like human ones, but by actually incorporating the human into its very own life through the incarnation. We are therefore not called to imitate the trinity by way of the incarnation but brought to participate in it. . . . In Christ we are therefore shown what the trinity looks like when it includes the human, and what humanity looks like when it is taken up within the trinity's own relationships. . . . The gap between divine and human is not closed here by making the two similar to one another, but by joining the two very different things—humanity and divinity, which remain very different things—into one in Christ via the incarnation. . . . The trinity is not brought down to our level as a model for us to imitate; our hope is that we might be raised up to its level.<sup>7</sup>

It's worth reflecting on Tanner's words here. Her point is that if we want to know how humanity ought to look in light of the trinity, then we should look to where the triune God has actually *become* human. We see in Jesus, for example, a dependence upon God, an empowerment by the Spirit, a self-offering love for others, and a ministry of prophetic witness and healing care. We image the triune God by faithfully participating in this mission as apostolic witnesses to God's abundant mercy and saving love. Jesus was sent on a mission "to inaugurate a life-brimming, Spirit-filled community." To share in the life of the trinity involves participating "in the kingdom or new community that accords with Jesus' own healing, reconciling, and life-giving relations with others."<sup>8</sup> *This* is how we model our lives in correspondence to the trinitarian life of God.

Tanner makes two important observations. First, "Jesus' relations with Father and Spirit do not appear in any obvious way to be the model for his relations with other human beings in the story." Second, the relations that Jesus has with Father and Spirit are simply and obviously "the sort of relations that it

is appropriate for humans to have with Father and Spirit. . . . We are to worship the Father following the precedent of Jesus' own prayers, carry out the will of the Father as human beings filled up with and empowered by the Holy Spirit as Jesus was, which means working for the well-being of others as Jesus did, and so on.<sup>9</sup> To be human is to be related *to* Father, Son, and Spirit—*not* to be related to others as Father, Son, and Spirit are related to each other.

We therefore learn nothing from the trinity about gender roles. The relations between Father, Son, and Spirit are not relations that we are called to imitate. They do not apply to us. It is also completely irrelevant what gender Jesus is. His humanity is representative of all human beings, since all people are equally sinners and thus are equally reconciled to God in him. (But even if his gender were significant, it would apply to men only.) There is no distribution of people groups among the trinitarian persons. The Father does not stand for one group and the Son for another. Tanner, again, states the matter well:

When humans are incorporated into the trinity through Christ, different people are not spread across the trinity to take on its pattern; instead, we all enter at the same point, we all become identified with the same trinitarian person, members of the one Son, sons by grace of the Holy Spirit; and move as a whole, as one body, with the second person of the trinity in its movements within the dynamic life of the trinity. The trinity does not therefore in any obvious way establish the internal structure of human community . . . . Instead, the one divine Son and the one divine Spirit are what make human society one; we are one, as the Pauline texts suggest, because we all have the same Spirit and because we are all members of the one Son.<sup>10</sup>

The attempt to specify a group that the Father represents and another group that the Son represents has no basis in Christian theology. All human beings find their unifying point of origin and departure in Jesus Christ as the incarnate one of God. Christ is the one who brings us into relationship with a God who is absolutely transcendent and ontologically other than humanity. Outside of his reconciling death and resurrection, there is no analogy between God and humanity; in him and through him, however, we are able to truly bear the image of God. If we wish to bear the image of the trinity, therefore, we can only do so by bearing the image of Jesus as his faithful body of Spirit-led disciples within the world.

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama III: Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 290.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>6</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. Casimir McCambley (Brookline, MA: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 145; quoted in Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 212.

<sup>7</sup> Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 234–36.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

## Part 5: Conclusion

*This is part five of my series on “Trinity, Gender, and Subordination,” which is my contribution to Rachel Held Evans’s [Week of Mutuality](#).*

### A Different Perspective

The heart of my argument is now clear: the theological presuppositions for the complementarian argument from the trinity are, in fact, groundless. They depend upon certain assumptions connected with social trinitarianism and other misguided analogies between God and humanity that (1) fail to respect the ontological divide between the divine and the human and (2) fail to look to Jesus Christ as the one who alone unites the divine and the human.

At this point, I want to look at things from a different perspective. I will do so as briefly as possible in two ways. The first is a simple point regarding social trinitarianism. Earlier I argued that the social doctrine of the trinity is the hidden assumption behind the complementarian argument. Without this doctrine, none of its claims work, because you can only extrapolate human relations from the divine if the trinitarian persons are three distinct subjects. The irony is that—in the work of theologians like Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, Leonardo Boff, John Zizioulas, and Catherine LaCugna—social trinitarianism makes the same move from trinity to humanity in support of *egalitarianism*. This, in itself, should give us pause. Whether one side has more arguments in favor or not, the fact remains that it is not at all clear that the argument from the trinity should result in a complementarian social order. Whereas the complementarian argument focuses on the way Father and Son relate within history, the egalitarian argument focuses on the being of Father and Son within eternity. Picking one over the other is hazardous: losing the Son’s subordination to the Father cuts one off from the biblical narrative of Jesus, but losing the eternal co-equality and perichoretic unity lands one in subordinationism.

In the end, both versions of social trinitarianism presuppose the same problematic conception of divine “personhood.” Both employ circular reasoning that construes God in human terms, making God into the image of humanity so that humanity can then find its image in God; both end up confirming what the theologian already believes. Social trinitarianism—whether a social-trinitarian complementarianism or a social-trinitarian egalitarianism—ends up with a quasi-tritheistic conception of God that undermines the single subjectivity of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. For this reason, we cannot appeal to an egalitarian doctrine of the trinity over against a complementarian doctrine of the trinity.

The second change of perspective involves rethinking our gendered metaphors for God. While God is beyond gender, we are nevertheless able to use gendered imagery for God in order to articulate the reality and revelation of God for us. The problem is that we have been too blind to the way the tradition engages in rather surprising acts of de-gendering or gender-bending. Again, Tanner is helpful here, and I will quote her at length:

The gendered imagery in classical trinitarianism is always considered in tandem . . . with other forms of biblical imagery of a quite impersonal sort—light and water imagery, for example. Paired with these other images, the meaning of Father-Son language becomes quite abstract and relatively untethered from its specifically gendered associations. . . . The Son comes out of the Father, for example, like a ray from a source of light, so as to share its nature. No one set of biblical images, furthermore, is privileged; each has its particular theological strengths and weaknesses. . . . Multiple images are therefore commonly employed together so that they might mutually modify one another’s theological shortcomings. . . . One might grant too that in classical trinitarian thinking this is a Father who acts like a mother: he births or begets the Son. . . . The closeness of the relationship is at issue: the absence of any temporal or spatial distinction between originator and originated. Birth as the primary metaphor for developing whatever the Father is doing in relation to the Son is therefore often quite strong in classical trinitarianism. One might even say, following Psalm 120:3, as Hilary of Poitiers does, that the Son is begotten of the Father’s womb. . . . Gendered imagery is “exceeded” in a “baffling of gender literalism,” as Janet Soskice puts it. “Roles are reversed, fused, inverted: no one is simply who they seem to be. More accurately, everyone is *more than* they seem to be . . . the Father and the Spirit are more than one gender can convey.”<sup>1</sup>

The claim is not that we have to always balance out our gendered imagery whenever speaking about God. That would certainly be an improvement over an exclusively one-sided use of gendered language. But the real point is that God is absolutely beyond gender in such a way that no single gender can accurately reflect the trinitarian life of God, and thus both genders can be used to speak faithfully of God—though, in our current state of linguistic confusion, no gender might be the best option. This needs to become axiomatic for Christian faith. Without it, we are easily bewitched by the language found in scripture and the tradition into thinking that Father and Son are somehow comparable to what we call “fathers” and “sons,” that God is somehow more like a man than a woman, or that relations within the trinity share a likeness to relations between men and women. These are all examples of Christianity run amok, and we have to be diligent about extinguishing such ideas whenever they appear. Once this axiom is in place, however, we are free to employ gendered imagery in ways that help to articulate the truth of the gospel. We can speak of God the Father who is, at the same time, God the Mother. This is not an act of departing from scripture or of bringing in pagan notions into our theology. It is precisely out of a true faithfulness to the triune God that such language becomes meaningful, even necessary.

### Conclusion

The complementarian argument from the trinity is biblically and theologically unsupportable. It makes assumptions about God that we have no basis for making and draws analogies that we have no business drawing. In short, it is not controlled by God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ in the way that all our thinking and speaking about God must be. That’s not to say the egalitarian argument from the trinity is any better, though it is by far the more common. I am saddened whenever I hear Christians appealing to the trinity in support of *any* social model—whether complementarian or egalitarian. It is evidence that we have domesticated God and, simultaneously, that we have lost contact with the insights of our ancestors in the faith. I hope this argument is not taken to imply that the trinity is irrelevant for the church’s life. But the relevance will have to be located elsewhere, filtered through christology. The trinity is not a social model for us to imitate; it is rather a christocentric mission in which we are called to participate as a community of faithful and obedient disciples.

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<sup>1</sup> Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 213–15. Quoting from Janet Soskice, “Trinity and Feminism,” in *Cambridge Companion to Feminist Theology*, ed. Susan Frank Parsons (CUP, 2002), 146; Susan Ashbrook Harvey, “Feminine Imagery for the Divine: The Holy Spirit, the Odes of Solomon, and Early Syrian Tradition,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 37, nos. 2–3 (1993): 114.

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