

The Source of Godhead Confusion

There appears to be conflicting points which are seemingly difficult to resolve. The Son is submissive to the Father; yet He is equal with Him. He comes obediently from the Father; yet He is fully God. He is said to be “begotten”; yet He has existed forever.

The Holy Spirit is sometimes sent by the Father; yet, at other times, He is sent by the Son. He is the Spirit of truth; yet He is an actual being. We are never told to pray to Him; yet He is fully God. He is the newly sent Comforter; yet He has existed eternally.

How can we reconcile these seeming contradictions?

Here is the primary cause of this seeming confusion in human minds: People confuse the nature of the Godhead with Their work.

Learning about the individual mission of each member to save mankind, we are tempted to imagine that Their respective roles in relating to created beings and their work for the salvation of mankind explain the nature and inner attributes of each of Them.

The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are names that refer not to their nature, but to their work. In nature, each one is fully divine, fully God, self-existent, equal in every way to each of the others, and totally eternal - both past and future.

What is their work?

“The Godhead was stirred with pity for the race, and the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit gave Themselves to the working out of the plan of redemption.” - *Counsels on Health*, pg. 222

“The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the three holy dignitaries of heaven, have declared that They will strengthen men to overcome the powers of darkness. All the facilities of heaven are pledged to those who by their baptismal vows have entered into a covenant with God.” - *SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, pg. 1110

In this study we will look at the principle of headship and functional role differentiation in the Godhead. We will see that Christ is fully equal in nature with the Father, yet subordinate in role. Likewise, the Holy Spirit is submissive to the Father and the Son in their respective functional roles, while being inherently equal in divine nature with both.

Principle of Headship, Submission, and Equality

Scripture clearly portrays each of the three divine persons as possessing fully and simultaneously the identically same infinite divine nature. Scripture also affirms the submission of the Son to the Father and the Spirit to the Father and Son. Since this submission cannot rightly be understood in terms of essence or nature, it must exist in terms of relationship.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share an eternal equality of being while also having a functional relationship of headship and submission. The existence of submission does not conflict with equality of being because God and Christ are equal in their nature. This submission is functional and provides for distinct role relationships, without expressing or implying any inequality of being. Furthermore, this submission to headship authority is not a result of sin.

The structure of heaven is built upon relationships characterized by selfless loving authority and voluntary submission. In fact, the entire universe is woven together by a fabric of loving relationships that are organized by authority and voluntary submission. This is not only evident in the nature of the Godhead but also in the nature of all created beings. In God's kingdom voluntary, loving submission to loving authority takes the form of gentle, thoughtful, unselfish leadership and willing, joyful, chosen submission to authority.

Functional Submission vs. Ontological Subordination

The term "ontology" refers to the nature of being. Ontological equivalence means equality of being or nature, whereas ontological subordination means submission based on inherent inferiority of nature. Ontological subordination is in contrast to functional submission which is based on equality of being but role differentiation.

The Trinitarian view of the Godhead is one of ontological equivalence and functional submission, meaning the three divine members of the Godhead are equal in nature but manifest different roles involving authority and voluntary submission.

In contrast, the non-Trinitarian view of the Godhead is one of ontological subordination, where the Son is submissive to the Father not because of a relationship that is willingly entered into by the Son but because of inherent inferiority of the nature and being of the Son. In this view there is ontological inequality between the members of the Godhead that results in the Son and the Spirit as being subordinate to the Father because of their inherent inferiority to the Father.

Thus, it is critically important to distinguish between the truth of the functional submission of the Son to the Father with the heresy of subordinationism which asserts non-equality of being. Non-Trinitarians have attacked the doctrine of the full deity and equality of Christ stemming from a misunderstanding of the Son's submission to the Father from before the beginning of creation extending into eternity future. The doctrine of ontological subordination is the result of taking the many scriptural references to the Father's authority and the Son's submission as evidence for inequality of being. But as the remainder of this study will show, the relationship of the Son to the Father, and the Spirit to the Son and Father is characterized not by ontological subordination but by ontological equality and functional submission.

The Hebrew Father/Son Motif

The terms of "Father" and "Son" in Western thinking carry with them the ideas of origin, dependence, and subordination. In the Hebrew mind, however, these terms emphasize sameness of nature. Thus when the Scriptures speak of the "Son" of God they assert His divinity (Matthew 26:63-66; John 5:17,18; 10:30-33,36; 19:7).

The sonship of Jesus is not ontological but functional. In the plan of salvation each member of the Godhead has accepted a particular role. It is a role for the purpose of accomplishing a particular goal, not a change in essence or status. The sonship of Jesus refers to His eternal voluntary functional submission to the Father <https://theheavenlytrio.com>

which became manifest with the creation of angels and unfallen beings and more pronounced at the incarnation and which will continue through eternity. The Son did not become less than the Father during His earthly incarnation, but He did submit Himself functionally to the Father's will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (see John 14-16) as well as to the will of the Father, but this does not imply that He is less than they are.

Christ is Eternal, Self-Existent, and Fully God

The equality of the Son with the Father is alluded to in John 1:1 where we read "In the beginning [before creation began] was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The full divinity and equality of being of the Son with the Father is also apparent in passages such as Isaiah 9:6, John 20:28, Romans 9:5, Philippians 2:5,6, Colossians 2:9, Titus 2:13, and many others.

The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45:6 as a direct address by God the Father to the Messiah, calling Him God.

Hebrews 1:8 But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom.

Deity is here ascribed to the Son of God, who is not a created God, nor God by office or delegation, but by very nature.

Matthew 3:3 quotes Isaiah 40:3 pointing to John the Baptist as the fulfillment of the one prophesied to be the forerunner of Jesus:

Matthew 3:3 For this is he that was spoken of by the prophet Esaias, saying, The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

In Isaiah 40:3 the word for "Lord" is *Yahweh*, whose way John was to prepare. Thus Jesus was none other than *Yahweh* Himself, the self-existent, eternally existent God of the Old Testament Hebrews.

Christ's Submission to the Father in Eternity Past

The Father-Son relationship of authority and submission has existed in parallel with their equality of being from before the beginning of creation. The distinction in names, "Father" and "Son," has always existed, implying role differentiation.

Describing equality of being and headship/submission in the Triune Godhead existing in eternity past, Ellen White says:

"The Sovereign of the universe was not alone in His work of beneficence. He had an associate—a co-worker who could appreciate His purposes, and could share His joy in giving happiness to created beings. ... Christ, the Word, the only begotten of God, was one with the eternal Father—one in nature, in character, in purpose—the only being that could enter into all the counsels and purposes of God." - *Patriarchs & Prophets*, pg. 34

The Father is here described as "the Sovereign of the universe", the One who has supreme rank, authority, and power. The Son is described as "an associate, a co-worker". Although the Son was invested with <https://theheavenlytrio.com>

equal power and authority, He willingly submitted to the Sovereign of the universe in His role within the Godhead." Thus, there is clearly inspired evidence for equality of being with differentiation of roles in the Godhead.

Inspiration tells us that Christ has always been the eternal, self-existent Son.

"The Word existed as a divine being, even as the **eternal Son of God**, in union and oneness with his Father. **From everlasting he was the Mediator of the covenant**, the one in whom all nations of the earth, both Jews and Gentiles, if they accepted him, were to be blessed. The world was made by him, "and without him was not anything made that was made." If Christ made all things, he existed before all things. The words spoken in regard to this are so decisive that no one need be left in doubt. **Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was with God from all eternity**, God over all, blessed forevermore." - *Review & Herald*, April 15, 1906

"**He was equal with God, infinite and omnipotent**. He was above all finite requirements. He was Himself the law in character. ... **He is the eternal, self-existent Son**, on whom no yoke had come." - 12LtMs, Ms 101, 1897, par. 28

The Father-Son relationship of headship/submission has always existed. Though "equal with God" and Himself "God...in the highest sense", Christ has existed in His office as the Eternal Son, Eternal Mediator, and the Eternal Word by voluntary submission to the Father.

"The terms of this oneness between God and man in the great covenant of redemption were arranged with Christ **from all eternity**. ... The covenant of grace is not a new truth, for it existed in the mind of God from all eternity. This is why it is called the everlasting covenant." - *Signs of the Times*, August 24, 1891, par. 10

Christ, as Mediator, has consented to assume a voluntary functional submission to the Father, and to recognize God the Father as superior in office.

"Christ was **appointed to the office of Mediator** from the creation of God, **set up from everlasting** to be our substitute and surety." - *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pg. 250

Jesus declared on well over thirty occasions in John's Gospel that He was sent to the earth by the Father to do the Father's will. Scripture reveals that this sending, or commissioning, took place in eternity past, a commissioning that then is fulfilled in time.

Ephesians 3:9,11 (RSV) and to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which **from all ages** hath been hid in God who created all things; ... according to the **eternal purpose** which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord:

Romans 16:25 (RV) Now to him that is able to stablish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which hath been kept in silence **through times eternal**,

Peter confirms the eternal commissioning of the Son.

1 Peter 1:20 Who verily was foreordained **before the foundation of the world**, but was manifest in these last times for you,

If we wonder how far back this commissioning of the Son took place, this verse settles the question. Before the world was made, the Father chose (literally, "foreknew") the Son to come as the Redeemer. The Son's coming in time to shed His blood reflects not an ad hoc decision but the eternal purpose of the Father to send and offer His Son.

Ephesians 1:3-5 and Revelation 13:8 confirm this understanding.

Ephesians 1:3-5 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him **before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will.

Revelation 13:8 And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain **from the foundation of the world**.

The plan of salvation has always been in the minds of the members of the Godhead, as an "eternal purpose." Just as surely as God has always existed, the plan of salvation has always existed. If the plan of redemption is eternal, then Christ, who is the very center of it, must also be eternal.

Further evidence of the Father-Son relationship of headship/submission in eternity past follows:

The Father created all things through His Son and for His Son's benefit (John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2,10; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:16); nevertheless, the Father who sits on the throne is ultimately credited with the creation (Revelation 4:11), though He accomplishes it through His Son (Hebrews 1:2).

The Father "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world" and "predestined us to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Ephesians 1:4; Romans 8:29). The Father did the "choosing" and the "predestinating" in Christ. The Son never "chose" or "predestined" us in the Father.

Furthermore, being obedient to the Father, the Son condescended to become the Commander of the angels, known also as the Angel (Messenger) of the LORD, and Michael the Archangel, Commander of angels. (See Joshua 5:13-15; Ex 3:3-6, 13-14; Jude 9; 1 Thes 4:16; John 5:28-29).

The authority-obedience relationship between the Father and the Son has always existed, from before the beginning of creation, simultaneously with their equality of being. This apparent paradox was misunderstood by Lucifer, requiring the Father to declare to the host of heaven that He had invested His Son with authority, endowed Him with unlimited power, and that the Son would carry out His will and His purposes, but would do nothing of Himself alone.

"The King of the universe summoned the heavenly hosts before Him, that in their presence He might set forth the true position of His Son and show the relation He sustained to all created beings. The Son of God shared the Father's throne, and the glory of the eternal, self-existent One encircled both. About the throne gathered the holy angels, a vast, unnumbered throng—"ten thousand times ten

thousand, and thousands of thousands" (Revelation 5:11.), the most exalted angels, as ministers and subjects, rejoicing in the light that fell upon them from the presence of the Deity. Before the assembled inhabitants of heaven the King declared that none but Christ, the Only Begotten of God, could fully enter into His purposes, and to Him it was committed to execute the mighty counsels of His will. The Son of God had wrought the Father's will in the creation of all the hosts of heaven; and to Him, as well as to God, their homage and allegiance were due. Christ was still to exercise divine power, in the creation of the earth and its inhabitants. But in all this He would not seek power or exaltation for Himself contrary to God's plan, but would exalt the Father's glory and execute His purposes of beneficence and love." - *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pg 36.2

Christ never has changed His position, or role, or office in relation to the Father. The relationship of roles is fixed and has existed throughout eternity. Based on the inspired record, we must remember that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). The term "role" underscores the fact that it is a relationship willingly entered into by the Son from before the beginning of creation with respect to the Father, and thus it is not permanent in the sense of somehow being inherent in the Son's being.

"There had been no change in the position or authority of Christ. Lucifer's envy and misrepresentation and his claims to equality with Christ had made necessary a statement of the true position of the Son of God; but this had been the same from the beginning. Many of the angels were, however, blinded by Lucifer's deceptions." - *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pg 38.1

It is thus clear that the Father's commissioning of the Son is based in eternity past, and that the Son's voluntary submission to the Father is rooted in their eternal relationship within the Godhead.

Christ's Submission During the Incarnation

The author of Hebrews alludes to the submission of the Son in the incarnation, coming to do the will of God, as he quotes the prophecy in Psalm 40.

Hebrews 10:5-7 Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, But a body didst thou prepare for me; In whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hadst no pleasure: Then said I, Lo, I am come (In the roll of the book it is written of me) To do thy will, O God.

Following the incarnation, it is evident that Christ was subject to the Father's authority.

John 5:19 ... The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father doing...

John 5:30 I can of myself do nothing: ... I seek not mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.

John 8:29 ... I do always the things that are pleasing to him.

Christ was subject to the authority of the Father and kept His commandments.

John 15:10 ... I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love.

The submission necessary to secure our salvation is further illustrated by His struggle in the Garden leading to Calvary:

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Matthew 26:39 ... O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass away from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.

While the role of directing, sending, and commanding the Son belongs to the Father, we see the equality as well as the willing submission of the Son to the Father

Philippians 2:6,8 (RV) Who, being in the form of God, counted it not a prize to be on an equality with God. ... He humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross.

"In His incarnation He gained in a new sense the title of the Son of God. . . . While the Son of a human being, He became the Son of God in a new sense." - *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, pg. 226

Christ assumed the role of Mediator (between God and created beings) prior to creation, and at the Incarnation the nature of his Sonship changed and He took on a new role: He became the Son of a human being as well as the Son of God.

Christ Submission in Eternity Future

1 Corinthians 11:3 teaches a principle of headship that God established based on the pattern within the Triune Godhead by the eternal headship of the Father in relationship to Christ. This headship is grounded in functional differences rather than differences in nature or essence.

1 Corinthians 11:3 But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God.

The principle of headship/authority is not based on ontological subordination, but on the Scriptural claim that God is the eternal origin of all things and Christ is the eternal agent (1 Corinthians 8:6). Christ is fully equal in essence with the Father, yet subordinate in role.

Because Christ was commissioned in eternity past to carry out the will of His Father, when this work is completed, Christ will place Himself in the very position He had with the Father previously. While possessing again the full glory of the Father (John 17:5), He will put Himself in subjection to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:28).

After the ascension, Christ was exalted at the Father's right hand (Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:13; 8:1; 10:12-13; 12:2; 1 Peter 3:22). To be seated at the right hand of a king in the ancient world indicated that that one was second in authority. The Messianic promise in Psalm 110, "Sit at My right hand until I make your enemies My footstool", points to the authority of the Father.

Christ, functioning as our High Priest, intercedes in our behalf before the Father, providing further evidence that the Father possesses supreme authority, since the Son does not command the Father, but brings requests (Romans 8:34; Hebrews 7:25).

Throughout eternity the submission of the Son of God to the authority of the Father will be manifested to the universe of unfallen beings. Forever to retain His human nature, uniquely perpetuating the results of His incarnation, Christ will be one with His brethren, our Elder Brother.

To assure us of His immutable counsel of peace, God gave His only-begotten Son to become one of the human family, forever to retain His human nature. ... God has adopted human nature in the person of His Son, and has carried the same into the highest heaven. ... The I AM is the Daysman between God and humanity, laying His hand upon both. He who is "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners," is not ashamed to call us brethren. Hebrews 7:26; 2:11. In Christ the family of earth and the family of heaven are bound together. Christ glorified is our brother. Heaven is enshrined in humanity, and humanity is enfolded in the bosom of Infinite Love. - *Desire of Ages*, pg. 25.3

The confirming evidence that Christ will be subject to the Father throughout eternity is the reality that the Son willingly condescended to encumber Himself with a human nature, never to be the same, having become our Elder Brother. Christ has become the Second Adam, the new head of the human race.

Nevertheless, the Son is not eternally inferior to the Father; He is equal to the Father in His being or essence, for He is fully God. This means that along with equality in attributes and deity and value and honor, there is also a subordination in role, and the Son is subject to the Father in authority.

And the Son will forever be subject to the authority of the Father. Paul says that after the last enemy, death, is destroyed, "...the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Here we find further confirmation of the eternal, willing submission of the Son to the authority of the Father from eternity past to eternity future. In eternity past, prior to the foundation of the world, the Son was subject to the Father; in the Creation the Son was subject to the Father; following the incarnation the Son was subject to the Father; from His ascension, the Son has been subject to the Father, sitting at His right hand; today, as He intercedes for us, the Son is subject to the Father; and when death is destroyed, the Son will be eternally subject to the Father.

Submission of the Holy Spirit

The principle of headship/submission is manifested also in the relation of the Holy Spirit with the Son and the Father. The Son is subject to the Father and the Holy Spirit is subject to the Son. The Father sends the Son into the world, and the Son sends the Holy Spirit into the world from the Father

John 15:26 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.

Just as the Son's mission was to reveal and glorify the Father (John 14:9; 17:4), the Holy Spirit will reveal and glorify the Son; and He will declare and testify of Christ.

John 16:13,14 (ESV) When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The Holy Spirit listens to and is submissive to the authority of the Father and the Son. He never “speaks on His own authority,” but speaks only that which “He hears” from the Father or the Son.

The Holy Spirit, being subject to the Father, makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:27). “The heavenly trio”—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are inherently equal in being, yet the Son is submissive to Father and the Holy Spirit is submissive to the Father and the Son in their respective functional roles.

Since God never changes, “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8; also Malachi 3:6; James 1:17), the equality, headship, and submission, inherent in divine love and the nature of the Triune Godhead has always existed and will continue to exist in the ceaseless ages.

Summary

The source of Godhead confusion stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of the Godhead versus Their work and respective roles. Christ's role of submission to the Father is not based on ontological subordination, but rather ontological equivalence and voluntary submission to authority based on role differentiation.

From eternity past Christ has voluntarily submitted to the authority of the Father. Even in his earthly ministry, Jesus was voluntarily submissive to the Father. His inherent divinity precluded any ontological subordination. Thus we read:

"He came not to our world to give the obedience of a lesser God to a greater, but as a man to obey God's Holy Law, and in this way He is our example." - *Selected Messages*, vol. 3, pg. 140

This understanding sheds light on passages in the Bible that describe the Father as having an authoritative role and Christ and the Holy Spirit as having submissive roles (e.g. John 13:16; 14:28; 16:13; Romans 15:6; 2 Corinthians 1:3; Ephesians 1:3,17; 1 Peter 1:3; Revelation 3:12). These passages refer to eternal voluntary functional submission of the Son of God to the Father which became manifest with the creation of angels and unfallen beings and more pronounced at the incarnation and will continue through eternity (1 Corinthians 15:28).

Within the "Heavenly Trio" a relationship of headship and submission roles between the Father and the Son has existed from before the beginning of creation. The relation of the Father and Son in eternity past, in Christ's historic and incarnate life, and in eternity future is the same. The Holy Spirit submits to the Father and glorifies the Son while sharing the same divine nature as both. Inspiration clearly upholds these truths. The principle of headship, submission, and equality is inherent in divine love and the nature of the Triune Godhead, evidence that one can be subordinate in authority and still be equal in being, equal in importance, and equal in personhood.