

IS THERE A HIERARCHY IN THE IMMANENT TRINITY ?

INTRODUCTION

The Immanent and Economic Trinity

The immanent (or ontological) Trinity is usually described as the way we speak about God in his own essence and being before and apart from any act of creation; and also the way we speak of God in terms of the intra-trinitarian relationships of the three persons (cf Worthing 1999: 22). When I use the word immanent Trinity, I am wanting to express it in terms of the *intra-trinitarian relationships* between the three persons of the Trinity apart from creation and time and *not* in terms of God in his own essence and being. Therefore my question could be put another way: Is there a hierarchy in the intra-trinitarian relationships of the Trinity?

The economic Trinity is usually described as the way we speak about God as he relates to his creatures in time and space in such things as creation, redemption and sanctification. It is commonly held that there seems to be a hierarchy in the economic Trinity, e.g., a hierarchy is seen in the Father sending the Son (Christ) and the fact that Jesus Christ is subordinate to the Father is seen in his total obedience that he renders to the Father. However this hierarchy is only seen in the light of Christ's humanity and hence belongs to the economic Trinity. My question seeks to go beyond this and seeks to explore the possibility of talking about a hierarchy beyond the limits of the incarnation (economic Trinity) and in terms of the immanent Trinity. In other words my question seeks to explore the possibility of talking about a hierarchy in the intra-trinitarian relationships of God.

Why would I seek to ask this question? My aim in this study is to get behind the real biblical meaning of hierarchy which includes such things as authority and subordination. If there is a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity then this has implications for the way humanity is made in the image of God, i.e., that the immanent Trinity is the source and paradigm of all human relationships (cf 1Cor 11:3).

The Matter of Hierarchy: Functional and Relational

According to the *Collins Dictionary* hierarchy is defined as a system of persons or things arranged in a graded order (McLeod 1987: 470). And *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Desk Dictionary* defines hierarchy in terms of successive orders or classes, each of which is subject to or dependent on the one above it (Landau 1985: 303). So we can see from this that hierarchy is an order that involves some sort of authority and subordination. But what do we make of authority and subordination in the immanent Trinity?

Let me explain what I do not mean by hierarchy. It is generally conceived in society that such terms as hierarchy, authority and subordination presupposes the idea of superiority, inferiority and domination. We must agree with feminist writers such as LaCugna who say that any sense of superiority, inferiority and dominance is contradictory to the gospel and to the Trinity. And again we must totally agree with LaCugna's statement that "any theological justification for a hierarchy [in the sense of domination and superiority] among persons also vitiates the truth of our salvation through Christ" (1973: 400). However I must disagree with LaCugna and others who say that terms such as hierarchy, authority and subordination necessarily implies superiority- inferiority-in-equality. I am not alone in this matter either.¹ I think that a true biblical concept of hierarchy and authority does not involve these things at all.

1. see Bingham 1996: 101,219; Kleinig 1998: 4; Lockwood 1999: 14, p 14n.30; LaCugna 1973: 287 where she makes reference to orthodox theologians.

So far I have said that hierarchy involves some sort of authority and subordination and I have said that this does not refer to superiority-inferiority. Let me explain the nature of hierarchy further.

Bingham explains hierarchy as functional, relational and vocational (1996: 101, 102). He explains the hierarchies in the creational order such as the sun and moon to rule day and night; and humankind's hierarchy over creation in the light of God's good creation. He makes the point that these hierarchies were given a vocational task to perform. The sun and the moon were to give light and mark the days and nights. Humankind's vocation was to exercise dominion over all living creatures. These hierarchies were seen as God's good intention for his creation. In other words they were seen as functional and vocational gifts of God that were intended to serve the creation. And thus hierarchy is seen as '[a] course of members functionally moving together for the fulfilment of a task...' in which hierarchical order is required (cf Bingham 1996: 101). So the point of all of this is to show that hierarchy is a functional and relational order.

Then the question is raised: How can there be a hierarchy in the Trinity? As I said in my introduction many people accept the idea that there is an economic hierarchy. In the Scriptures there are countless passages regarding the Father's superordination [not superiority] over the Son in sending Christ into the world and Christ's submission and obedience [not inferiority] to the Father (see John's use of the word for 'send' in his gospel account; see also John 10:18; 12:49; 14:28, 31; 5:19-20; 8:28; 14:10; Heb 5:8-10; John 9:4; 10:17; 14: 30-31; Phil.2:8; 1Cor 11:3; 15: 25-28). There is definitely a hierarchical relationship involved here. But is it only to do with Christ's humanity? Is Jesus only subordinate to the Father because of humankind's salvation? Is Jesus only subordinate to the Father because of his humanity and not to his deity? If we say that subordination does not mean inferiority then I think we can say that there is a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity. However this hierarchy is a functional and relational one. It is not about the substance or essence of God, but about his intra-trinitarian relationships. I am not alone on this matter:

Bingham argues that there is a functional and relational hierarchy in the immanent Trinity (see 1996: 101-120; 214-273).

St. Hilary in reference to John 14:28, where Jesus says that "the Father is greater than I" says according to Luther that "[s]ince the Father is the first Person, it is only fair to call Him greater than Christ. But since other passages of Holy Writ prove that Christ is true God, it must be possible to bring this verse into agreement with the rest of Scripture, namely, by saying that the Father is greater, 'not by nature or essence but by authority,' that is, not by reason of divine essence but solely because the Son proceeds from the Father, not the Father from the Son." (G.B's emphasis) (Luther's Works, American Edition vol 24: 187 emphasis mine).

C.K Barrett says in his commentary on *The Gospel according to St. John* that the passages speaking about the Jesus' subordination to the Father "are not simply explained away as having reference only to the *humanity* or *incarnate* life of our Lord" (1958: 71 emphasis mine). In reference to 1 Cor 3:23, Barrett clearly states that there is authority and subordination present in the immanent Trinity in his *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* when he says the following:

"We should avoid a difficulty if we stopped at this point, and thought of Christ's belonging to God as something that refers **only** to his earthly life and humanity (so, e.g., Calvin and most earlier commentators), in which he practised sacrificial obedience, as the Corinthians also must. We are however forbidden to do this not only by Paul's thought in general, but by the explicit statement of xv. 28 (*When all things shall have been subjected to him, then the Son himself also shall be subjected to him who subjected all things to him, that God may be all in all*). **There is eternally a relation of superordination and subordination between the Father and the Son.** This does not however mean (if we may use language that did not rise till many years after Paul's time-though Lightfoot notes that to take this phrase with reference to the divine nature of Christ 'is necessary for the proper understanding of the Nicene Creed') that the Son is not of one

substance with the Father, and belongs to a different order of being; it means rather that the Son, being of one substance with the Father, is differentiated from him precisely in this, that he renders the obedience of perfect love to the perfectly loving will of the Father. This language is indeed much too formal for Paul, whose thought moves in **terms of function rather than essence**. For him, Jesus is the willing agent of God." (1968: 97,98 bold mine)

We can see here that Barrett says that there is "eternally [in] a relation of superordination and subordination between the Father and the Son." And we can see that he expresses very clearly that that it is a hierarchy of function and not of essence.

Barrett again says clearly on this matter that the "[t]here can be no doubt that Paul taught a form (we may call it an innocent form) of subordinationism...The Son would no longer be the kind of Son we know him to be if he ceased to be obedient to and dependent on the Father" (1968: 249 in reference to 11:3).

Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras in connection with the Trinity says that the equality of communion in God does not exclude a hierarchy (LaCugna 1973: 286). He explains that the life of the Church is hierarchical and is based on the Trinity. However he explains that this hierarchy is not one of inferiority, but is one of obedience founded in a free, loving and perfectly communicative relationship. There is equality in the fullness of their humanity, yet there is obedience which is a gift from God.

Dr. John Kleinig in his discussion paper on *The Ordination of Women and the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity* suggests that there is a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity. He argues that the order of ministry in the church is a reflection of the order of the Holy Trinity and more specifically that the order of subordination in the whole of the church (e.g., the church to Christ; to each other; Pastors to Christ; congregation to their pastors) is based on the willing subordination of the Son to the Father. He says that the Holy Trinity is an ordered community based on the headship of the Father. He explains this ordered community by saying:

"This order is characterised by the loving, obedient 'subordination' of the Son to the Father. Just as the Father works only through the Son and does nothing apart from the Son, so the Son fulfills the will of his Father and seeks only to please him. Even though he is in all ways equal to the Father and in *no way inferior* to the Father, he is nevertheless *utterly subordinate* to the Father. Thus as St Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 11:3, God the Father is the head of Christ the Son, even as Christ is the head of every human husband and every human husband is the head of his wife. In 1 Corinthians 15:25-28, Paul goes so far as to say that the Son is not just subordinate to the Father until the resurrection of the dead on the last day but will be *forever subordinate to the Father*, so that God the Father may be all in all. Christ's relation as Son to his Father is therefore characterised by his subordination to the headship of the Father. It has *nothing to do with the dominance and power of the Father*. It involves and expresses the *harmony* of the Son with the Father and his love for the Father." (1998: 4)

We can see here Kleinig discusses headship in terms of authority and hierarchy and he even says that the Son will forever be subordinate to the Father.²

Other writers such as George R. Beasley-Murray and Raymond Brown leave open the possibility of talking about Jesus' subordination to the Father as not just belonging to the incarnation and hence the economic Trinity (see Beasley-Murray 1987: 262 and Brown 1970: 654).

Divine Perichoresis

The early church emphasised the perichoresis within the Godhead. That is, each person in the Trinity penetrates the other and shares in the divine relationship with one another. The Son is in

². Some people say that Jesus was subordinate only in his earthly life in connection with the economic Trinity. They see that there is thus no subordination after the resurrection because he was exalted to the right hand of the Father. What they fail to realise is that in 1Cor 15:28 it says that Jesus is and will be forever subordinate to the Father.

the Father, the Father is in the Son and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son. They are all of one being. This perichoresis involves the divine action of love to one another. 1 Cor 11: 3 indicates that headship is connected with relationships. The Father only exercises headship because he is in the Son. The Son (Christ) exercises his headship not in isolation and on his own terms but he exercises it under the authority of God.³ And in like manner the man is to have headship over the woman not by himself but is to exercise it as one who is under Christ. Bingham is right when he says that in the light of the perichoretic action within the Trinity it dissolves any notion of superiority-inferiority, but does not eliminate the reality of hierarchy (Bingham 1996: 103,223).

Nicene and Athanasian Creeds

One might ask how can we remain faithful to the creeds of the church if we suggest that there is a functional and relational hierarchy in the immanent Trinity?

In the context of the whole Arian controversy the early church expressed the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of *substance* and *ousia*. Both the Nicene and Athanasian creeds express the nature of the unity of being i.e., that Christ is *homoousios* with the Father.

Arius' said that Christ was a creature, particularly with reference to John 14: 28, where Jesus says "The Father is greater than I". Arianism transferred terms such as unbegotten, begotten etc into the human realm of creation. Whereas both the East and West in opposition to Arianism emphasised these terms as eternal characteristics, that are distinctive relational terms. (c.f LaCugna 1973: 30-41) The Cappadocians in particular emphasised that words like begotten, unbegotten, generate and ungenerate do not express the substance of God, but are characteristics of the divine hypostases (c.f LaCugna 1973: 57). Thus as a result of Arianism, Athanasius and the Cappadocians argued against Arius by emphasising that there was an economic subordination of Christ to the Father and not an intra-trinitarian one (ontological). (GB's Emphasis) This led the Nicene Creed to confess that Jesus the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. And this *economic subordination* is highlighted by the Athanasian creed where it says that Jesus is inferior to the Father with respect to his humanity. Therefore as a result of the Nicene creed, Trinitarian theology made a sharp contrast and distinction between the ontological (immanent) and economic Trinity. The economic Trinity was seen in the context of the incarnation, but yet the ontological was seen in connection with substance and being.

The other major distinction that Nicea made was the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostases*. In some places they equated these two terms, but in the context of the Nicene creed these two terms were distinguished from one another and are usually equated today with the English words of *being* and *persons* (c.f LaCugna 199: 8, 32, 37-44).

The Cappadocians in the fourth century developed an intra-trinitarian meaning of words such as *ungenerate* where it was said that it is merely an *aspect* of God's being and it is not identical with God's *ousia*. In other words it was seen as a relational characteristic. This is explained further when it is said that we can never know what the Father is, but only what the Father is in relation to the Son and the Spirit. So we can see a development in Trinitarian theology after the Nicene creed. We can see that such terms as hierarchy and subordination in the context of the Arian controversy were used in relation to the *ousia* and *substance* of God. Later, however the Cappadocians used these terms in a *relational* and *hypostatic* sense (cf LaCugna 1973: 60, 62, 66, 67). This is supported by Gregory of Nyssa. He stated this very clearly when refuting the notion that the Son is of a different essence to the Father when he says that, *Father is the name of a relation not the name of an ousia or energia* (LaCugna 1973: 65 emphasis mine).

Therefore I would emphasise along with the Cappadocians and with Eastern theology in terms of relational characteristics. So I would emphasise that words such as hierarchy, authority

³ If the man exercised his headship over the woman on his own terms then abuse and domination occur, but he is to base his headship on the knowledge that he is under Christ. And therefore is to base his headship on the self-sacrificing love of Christ.

and subordination are relational characteristics of God in the immanent Trinity, but not in the sense of substance and not only in the sense of the economic salvation of humankind. (G.B's emphasis. Surely the Son who is begotten of the Father is not just the God towards us, but is the eternally begotten Son. Barrett explains this point well by saying that "the Father is God sending and commanding, the Son is God sent and obedient" (Beasley-Murray 1987: 262). Barrett's point is that there is a relational difference between the persons of the Trinity. And so my point is that a hierarchy highlights a relational distinction between the persons of the Trinity⁴.

Therefore when I suggest that there is a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity, I am saying that there is a relational and functional hierarchy. In other words I am connecting it to the *hypostases* of God. However if we say that there is an ontological hierarchy or a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity (in terms of God's essence and being), I believe that we can be too specific and can end up equating the words of *ousia* and *hypostasis*. As a result there is a danger of not remaining faithful to the Nicene and Athanasian creeds' distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. This is why I have defined the immanent Trinity more in terms of the intra-trinitarian relationships. (G.B's emphasis)

I believe that I am not going against these creeds at all because this line of thinking is not talking about God's substance or essence as the creeds did. The other point I want to make is that I am not equating hierarchy with superiority-inferiority. In other words my point is saying something different to the creeds.

Karl Rahner: The Economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa.

Rahner explains that modern piety and dogmatics have neglected the doctrine of the Trinity. The Trinity is seen as an isolated doctrine and "remains, *as a reality*, locked up within itself" and has nothing to do with us at all in our lives (1970:14). He explains that the Augustinian-Western tradition has tended to separate the two treatises *On the One God* and *On the Triune God* so much that the unity and connection between the two have been overlooked (1970: 20).

Rahner says that the immanent Trinity is the way God is in himself. That is, as he exists in relationship as Father, Son and Spirit (note the relational aspect). The economic Trinity is in effect the result of this relationship in which God communicates himself freely. In other words the economic Trinity is the self-communication of God in time and history. And he goes on to say that, that which is communicated [self-communication of God] may rightly be called the divinity and hence the 'essence of God' (1970: 102).

Rahner's basic thesis is that "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity". For Rahner the Trinity must be connected to humanity because the Trinity is a mystery of salvation. God's self-communication in the incarnation is a communication and revelation of himself. He states that divine mediation in history is to be a real mediation in God's inner life. In other words he argues that God's revelation in history is a revelation of how God is in his immanent life (1970: 22, 21, 36, 38, 99, 100).

Surely we must agree with Rahner's principle that the economic Trinity reveals who God is in himself. The doctrine of the Trinity was formulated in the light of the revelation in Jesus Christ in time and history and so we have used human language to talk about God's *being* as Trinity. Therefore the principle of seeing a hierarchy in the economic Trinity reveals who God is in himself (in the intra-trinitarian relationships). And this suggestion of hierarchy does not even go so far as the Nicene creed because it is in the realm of relationships and not God's essence.

⁴. Eastern theology emphasises the monarchy of the Father i.e., the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone and not by the Son. They do so to emphasise the relational distinctions between the persons of the Trinity so that they do not confuse the persons of the Trinity (Lossky, Vladimir 1995: 170, 173, 176, 178).

My point is that, surely we can come to the conclusion that because there is a hierarchy in the economic Trinity there is also a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity.

Weinandy expresses well what I am trying to say here, when he says:

“The immanent Trinity is identical to the economic Trinity...while the economic Trinity...is expressed primarily in functional and not ontological categories; that is, *ad extra* words and deeds of the Trinity are articulated in relational terms and idioms; *yet inherent within these functional categories lies a trinitarian ontology. Functional economic trinitarianism discloses an ontological immanent trinitarianism.* The *pro nobis* manifestation of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit innately contains and naturally unveils an *in se* ontological reality.” (1995: 22 emphasis mine)

Hierarchy is expressed in Servanthood and Love

In Matthew 20: 25-28 Jesus makes the point that rulers of Gentiles lord it over the people and are tyrants over them. This is I believe the way society views hierarchy in general these days ie., in terms of superiority-inferiority. And Jesus was against this idea of hierarchy. So what is true hierarchy. Jesus says that whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, as Jesus came to serve among us. So Jesus is saying that true authority and hierarchy is expressed in service. This is a revolution in our thinking all together. What we think by hierarchy in general, is thrown upside down by Jesus. However this does not negate hierarchy and authority. Biblically speaking, we can't ignore hierarchy and authority even though the sinful person hates these things.

CONCLUSION

I have attempted in this essay to explore whether there is any grounds for making the assertion that there is a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity. I have defined hierarchy in terms of authority and subordination and I have stressed that hierarchy does not mean superiority-inferiority. Scripture clearly testifies that there is relational and functional authority and subordination in the Trinity. Thus I see with others that a hierarchy in the immanent Trinity is one that is functional and relational and does not affect the substance or essence of God. It is important to realise that hierarchy does not negate the equality of the persons in the Trinity.

I have shown that Nicea trinitarian theology talked more in terms of substance and being. That is to do with God's Godness. And also the fact that they distinguished carefully between *ousia* and *hypostases*. Therefore I believe that a relational and functional hierarchy in the immanent Trinity does not go against the creeds of the church because it firstly expresses a hierarchy that does not imply superiority-inferiority and secondly it expresses a hierarchy in terms of function and relationships and not substance.

I have said that the Scriptures testify clearly that there is an economic hierarchy in the Trinity. And I have also shown that it is not illogical to say that because there is a economic hierarchy there is also an immanent hierarchy. Therefore I would answer the question that I have raised with a YES.

As I said in my introduction this has important implications for the way humanity is made in the image of God and hence its' relationship to authority and subordination. I believe that the Trinity is the source and paradigm of all human relationships. Paul is quite clear in 1Cor 11:3 that he basis the headship of man over woman on the basis that the Father is the head of Christ. Clearly in the context of this passage it is talking about authority being a function of order in the church.

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