On The Compatibility of Ontological Equality, Hierarchy and Functional Distinctions
Alan Myatt, Ph.D., Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary
Presented at the 61st annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society
New Orleans, November 20, 2009

It has become evident in the recent debate over the nature of the Son's subordination to the Father in the Trinity that important issues are involved. Most recently the claim has been made that this doctrine has implications for how Christians may pray. Dr. Bruce Ware has encouraged us not to pray directly to Jesus, but rather to pray only to the Father, through Jesus, in the Spirit.[1] If he is correct many of us will need to change how we approach God in the most intimate areas of our devotional life. This is not an arcane discussion of how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. It goes to the core doctrines of our faith. It defines the nature of the God we serve. Significant practical issues of prayer and worship are involved.

In this paper I do not pretend to provide a comprehensive discussion or defense of my position. My stance will become clear enough as I proceed. Rather, my purpose is to examine briefly and make some remarks on the notion of hierarchy, ontological equality, and functional subordination from the stand point of world view. By this I mean to do two things; first, to raise the question as to how this issue may or may not be coherent from the perspective of developing a consistent world view. That is, what must be the relation between ontological equality and functional hierarchy in order for these notions to be part of a stable world view? Secondly, I want to look at some presuppositions and world view issues that seem to underlie notions of hierarchy, and then ask whether or not these points are consistent with a biblical view of God and creation.

Hierarchy and World View
All world views either include or imply the answers to questions in four distinct areas of discourse; knowledge (epistemology), being (ontology or metaphysics), value (ethics) and purpose (teleology). There is nothing novel about this as these are the kinds of issues that any elementary text in philosophy will typically treat. The question of functional subordination arising out of ontological equality touches especially the areas of ontology and ethics, the theories of being and action. But exactly how are these to be related to one another?

The organic unity of world views
A world view is like a mobile. It hangs from a support, its foundational presuppositions, connecting its parts in a delicate balance. Unless we adhere to some type of irrationalism, it is difficult to deny the interdependence of the parts as they balance each against the others to maintain a cognitive and emotional equilibrium. Like any system, when we jiggle one section, the others move as well. If we remove a weight on one side, the system attempts to adjust in order to maintain the balance of consistency. This is a psychological as well as an intellectual truism.

Psychologists speak of the notion of *cognitive dissonance*; that all things being equal, people will tend to alleviate feelings of discomfort caused as a result of holding mutually exclusive ideas through such strategies as modifying one of them, adding additional ideas that

---

[1] Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance,*(Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 18.

appear to reconcile the two, changing relevant behaviors and so forth.[2] David K. Clark has pointed out that the internal arguments that people tend to generate to achieve cognitive consistency are the ones they find the most powerful. While such arguments may actually lead towards more consistency, it is clear that this does not *necessarily* involve the actual elimination of contradictions from one's beliefs. It does imply either becoming more consistent or devising a means of convincing oneself that no inconsistency exists. Consciously or unconsciously, one's perceptions of reality will be molded into what appears to oneself to be a coherent world view.[3]

This inherent push of world views towards logical and affective consistency sometimes has surprising results. Many of us are aware of the radical views of ethicist Peter Singer, with his insistence that some forms of non-human life are more valuable than many human beings. His definition of a person as one who is "capable of anticipating the future" leads him to quite naturally approve of euthanizing "defective" human infants, if the parents so desire.[4] We are able to see clearly how such ideas, so repugnant to most thinking people, flow quite naturally from his commitment to Darwinism, which ultimately springs from the ontology of philosophical naturalism. This example of the pressure towards world view consistency may be extreme, but it makes the point. Once a set of presuppositions opens the door to a particular path, the pressure for consistency will see that it is followed, perhaps not by the one opening the door, but most assuredly by at least some students and disciples who come behind.

This inherent drive towards at least perceived, if not true, consistency in world view is instructive. It is reasonable to assume that since consistency is itself a virtue reflecting the rational character of the mind of God, then God has created this drive as an essential part of our noetic structure. The doctrine of creation indicates that there is a correspondence between our minds and the structure of the created order. If one looks at an elephant one sees an elephant, not a giraffe or a banana. It is plausible, therefore, to conclude that the unity of the world view categories of ontology, epistemology, ethics and teleology is not merely a human construction. Rather, this unity reflects the necessary coherence of the created order itself.

The necessary unity of ontology and ethics is a well-known and useful tool in our apologetics.   We refuse to allow our atheist neighbors the fantasy of imagining that a rational ethic can be derived from the cosmology of Richard Dawkins or Bertrand Russell. Atheists can certainly *be* decent, law-abiding folks. They just have no intellectually defensible reason for being so. All they have, in the end, is mere personal preference. We insist on pressing this point because we are convinced of the unity of world view; that there is no disjunction between ontology and ethics. Decisions made in each of the four world view areas, epistemology, ontology, ethics, and teleology, determine the structure and content of the others. There is a necessary logical and psychological connection that pursues this type of unity, just as a mobile maintains its balance by adjusting itself back to equilibrium when one side is poked or modified.

Is it rational to separate ontology from teleology and ethics? Can there be a disjunction between ontology, the essence of an entity, and its ethical relationships with other entities? No, the theory of action and value is necessarily linked to ontology, and if this is the case it would follow that a necessary hierarchy in one area logically implies a necessary hierarchy in the other.

---

[2] R. L. Timpe, "Cognitive Dissonance," in *The Baker Encyclopedia of Psychology and Counseling,* 2nd ed., ed. David G. Benner and Peter C. Hill, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 220.

[3] *see* David K. Clark, *Dialogical Apologetics: A Person Centered Approach to Christian Defense,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 160-162 whose ideas were very helpful here. Thanks also to my colleague at Gordon-Conwell, Dr. Maria Boccia, whose insights helped illuminate this point.

[4] Peter Singer, "FAQ: III. The Sanctity of Human Life" available from http://www.princeton.edu/~psinger/faq.html; (accessed November 12, 2009).

The result is that a hierarchy of function necessarily points to a hierarchy of being. On this reading of the coherence of world views an eternally necessary functional hierarchy would be incompatible with ontological equality between the members of the hierarchy.[5]

The coherence of ontology and function in the Trinity

This brings us to the case of the claims being currently made in favor of just such an eternal hierarchy in the *taxis,* or ordering of the persons of the Trinity. Is it possible to make sense of such a notion? Is it coherent, either in its logic or practice? Or does it involve an inner dissonance that causes it to be permanently out of balance, in spite of the best efforts of its proponents?

Bruce Ware offers two reasons why there is no conflict between ontological equality and functional subordination in male and female relationships. The first is the analogy of that between parents and children "But is it not also clear that parental authority does not make parents superior to their children or children inferior to their parents? Both parents and children are fully human, fully made in the image of God, and fully deserving of the dignity and rights accorded to all human beings." [6]

The second reason offered by Ware is simply a restatement of the assertion that since it is true in the case of the Trinity then it must be true in human relations as well. He asserts that the role distinctions of "authority and subordination do not compromise the complete equality of the Triune Persons of the Godhead" and applies the analogy to the case of role relations between men and women. [7] Since he thinks his view is taught in Scripture, the question of its coherence is assumed but never demonstrated.

Rebecca Groothuis has responded to this type of discourse in her discussions of how complementarians ground gender role distinctions in the nature of masculinity and femininity.[8] Reviewing complementarian sources, such as *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood,* she shows that for the hierarchical view the difference is in the *nature* or *being* of each as male and female.[9] This is the case since the woman's subordination is both necessary and permanent, she contends. She then raises the question as to whether or not such a relationship between being and role is logically possible, and though the doctrine of the Trinity is not the focus of her discussion, the logical problem is the same. If one's eternal and necessary unequal role entails

---

[5] It is important to note that I am not arguing that all world views are necessarily consistent. That is clearly not the case. One of the primary reasons for rejecting false world views is the fact that they do contain logical contradictions that are irreconcilable within the framework of their own presuppositions. However, it does appear that both logic and human psychology tend to push in the direction of consistency. Decisions made in the area of teleology will both be shaped by and shape interpretations of ontology and ethics. The reductionistic empiricism of the new atheists leads inexorably to relativism in ethics. That not all atheists are willing to admit this or embrace it is only evidence of the inherent irrationalism in the world view itself. The more consistent they are, the more relativistic they become.

[6] Ware, 138.

[7] *Ibid.,* 139.

[8] See Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, *Good News for Women,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 41ff.

[9]"But notice that in evangelical patriarchy a woman's subordination still follows—necessarily and permanently—from what she necessarily and permanently *is* by nature (namely, female). Her personal being decides and determines her subordinate status… The essence of masculinity is a sense of leadership, and the essence of femininity is a disposition to submit to male leadership." Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, "Equal in Being, Unequal in Role," in *Discovering Biblical Equality : Complementarity Without Hierarchy, eds.* Ronald W. Pierce and Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 302.

one's unequal being, then this would obtain in the case of the Father and Son as in any other relationship.

Indeed this seems to be the case. The English suffix "-ness" denotes the condition or state of being of a thing. [10] If the basic "-ness" of a thing, i.e. its femaleness or its "sonship" (or "sonness", to coin a phrase) is the sufficient condition of its subordination, then this subordination is unavoidably a function of its being. It is grounded in its nature as female or son. If this were not the case, then there simply would be no *reason* why any such a distinction should be both necessary and permanent.

That such an understanding applies to recent arguments of some complementarians concerning the Trinity is to be confirmed by Ware's insistence that the roles in the economic Trinity are not *ad hoc*. The Son's submission is not for the purpose of carrying out the process of redemption. Rather it is a fundamental expression of his "sonship". The Son is not the Son unless He is eternally submissive to the Father and this relationship is grounded in God himself. It is difficult to see what this groundedness could be if it is not an aspect of God's being. Therefore, it follows that something in the being of the Son suits Him for a subordinate role while the being of the Father suits Him for supremacy. [11]

Wayne Grudem agrees with Ware. Headship and submission are eternal realities rooted in the nature of God the Trinity. However, it is not based on any distinction in competencies between the three Persons. "It is just there," he writes. [12] The Father has authority just because he *is* the Father and this is most likely *the* fundamental difference between the persons of the Trinity. However, he states that, "They don't differ in any attributes, but only in how they relate to each other." [13]

The problem here is to understand what it could mean for each to be suited for one role or another, by virtue of what they are as Father and Son, if it is the case that their natures are identical, which they must be if they share one identical divine nature. How can it be that they do not differ in attributes and competencies, if their roles are necessarily related to who they are? If this fitness for authority entails the supremacy of one party, then it necessarily entails the inferiority of the other party. How, then, is this not due to a difference in nature? Their roles are necessarily linked to the being of each. If the roles are unrelated to any distinction in attributes, as Grudem affirms, then why exactly, is the authority-submission relationship both necessary and one-way? To say that the Father is in authority because he is the Father, and that it is his authority that makes Him the Father, as Grudem implies, is circular. It does not explain why or how, much less prove, that this is the case.

Millard Erickson has argued this case against subordinationism on philosophical grounds. He notes that if authority and submission are essential and not accidental attributes of the Father and Son, then the essence of the Father and the essence of the Son are different. This "is equivalent to saying that they are not *homoousious* with one another" and so he concludes that there seems to be an internal contradiction in their formulation of this doctrine. [14]

---

[10] "-ness," in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary.*, 11th . (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003).

[11] Ware is consistent and forthright in asserting the Father's supremacy over the Son and Holy Spirit in the Godhead. Ware, 46ff.

[12] Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth: an Analysis of More Than One Hundred Disputed Questions,"* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers), 47.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Millard Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate,* (Grand Rapids, Kregel, 2009), 172.

It is interesting to note that Grudem admits that authority is related to the being of God. "Within the being of God, you have both equality and authority," he says. Since this is the case, he believes that egalitarians should just agree that such relations are possible.[15] But why should egalitarians admit to any such thing? His use of the term "being" to describe the locus of both equality and subordination in God is a sign of the very incoherence that egalitarians are complaining about. This becomes even clearer as we look at the first of Ware's analogies offered in defense of this view.

Parents and children are equal in dignity, Ware writes. Yet parents properly have authority over their children. However, he fails to note that, in fact, children are inferior to their parents in respect to the characteristics that make their submission necessary. Children lack the wisdom, experience and physical capability that parents possess to make their own decisions and survive. This is why the law recognizes that children do not share fully in the rights of adult humans until they reach the age of majority. They do not have the right to decide not to go to school, to live on their own, enter into contracts and do many other things that adults do. It is for their protection and well being that they must submit to their parents because they lack, by virtue of their being children, the competence to fully care for themselves. In this respect they are *not* equal to their parents, although it is certainly the case that they are equally in God's image and thus of equal value and dignity. Once they become adults, and are thus judged responsible for themselves, then they are no longer required to submit to their parents. The crucial point here is that if there were no difference in attributes and being regarding the ability to care for one's self, there would be no reason for the submission. The analogy appears to actually support the incoherence of the hierarchical view.

In the case of children, subordination is clearly not related to any defect in their humanness, but rather the changing state of their maturity. However, as Groothuis contends, "When subordination follows *necessarily and justifiably* from the subordinate person's unalterable nature, the subordinate *is* inferior in at least some aspect of her being; in this case, the scope and duration of the person's subordination will reflect the extent and significance of the inferiority."[16] More specifically, she argues that if the subordination is "permanent, comprehensive and ontologically grounded" then the subordinate person is inferior.[17]

In a recent article Steven B. Cowan attempts to refute Groothuis and establish the coherency of the complementarian position. Can he save ontological equality and functional hierarchy from its apparent inherent irrationalism? I do not believe so. Space does not allow a full scale discussion, but a few remarks, at least, are in order.

Cowan frames the issue between the two sides as a dispute over "whether the property of *being equal in value and dignity to X* can be had by an individual who also has the property *having a subordinate role to X*."[18] However, the point at issue is not necessarily a question of value, per se, though egalitarians tend to believe that this is implied. Rather it is a question of ontological inferiority in respect to the qualities that make one fit for authority or leadership. The only coherent reason for one to have necessary authority, leadership, teaching and decision making primacy is that one is better able, that is, better fitted for such tasks by one's nature. The subordinate may be equally valued as properly fulfilling a valuable and necessary role, but this is

---

[15] Grudem, 48.
[16] Groothuis, "Equal in Being, Unequal in Role," 316.
[17] *Ibid.*, 317.
[18] Steven B. Cowan, "The Metaphysics of Subordination: A Response to Rebecca Merrill Groothuis," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, 14:1 (Spring, 2009), 43.

not the same thing as being ontologically equal. The ontological inferiority still obtains regardless of complementarian efforts to make it go away.

In any case, Cowan readily gives up ontological equality, since he admits that female subordination is ontologically grounded. The implication of this is that role subordination in the Trinity must also be ontologically grounded. Cowan thinks he can get around Groothuis's criticisms by arguing against her premise that women's subordination is permanent and comprehensive. Even if we grant this in the case of women, it should be emphasized that in the case of the Trinity, hierarchicalists[19] hold that the Son's subordination *is* permanent and comprehensive.[20] That is exactly what is at issue. Hence, Groothuis's premises remain intact if we apply her argument to the Trinity, so that the ontological inferiority of the subordinate person, in this case the Son, would seem to follow.

The result is that the subordinate party is viewed as inferior in the sense of being less fit or less suited for carrying out the functions and responsibilities of authority. Cowan uses an odd illustration that actually reinforces this point. He speaks of a hypothetical alien creature that has two independent faculties enabling it to live both in water and on land. Its fitness for each environment is related to ontological factors appropriate to each. He supposes that women could likewise have qualities that suit them for subordination in the present that would not be expressed in the future.[21] These would be qualities of their being. Now if we apply this reasoning to the Trinity it would seem that the Son is subordinate to the Father because in his nature, he is less fit for supreme authority. The clear implication is that the Son has a different nature, inferior in at least some respects to that of the Father.

It appears that in spite of statements to the contrary, there is a drift in hierarchicalist interpretations of the Trinity towards going beyond a merely functional subordination to ground the obedience of the Son in the nature, or ontology, of the Persons of the Trinity. This is to be expected if the notion of ontological equality and permanent functional subordination is incoherent, as I believe it to be.

As I argued at the outset, there is both a logical and psychological tendency for world views to reach as much consistency as possible. A stable world view must have consistency between its ontology and its ethics. Action that is eternal and necessary to a thing is logically grounded in its nature. It does what it does because of what it is, and what it is, is a function of its being. The notion of the eternal subordination of the Son introduces an artificial disjunction between the ontology and ethic of the hierarchicalist world view that is inherently unstable. This element of irrationalism will press for resolution, either by denying eternal subordination or denying ontological equality in the Trinity.

---

[19] I have shifted my terminology to "hierarchicalist" in discussing the Trinity in recognition of the fact that not all complementarians hold to the eternal subordination of the Son. After consideration, I have decided to stick with "hierarchicalist" rather than adopt Erickson's term, "gradationalist", since hierarchy seems to be a more apt description of their view.

[20] I would argue that in fact, Cowan does not successfully refute Groothuis's argument in relation to female subordination. For example, he argues that female subordination is not permanent in the next life, and hence can be seen as merely functional (46). However the logic of the analogy of the Trinity as applied to this issue would indicate otherwise. That there is a drift towards eternal female subordination in complementarian thinking is evidenced by Mark David Walton's defense of such in his article, "Relationships and Role in the New Creation," *Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood,* 11/1 (Spring 2006). Indeed, the entire push for eternal hierarchy in the Trinity evidences the irresistible logic of this.

[21] Cowan, 47.

The Great Chain of Being: the ontological basis of hierarchy

Given the instability of the hierarchicalist viewpoint, it is legitimate to ask what is sustaining it. In his treatment of the metaphysics of subordination, Cowan introduces an illustration which serves as a helpful pointer towards an answer. He argues against the inherent inferior value of subordinates by describing the relations between members of a fictional society as told in the science fiction novel, *The Mote in God's Eye* by Jerry Pournelle and Larry Niven. The "mote" refers to a section of space where a planet is populated by a race of aliens, the Moties, organized into castes each of which is genetically adapted for specific functions. Some are rulers, some are warriors and so forth. Since each caste is essential for the functioning of society, none can be said to be more valuable than the other. Hence, Cowan concludes that subordination does not diminish value.[22] But is this conclusion justified?

This may be so in a novel, but we do not need to retreat into science fiction to find examples of hierarchical societies stratified by social castes. The Motie society appears to correlate roughly with the caste system of Indian Hindu society. There can be no doubt that the social stratification in that context most certainly implies a hierarchy of value. I believe there is a set of philosophical assumptions lurking in the background here that need to be examined. Perhaps these assumptions are unconscious, but they are there nevertheless and they need to be brought out into the light.

Throughout the bulk of Christian history the hierarchical stratification of human relations extended beyond male-female relationships in the church and home to persons at all levels of society. Scholars have documented the caste system of medieval Christendom and linked it to an underlying world view known as the Great Chain of Being. The assumptions of the Chain of Being have their roots in the West in Aristotelian and Platonic thought, where the natural division of society into superiors and subordinates was taken for granted. This vision was developed into an all-encompassing philosophy and world view in neo-platonist thought and was appropriated by early Christian apologists as a means of expressing the faith in response to philosophical attacks. It eventually became entwined with the theology of the church and set the agenda for its theory of society.[23]

The idea of the Great Chain of Being arose as a solution to the ancient One-and-Many problem. Presupposing that the universe is ultimate, the Greeks asked whether it was ultimately a unity or diversity. Some, like Parmenides, denied the reality of diversity and change, while others following Heraclitus argued that all is flux. Eventually, the Great Chain of Being was developed as a means of unifying the diversity of the world with the One from which all originates. The many were united to the One by means of the Chain of Being, which held everything in its place.

The influence of Greek hierarchicalism on the doctrine of God is evident in Origen's theory that the Father imparts to the Son his existence and therefore the Son is less than the Father.[24] This is very similar to the kind of emanation theories emerging from neo-platonic

---

[22] Cowan, 51.

[23] Perhaps the most important book tracing the history of the concept is Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964). See also E. M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture,* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), 25ff, Letha Scanzoni, "The Great Chain of Being and the Chain of Command," *The Reformed Journal,* 26/8 (October 1976) 14-18, and Robert K. McGregor Wright, "Hierarchicalism Unbiblical," *Journal of Biblical Equality,* 3 (June 1991), 57-66.

[24] This is especially evident in this quote, "The God and Father, who holds the universe together, is superior to every being that exists, for he imparts to each one from his own existence that which each one is; the Son, being less than

thought. For Plotinus all of the diversity in the universe originates in a series of emanations from the being of the One, who is beyond being itself. The resulting Chain of Being forms a hierarchy from the higher spiritual realms to the lower creatures.[25] Paul Helm has noted that the language of the begetting of the Son and procession of the Spirit in the church's creeds was, no doubt, due to such neo-platonic influence.[26]

Neo-platonic notions of hierarchy continued to find their way into the church's theology through such writings as those of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. This vision of society became basic to Western thought. By the time of Shakespeare, it is depicted as a universal hierarchical order, which Tillyard describes as expressing

> the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unfaltering order, and its
> ultimate unity. The chain stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest
> of inanimate objects. Every speck of creation was a link in the chain…
>
> In this order angel is set over angel, rank upon rank in the kingdom of heaven;
> man is set over man, beast over beast, bird over bird, and fish over fish, on the
> earth in the air and in the sea: so that there is no worm that crawls upon the
> ground, no bird that flies on high, no fish that swims in the depths, which the
> chain of this order does not bind in the most harmonious concord.[27]

 In the Middle Ages this concept translated into the division of society into "Three Estates", each stratified according to the Chain of Being. The first estate consisted of the clerics; church officials beginning with the Pope, Archbishops, Bishops, and Priests. The second estate included the ruling classes of kings, nobility and knights, while the peasants and merchants made up the lower estate.   Any violation of the established authority within each estate was seen as a threat to the creation order and subversive to the state and to the stability of Christian culture. Any attempt to leave one's place in the chain was therefore an act of rebellion. It is critical to note that in the family there was a hierarchical ordering of husband, wife, children and servants.[28] Each was subordinate to the previous due to their immutable places on the Chain of Being.

It is important to understand that the philosophy of the Great Chain of Being is fundamentally a non-Christian solution to a philosophical problem that arises out of the denial of a biblical world view. The question as to whether or not reality is ultimately one or many is derived from the assumption that the universe is ultimate, and is thus founded on a denial of the

---

the Father, is superior to rational creatures alone (for he is second to the Father); the Holy Spirit is still less, and dwells within the saints alone. So that in this way the power of the Father is greater than that of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and that of the Son is more than that of the Holy Spirit, and in turn the power of the Holy Spirit exceeds that of every other holy being." *Origen on First Principles: Being Koetschau's Text of the De Principiis Translated into English.* tr G. W. Butterworth, (Peter Smith Publishers, 1966), 33-34 (Fragment 9), cited in Edward Moore, "Origen of Alexandria" *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/o/origen.htm (accessed Nov. 16, 2009).

[25] Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Volume I Greece & Rome Part II* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1962), 210ff.

[26] Paul Helm, "Of God and of the Holy Trinity: A Response to Dr. Beckwith," *The Churchman,* 115/4 (2001), 351. See also Erickson, 182-183.

[27] Tillyard, 26-27.

[28] Dr. Bruce Magee has a helpful diagram of these relationships in his internet course notes, English Department, Louisiana Tech University, http://www2.latech.edu/~bmagee/201/intro2_medieval/estates&chain_of_being_notes.htm (accessed May 1,2009)

Creator-creature distinction. From a biblical standpoint, only the Triune God is ultimate, and in Him both unity and diversity are equally ultimate. The unity of His nature is not prior to the diversity of Persons and neither is the diversity of Persons prior to the unity of His nature. There is an absolute ontological equality, except for their personal consciousness, between the three persons.[29] Since He is the Creator, God's sovereign plan accounts for both the unity and diversity of the creation. There is no need to posit a hierarchy or Chain of Being to hold everything together. The diversity and unity of the universe finds its resolution in the will and creatorial acts of the One-and-Many Trinity.[30]

The notion of the Chain of Being is, hence, the fruit of an essentially pagan world view. Yet it is this view that became definitive for defining hierarchical relationships in Western Christendom. Relations of political, ecclesiastical and gender authority were explicitly based on this type of thinking. Its influence on biblical interpretation can even be seen in the commentaries of Calvin, who argued that the woman

> by nature (that is, by the ordinary law of God) is formed to obey; for … (the government of women) has always been regarded by all wise persons as a monstrous thing; and, therefore, so to speak, it will be a mingling of heaven and earth, if women usurp the right to teach. Accordingly, he bids them be "quiet," that is, keep within their own rank.[31]

Elsewhere he argues

> He (Paul) establishes by *two* arguments the pre-eminence, which he had assigned to men above women. The *first* is, that as the woman derives her origin from the man, she is therefore inferior in rank. The *second* is, that as the woman was created for the sake of the man, she is therefore subject to him, as the work ultimately produced is to its cause. That the man is the beginning of the woman and the end for which she was made, is evident from the law.[32]

Notice the language. The woman is inferior in rank. She is formed to obey. This is Chain of Being language, subtly imposed on the biblical text.

The influence of the Chain of Being continued to play a leading role in attempts of 19th century Christians to use the Bible to justify the continuation of slavery. Theories of the lower rank of Africans on the Chain of Being abounded and were used to argue that there was nothing

---

[29] Wayne Grudem's suggestion that unless there is a hierarchy of roles of authority and submission in the Trinity then there is no distinction between the Persons, resulting in modalism, is nonsensical. The distinction between the Persons is perfectly capable of existing without any hint of roles or authority and submission. All that is required is that each person has His own individual and unique consciousness, distinct from the others. There is no necessary reason why this would require that one be eternally under the authority of the other. The real distinction is that there are three "egos", three distinct individual consciousnesses in an I-thou relation with the others. See Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 251.

[30] A very helpful discussion of this may be found in Rousas John Rushdoony, "The One and Many Problem – The Contribution of Van Til" in *Jerusalem and Athens*, ed. E. R. Gehaan, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 339-348.

[31] *Commentary on I Timothy ,* 2:12.

[32] *Commentary on I Corinthians.* 11:8

immoral in the arrangements of antebellum slavery in the southern United States.[33] After all, according to the Chain of Being doctrine, each person's role is indispensable to the functioning of society. In a sense, all are of equal value, though, to quote George Orwell, "some are more equal than others."[34] The subordination of some to others appears to be an evil, they admitted, but once it is understood as a necessity of the order of creation (the Great Chain of Being), it is argued that subordination is not an evil at all.[35]

The similarity of the notion of a chain of command of authority in the Trinity and in male-female relations to the non-Christian theory of the Great Chain of Being is no coincidence. Such notions originally were derived from the infusion of the Chain of Being philosophy into Christian thought, which formed the presuppositional lens through which ancient, medieval and early modern Christians read their Bibles. The ontology of hierarchy is derived from this presupposition, a metaphysic at odds with the Christian doctrine of creation and the notion of the self-contained Triune God as presented in Scripture. It places the value and limits the function of things according to their position in the hierarchy of Being. Current attempts to define the Trinity as an eternal hierarchy of authority and submission may be understood, then, as examples of reading the Great Chain of Being back into the biblical text. The motive for this seems to be the preservation of an understanding of male-female role relations in the home and church that is also structured around the Chain of Being concept.*

It should be noted that this hierarchical understanding of these relations, indeed of the universe itself, is virtually ubiquitous in non-Christian, pagan thought throughout the world, both ancient and modern. Ancient mystery religions of the near east, as well as Hindu pantheism among others, show this tendency to structure the universe in a hierarchy of Being, with rigid social structures. In its more pure forms, unimpeded by any biblical influence, the tendency is for some type of cosmic evolution through which humans eventually become divine. One common factor is a hierarchy of divinities and a hierarchy of male over female. Patriarchy has been so universal in human society that it could be said to be the default mode of human existence.[36]

While complementarians persist in accusing egalitarians of yielding to the pressure of non-Christian culture in their handling of Scripture, it appears that just the opposite is true. [37] If hierarchicalism is the fruit of a non-Christian world view, as I have contended, this has important

---

[33] An example of one such text is Josiah Priest, *Bible Defence (sic) of Slavery; and Origins Fortunes, and History of the Negro Race,* 5th ed, (Glasgow, KY: W. S. Brown, 1852), 166ff. More extensive documentation can be found in Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 482ff.

[34] George Orwell, *Animal Farm,* (Everyman's Library, 1993), 88.

[35] This is the argument of Soame Jenyns, *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil.* 4th ed. (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), 71-72.

[36] Attempts to prove the existence of a primordial matriarchy from which the ancient world fell into patriarchy have proven unsuccessful. See Joan Bamberger, "The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society," in *Women, Culture, and Society,* ed Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), 263-270.

[37] "**Bruce A. Ware**: First, and most fundamental, the issue at root is this: will Christian individuals, churches, and organizations follow the clear teaching of Scripture on the equality and distinction that mark the nature and roles of men and women, or will they yield to the pressure and values of our culture and so re-cast biblical teaching after the mold of our own age? I'm quite aware that evangelical egalitarians would deny that they are guilty of this charge, but I stand by the charge. What drives contemporary egalitarian biblical interpretation is not the force of the biblical text itself but the culture that presses to modify what that text says." "JBMW Forum" *Journal for Biblcal Manhood and Womanhood*, 12/2 (Fall 2007), 42.

implications. Traditional hierarchical biblical interpretation has been filtered through the lens of a cultural vision of human relations compromised by the absorption of a pagan world view grounded in the Great Chain of Being. This effectively blinded it to the egalitarian implications of the biblical text.

Contrary to being a capitulation to culture, the egalitarian impulse is a historical development running against the tide of these assumptions, that surfaced in Britain and America as the implications of Reformation theology began to saturate the culture in the wake of the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries.[38] It came into full bloom among evangelicals in the abolition and suffrage movements of the 19th century. Under pressure from egalitarian readings of Scripture, the hierarchical vision has been in a steady retreat ever since. The Bible's teachings of the ontological equality of all persons has done away with the rule of kings in favor or democracy, the enslavement of Africans in favor of equal civil rights for all races, and the political and social subordination of women in favor of suffrage and the rights to education and a career.

One place where the Chain of Being still seems to hold power is in the church.[39] It should be a matter of concern that this influence appears to be growing. At the outset of this paper it was noted that at least one prominent proponent of the eternal submission of the Son to the Father has encouraged us to cease praying directly to Jesus. This is because the Father is seen to be supreme.[40] A recent booklet that I received expresses a quite similar sentiment,

> Jesus taught his followers to pray to "our Father in the heavens." (Matthew 6:9). Our prayers, then, must be directed only to Jehovah God. However, Jehovah requires that we acknowledge the position of his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ…He is appointed High Priest and Judge. (John5:22; Hebrews 6:20) Hence, the Scriptures direct us to offer our prayers through Jesus. For our prayers to be heard we must pray only to *Jehovah* through his Son.[41]

That this quote, which obviously comes from the Jehovah's Witnesses, sounds so similar is a cause for concern. I am not suggesting that the author mentioned shares their arianism. This would be a clearly unfair accusation. Nevertheless, it seems that when we are exhorted to pray only to the Father and not to the Son as well, some sort of Rubicon has been crossed. One wonders what the impact of this will be on worship as its implications are worked out. Could it be described as Jesus' lesser glory? The fact is that Jesus taught us to pray to himself as well as to the Father (John 14:14). This is completely appropriate. The perichoretic unity of the Trinity simply does not allow for any type of essential supremacy or subordination amongst the three Persons. They must share one identical divine nature as the Scriptures teach.

Millard Erickson has warned that the hierarchicalist interpretation of the Trinity is a detour in the wrong direction. He contends that this position is unstable.[42] I must agree. If my

---

[38] The impact of the Great Awakenings on the formation of American and British concepts of liberty, morality and equality are documented in John Wesley Bready, *England Before and After Wesley.* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1938). Of course, egalitarianism is not entirely novel in history. There is evidence that the early church enjoyed a time of egalitarian practice before the Chain of Being philosophy became dominant.

[39] It also continues to hold sway as the organizing principle of neo-darwinian theories of evolution, but that is a subject for another study.

[40] Ware, 153.

[41] *What Does the Bible Really Teach,* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 2005), 167-168.

[42] Erickson, 258.

argument at the beginning of this paper is correct, then this instability will attempt to resolve itself, returning to equilibrium just as a hanging mobile does when it is bumped. The dissonance between equality and subordination will lead to one or the other being given up. In this case, that may very well mean that some will eventually follow the logic of hierarchy towards arianism. I would like to join Dr. Erickson in a plea for the hierarchicalists to rethink their position and turn back.

* In the paper given just prior to this one Dr Bruce Ware vehemently denied that his view of the eternal subordination of the Son was influenced by a desire to bolster complementarian claims concerning male-female relations. I am willing to take his claims at face value, however, it should be noted that it was complementarians who first brought the Trinity into the discussion to support their views. See Bruce Ware, "A Defense of the Ontological Equality and Functional Authority-Submission Relations among the Three Trinitarian Persons," unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 20, 2009.