

# **1 Corinthians 11:3: Headship, Trinity and Gender**

## **Introduction**

1. I would like to express my gratitude at being able to contribute a further paper for these conversations, and my intention is to develop some of the issues that emerged from our discussions earlier in 2010.
  
2. In those earlier discussions it became clear that our reflections on our different positions on the consecration of women bishops could not be separated from two other issues, namely:-
  - (a) our positions on the responsibilities of men and women in marriage;
  - and
  - (b) our positions on the Trinity, notably the eternal relation between the Father and the Son
  
3. One text which on some interpretations brings both these issues together is 1 Corinthians 11:3. This did form part of our discussion on the area of Paul's use of arguments from creation, which is much to the fore in vv 4ff, but the impact of 1 Corinthians 11:3 in these other dimensions was not dealt with at any length.
  
4. Naturally, for some it is a red herring to see 1 Corinthians 11:3 as pertaining to the issues outlined in 2 (a) and (b) above. But there are those who see verse 3 as referring to relations between husband and wife and between Father and Son, and who further envisage those relations including

connotations of authority.<sup>1</sup> As such 1 Corinthians 11:3 is relevant for our discussions.

5. My intention here is to deal with the Trinitarian implications of these views. I sense this is especially sensitive and it is worth setting out why this might be. The eternal relations between the Persons of the Trinity are perfect and holy. So, if 1 Corinthians 11:3 does refer to an ordered Trinitarian relation between the Father and the Son, then clearly an ordered but perfect relationship can exist between ontological equals. Personal submission would not **by itself** indicate either an imperfect relationship or an ontological inequality. If it is possible for such a relationship to exist between divine Persons, it is not inconceivable that such relations of ontological equality but ordinal submission could exist between humans.
  
6. When we touched on this in our earlier meetings, this excited strong responses, but we were not at that stage in a position to probe why. I think a number of issues have been raised elsewhere about Trinitarian relations conceived in ordinal submission terms, including:-
  - (a) such a concept is essentially Arian, since ordinal submission by Son and Spirit amounts necessarily to ontological subordination;<sup>2</sup>
  - (b) such a concept is present neither in Scripture, nor in Church history, and is at best unwarranted speculation;<sup>3</sup>and
  - (c) such a concept is incoherent.

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<sup>1</sup> E.g P. Barnett and W.H. Mare

<sup>2</sup> E.g. G. Bilezikian

<sup>3</sup> E.g K. Giles

7. The objections 6 (a)-(c) take us a good deal wider than the specific topic of women bishops. On that topic we have tried signally hard not to 'disfellowship' each other, but obviously much depends on the context within which some of the arguments relating to female bishops are put.
8. Thus, if one does accept an 'egalitarian' view of the Trinity on the grounds that ordinal views are Arian by necessary implication, then naturally a traditionalist who refuses female episcopacy by using in part ordinal Trinitarian arguments must logically be under one of the anathemas of the original 325 Nicene Creed.
9. Similarly, if one does accept an ordinal view of the Trinity, then the use of the egalitarian argument raises issues which do go to the scope of Trinitarian orthodoxy.
10. Thus lying under the arguments about female episcopacy are questions which deal not only with how we handle our disagreements about the meaning of 1 Timothy 2, for instance, but what amounts to the acceptable range of disagreement between Christians on Trinitarian theology (and, come to that, the theology of marriage).
11. Finally, by way of introduction, this Trinitarian question does not disappear merely by deciding that 1 Cor 11:3 does not deal with Trinitarian relations. It arises from other NT texts and must at some stage be faced. Accordingly, I take it that this paper must deal both with the exegetical issues of 1 Cor 11:3 and also with some of the Trinitarian issues surrounding the egalitarian/ordinal debate.

## 1 Corinthians 11:3

12. The text before us reads in the NKJV:-

But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

### *Headship relations*

13. Paul thus tells us about three relational pairs, each one of which features 'headship' (there is a *kephalē*):-

Man ----- > Christ

Woman----- > Man

Christ ----- > God

14. Three points are worth noting before we go further.

15. First, the headship relation seems to be asymmetrical, or non-reversible. Thus, to borrow the later thought of Augustine's discussion,<sup>4</sup> a relation between brothers is reversible. For each brother is brother to the other: the relational shape is the same, whichever party is taken. Here, though, the man-Christ relation is non-reversible: Christ is head to the man, not the man to Christ. Commentators actually share common ground on this, whether they think that Christ is head by being creational source,<sup>5</sup> or salvific source,<sup>6</sup> or source as authority.<sup>7</sup> No-one suggests that man is creational source for Christ, or salvific source or authority source. The relation is non-reversible. The obvious comparison passage about headship, the *kephalē* relationship between Christ and the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33), likewise features a non-reversible relation.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g. In *De Trinitate* 7.11

<sup>5</sup> So apparently L. Morris 1985:149.

<sup>6</sup> So G.D. Fee 1987:505

<sup>7</sup> So P. Barnett 2000:196.

16. Secondly, while there are clearly sufficient correspondences between these three pairs of relations to warrant *kephalē* being employed in each, it does not follow that each relational pair is identical in all respects to the others.

17. Thirdly, it is common ground among commentators that one must be cautious about reading Western notions of the 'head' as the seat of governing reason back into the text.

*The interpretative questions*

18. For present purposes there are three principle areas of interpretative question:-

- (a) does the man-woman refer to the relation between any given man and woman, or is it aimed at husband and wife?
- (b) Is Christ considered here as acting and relating in his human nature alone?
- (c) Does *kephalē* here or anywhere have connotations of authority?

*Man-woman*

19. Basically the alternatives here are to read the man-woman relationship either as the relationship that exists between any human male and any human female or as the relationship that exists between husband and wife.

20. Neither view is free from difficulty, so both caution and charity are called for.

21. Barnett points to the use of the specifically male word for 'man' (*anēr*) in verse 3, the context of 1 Cor 11 and the comparison passage from Ephesians 5.<sup>8</sup>
22. Of these, the first is suggestive but not decisive, since the use of the specifically male word is also accounted for on the view that this deals with any given man in relation to any given woman. The context of 1 Cor 11 provides some better support, depending on how one takes vv4-5 and v 7 and also v 8).
23. If the references to *kephalē* in vv4-5 are taken as having a *double entendre*, referring both to physical head and also relational head, then the dishonour of v 4-5 includes a reference to dishonouring one's relational head. One behaves in a way that brings dishonour not merely on one's own physical head, but also one's relational head.
24. The idea that one's relational head is affected by one's conduct is underlined in v 7 where man is the glory of God and 'woman' the glory of 'man'. If one's 'glory' has behaved wrongly in some way, then one is dishonoured and shamed.
25. However, such ideas of dishonour and glory belong most naturally to the marriage relationship, rather than the relationship between any man and any woman. It seems strange that a woman to whom one is a relational stranger is every bit as much one's glory as she is to the husband with whom she has exchanged marriage vows. The glory relationship described here is a lofty one, for it is comparable on at least some levels to the relationship between Christ and

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<sup>8</sup> Barnett2000: 200. Compare Mare 1976:255 on a husband's authority.

man, and between Christ and God. But both those relationships, Christ-man, God-Christ have an exclusivity to them. It is inconceivable that another could be head to a man other than Christ, and also inconceivable that Christ could have another head than God. But the 'any-man-any-woman' thesis seems to require that any given man is 'head' of any given woman. Any woman, therefore, would have more than one head. This seems unattractive.

26. With respect to v 8, this refers to the creation of woman, and Genesis 2:18, 23-24 link that creation very tightly to the creation of a marriage partner for Adam. To this extent Paul's appeal to man and woman in the creation narrative is glossed by his marital understanding of that creation.

27. Barnett's still stronger point, though, comes from his comparison with Ephesians 5:22-33. Here the relevant headship relations are between Christ and the Church and husband and wife. Here the *anēr* term is qualified by *idios* (one's own). This does suggest, of course, that *anēr* for Paul can mean husband.<sup>9</sup> Further, the nature of the marriage relationship here is monogamous, stressed by the way that Christ is the church's husband. One may add that elsewhere monogamous marriage is clearly an NT ideal.

28. However, this does not mean that the husband-wife construal is free from difficulty. Two principal difficulties arise.

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<sup>9</sup> I do not intend to enter into a discussion of Pauline authorship. Even if one did simply ignore the words of Eph 1:1, as well the thematic resemblances between Ephesians and other Pauline material, one is still left with the thought that the letter emerges from within a Pauline community, and thus remains highly relevant.

29. To begin with, there is the reference in v 12 to woman being taken from man (*ek tou andros*), but also man being born from woman (*dia tēs gunaikos*). While the former refers to Genesis 2 and Adam’s relation with Eve, who was to be his wife, the latter refers to the relation any post-Adam man has with his mother, so that a son-mother relation is in view. Arguably this would tell against the view that Paul is dealing with husband-wife relationships.

30. However, on balance this does not seem to be decisive. For, on any view the reference to ‘man’s’ birth from ‘woman’ introduces a new male-female relationship that has not been previously in view. This introduction of a new and unique male-female relationship is just as awkward for the view that v 3 just talks of ‘any-man-any-woman’. In fact, it may be more awkward, because the idea that son is ‘head’ of his mother and she his ‘glory’ does not immediately fit easily with the notions of a son’s duties of obedience to his parents of both sexes.<sup>10</sup>

31. Moreover, it is perfectly intelligible to see vv11-12 as parenthetical to remind men in particular of the complementarity that exists between the sexes.

32. As regards the other difficulty, this may be phrased as follows: if Paul only refers to husbands and wives in v3, then what are we to make of women who are not married? Or men who are not? Can the former pray and so with head uncovered, and the latter with head covered? Given the permanence of the relation between Christ and man, it would seem unlikely that Paul contemplates unmarried men praying

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<sup>10</sup> See Eph 6:1ff etc.

with covered heads. On the issue of unmarried women, the husband-wife view leaves him without expressing any explicit opinion. Given that at the time of writing the norm seems to have been for men and women to be married, it is quite possible that Paul is content to address the major case and is simply silent on the other cases.

33. On the whole the husband-wife construal does seem the most attractive option here, not least because the alternative 'any-man-any-woman' view seems to leave women with a plurality of heads and this seems unattractive in view of the uniqueness of a husband's headship relationship with his wife from elsewhere.

*Is Christ being considered as acting in his human nature?*

34. The fact that the word 'Christ' is used may tell in favour of Christ being considered as acting in his human nature. The significance of this is that even if one does think *kephalē* carries connotations of authority, then this would only apply to the Second Person considered in his relation as a human being with God the Father. Any questions of the eternal relation between Father and Son are therefore not dealt with by 1 Corinthians 11:3.<sup>11</sup>

35. It is, parenthetically, important to note what this might and might not prove. If one considers that it is only Christ as human that is in view here, then clearly the passage might not directly tell us the eternal Trinitarian relations are ordinal ones including submission. But it would not follow from that that the egalitarian case was made out either. The verse

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<sup>11</sup> Arguably this is Calvin's position in his commentary on 1 Cor 11:3: 'My point is that He is inferior to the Father, because he has clothed Himself with our nature, so that He might be the first-born among many brothers.'

simply would be silent on that dispute, and, as noted above, it would still remain to be settled, only from other material.

36. In fact, though, this question turns on what one makes of the kind of *kephalē* that Paul is discussing as between man and Christ.

37. For if *kephalē* here means 'source of life', then clearly Christ's relation of headship to the man is that of creator. This is consistent, of course, with Scripture (See John 1:1ff). Further, this fits the creation discussion of man and woman, where woman is taken out of man (Genesis 2:23). However, as Fee notes,<sup>12</sup> if one simply takes the Father as 'source of life' for the Son in his eternal relation, then this sounds very much like Arianism ('once the Son was not').

38. Thus we must turn to the much-discussed question of *kephalē*.

*Does kephalē here or anywhere have connotations of authority?*

39. In terms of the current scholarly state of play, we note the contributions of A. Perriman, K. Kroeger, W. Grudem and G. Fee.

40. G. Fee has commented that while Grudem's pre-1987 work had established that *kephalē* can mean leader, he has not established either that *kephalē* 'means "authority over"' nor that meanings of source or origin are never found.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Fee 1987:505

<sup>13</sup> Fee 1987:503, fn 42. His whole discussion p502-505, including footnotes 42-51 repays attention.

41. A. Perriman is significant for his contribution to discussions of *kephalē* by talking in terms of the word connoting prominence, pre-eminence, being foremost.<sup>14</sup> The point here is that the head is the most prominent part of the body ('the top'). Perriman is followed by A. Thiselton in his own extensive commentary on 1 Cor.<sup>15</sup>
42. W. Grudem has also written extensively on *kephalē*. Appendices 3, 4 and 6 in his *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* deal with K. Kroeger's work and also Perriman's work.<sup>16</sup> He remains critical of the view that *kephalē* could mean source,<sup>17</sup> and opines that the Perriman view of 'prominence' is likewise unattested,<sup>18</sup> and in any case can only led to disastrous results when applied to male-female relationships and God-Christ relationships.
43. In fact, what is at stake in these debates is not simply the positive proposition '*kephalē* means source' etc, but whether such propositions include a negative element, that authority is excluded. In the present discussions, naturally, it is not so much whether one translates *kephalē* as head, source, beginning, top-point etc that is the issue but whether one thinks that whatever translation one has chosen has or can have connotations of authority.
44. Thus some may be perfectly content with notions of source, provided scope is allowed for connotations of authority to come with that.

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<sup>14</sup> Perriman 1998:32-33.

<sup>15</sup> Engagingly, Thiselton admits to how personally difficult 1 Cor 11:3 is. (p 811).

<sup>16</sup> In the case of Kroeger, Grudem has repeated his charge that not merely does she cite sources badly, or in a distorted way, but refers to non-existent sources: Grudem 2004:Appendix 4, p 597.

<sup>17</sup> Grudem 2004:Appendix 4, p 597.

<sup>18</sup> Grudem 2004:Appendix 4, p 596.

45. From that point of view it is less than helpful for Fee to comment that ‘...it is not at all clear that it [sc *kephalē*] ever means “authority over”’.<sup>19</sup> Some would perfectly happily admit that *kephalē* does not ‘mean’ authority over, but would want to contend that it includes this.
46. For this reason it is not necessary to adjudicate on whether Fee and others are right to say that Christ is head of man as saviour,<sup>20</sup> for the point is whether ‘head’ can connote authority.
47. For Fee, authority is ruled out even as a connotation, because vv 11-12 explicitly qualify vv 8-9 so that they will *not* be understood in this way.<sup>21</sup> This, though, is to over-read the evidence. Vv 11-12 do not deal with the question of authority explicitly, but rather whether man and woman can be ‘without’ (*chōris*) the other. To that extent the issue is ‘independence’, ‘separation from’, but that need not bear on the question of authority. Fee is thus over-ambitious in thinking authority connotations are precluded on the basis of vv 11-12.
48. At this point it is important to note that *kephalē* is linked with authority in Ephesians 5:22ff. The verb for submission of wives to their husbands is supplied from 21. Nor is it any answer to suggest that some other verb should be understood, since the parallelism of v 24 (*hōs...houtōs*) links the submission of the Church to Christ with that of the wife to the husband.

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<sup>19</sup> Fee 1987:505 fn 42.

<sup>20</sup> Fee1987: 505.

<sup>21</sup> Fee 1987:502.

49. The instruction to submit of v 22 is then grounded in v 23, which provides the reason (*hoti* – because). The reason for this submission is that the husband is the *kephalē*/head of the wife, as Jesus is of his Church. This means that the instruction to submit is grounded by Paul precisely in the headship relation. Headship means much more than authority, for it grounds a husband's duty of love too, but Paul clearly uses headship to establish authority and submission. The non-reversible, asymmetrical, unique and authority-bearing nature of the relationship is highlighted by the comparison with Christ's marriage to the Church.

50. The comparison with Christ and the Church makes quite unarguable the idea that the husband-wife relation is one of reciprocal submission, based on v 21. To begin with, we have noted that the headship relation is not reversible. Secondly, Christ does not submit to us, for his relation is one of Lordship, and Ephesians 1 spells out his unique lordship over all. Thirdly, *allēlois* in v21 need not denote strict reciprocity ('everyone to everyone') but can also mean 'one another'.<sup>22</sup> The latter meaning is clearly preferable here, since 'each other' would render children's non-reversible submission to parents void and the notion of 'mutual submission' seems anyway self-contradictory.

51. This means there are excellent grounds for thinking *kephalē* can carry connotations of authority. This is natural enough. For it is hard to see in 1 Cor 11:3 how *kephalē* as between Christ and man could ever **not** carry connotations of authority. Whether one sees Christ as man's creator or man's

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<sup>22</sup> P.T Obrien 1999:403ff

saviour, it is not easy to see how these do not carry authority connotations.

52. Naturally, though, some may well not find these considerations persuasive, and in particular may feel that 1 Cor 11:3 is in fact silent on the question of Trinitarian relations. Accordingly we must turn to other scriptural and historical considerations that bear on this.

### **Biblical data on the Son's submission to the Father**

53. Place precludes a complete account of biblical data relating to the Son's obedience. The focus here is John's Gospel, since this contains both extensive Trinitarian material and was critical in the Nicene exposition of Trinitarian doctrine.

54. The background for the current discussion is provided by the claims:-

- (a) that the concept of the Son's obedience is arianising;<sup>23</sup>
  - (b) that the concept of the Son's obedience is alien to Scripture and the Nicene tradition
- and
- (c) the influential contention of J. Moltmann that the relation between Father and Son is not ordinal, or hierarchical.

#### *The issue in John – a rival power*

55. To begin with, it is worth framing the Father-Son in John in John's own terms rather than the important doctrinal

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<sup>23</sup> G. Bilezikian

controversies of the fourth century. The issue in the John's outlining of Jesus is not the Arian question as such (important though that is), but the question of blasphemy.

56. This emerges very starkly in John 5:18 where the response to Jesus' comment about his Father and he working on the Sabbath is that by calling himself son, he has made himself equal (*isos*) to God. In terms of the development of John, while the prologue has made it clear that Jesus will not be received by the world he has made (John 1:10-11), the themes of conflict have hitherto been muted. But from this point on in John, blasphemy surrounding the sonship claim is a constant theme, culminating in 19:7. Behind this blasphemy concern, of course, is the issue of polytheism, that God is no longer one and incomparable, but there is 'another power in heaven'.

57. As J. Neyrey observes, it is therefore of acute importance to see how Jesus meets the blasphemy charge with its implications of rivalry with God, for Jesus appears in John 5:17 to be claiming the divine prerogatives of giving life and judgment on the Sabbath.

58. Jesus' answer in John 5 is to co-ordinate his actions with those of the Father. He does what the Father does, and this theme again persists in the Gospel, that Jesus does and says what the Father gives him to do and say (John 10:37; 14:10-11; 17:4, 8). This means that Jesus is no 'second power' in heaven, who may act to rival the Father. Rather he does and says what the Father has given him to do and say, and the

Father loves him (John 5:20) and has granted the divine prerogative powers of judgment (5:22) and life-giving (5:21).

59. This means that there is no rivalry between two powers and no breach of the principle of a monotheistic monarchy in the cosmos. The Son has the divine prerogative powers, and the Father's will is that the Son be given honour even as the Father is – a striking thought given the Isaianic motif that God will not share his glory with another.

*The giving Father*

60. But this harmony in word and deed between the Father and Son is based on the Father's will and the Father's gift. Jesus is quite explicit that the Father gives him these divine prerogatives.

61. Nor will it quite do to assert that the gifts of John 5 are only for the purposes of the incarnation, because John 5:26 deals with the gift of life-in-himself. Just as the Father has this, so has he granted it to the Son. The Son has the same measure of life as the Father does. To those versed in the theology of the *homoousion* this is the thought that uncreated eternal life is shared by both Father and Son (and Spirit). But it is put in terms of gift from the Father, and such a gift of life-in-himself is not something that easily fits in space and time. Life-in-himself, life such as the Father has, relates to the Father's life in eternity.

62. This, though, means that the motif of gift is something that marks the relation of Father and Son in eternity and

space and time. It is a feature of both immanent and economic Trinitarian life.

63. The motif of gift is in fact developed extensively throughout the Gospel, notably present in the bread of life discourse of John 6 and the 'high priestly' prayer of John 17. The Father of John's Gospel emerges as a great giver, not just to the world, but to his Son, giving him all authority, glory and the power of life and death, as well as life-in-himself. This underlines the johannine thought that the Father loves the Son (John 3:35) and gives accordingly.

64. This relation, though, is asymmetrical: the Father gives to the Son, and while the Son gives on generously in his turn, the focus is by no means on reciprocal gifts to the Father. Rather the initiative lies with the Father, and the Father gives out of his own. Thus, remarkably, Jesus grounds his authority over his people on the Father's gift of them, acknowledging that they were the Father's to give (John 17:6). Jesus' authority is thus derivative: he grounds it in the gift of the Father.

#### *The sending of the Son*

65. The motif of giving has to be taken with the striking motif of sending. The sending motif was a favourite of Arianism in its homoian phase since to send some-one into the world is to contemplate an action that pre-dates their existence in the world. One might paraphrase the homoian thought thus:

'who was sent into the world? It can't be the human Jesus, because he was sent to take flesh and when he was sent he was not yet possessed of a human nature.

He was sent, then, in his pre-incarnate nature. To be sent, is to be obedient, and thus not truly divine.'

66. Jesus does, of course, refer frequently to the one who sent him, and strikingly says his food is to do the will who sent him (John 4:34), and sending and doing the Father's will also appear together elsewhere in Jesus' teaching (John 5:30; and 6:38). It is difficult to rephrase this sending motif at the will of another so as to make an egalitarian relationship, a difficulty heightened by the way that Jesus compares his Father's sending of him into the world with his own sending of his disciples (17:18), and our relationship with our sender is clearly one of obedience.

67. Nor will it do to claim that references to the will of 'him who sent me' somehow equates to the will of Father, Son and Spirit. For this undermines the revelatory principle of the incarnation: what appear to be the relationships are not the relationships, and what appears to be obedience to another turns out to be agreement with one's own will. This potentially, of course, undermines the work of Jesus as one who obeys for us, which has serious soteriological ramifications.

#### *True sons and their fathers' wills*

68. Rather, both the sending and giving motifs point to the Son as a true son, for sons love to do their fathers' will (John 14:31), and to the Father as a true father, for fathers love to give generous inheritances to their sons. To this extent, the Father-Son relationship conceived as an asymmetrical relationship in which the Father loves and wills and gives, and the Son loves and obeys corresponds with what the biblical

witness as a whole suggests. Given the Decalogue and the stipulation that sons honour and obey, it seems odd that the true Son should not conform to this pattern. But that is what the egalitarian case demands.

*Moltmann's challenge over 'Abba'*

69. Naturally for Moltmann, such an ordinal conception of the Father-Son relationship is misconceived because the 'Abba' terminology will not allow it.

70. For Moltmann this 'Abba' language is non-patriarchal, so that Sonship here does not connote the natural. Instead the keynote is an 'unprecedented intimacy' which excludes authority.

71. This, of course, contributes to Moltmann's more general project of opposition to hierarchy in state, church and family. For our relation with the First Person is patterned on the Son's. Moltmann describes God's new kingdom:

In this kingdom God is not the Lord; he is the merciful Father. In this kingdom there are no servants; there are only God's free children. In this kingdom what is required is not obedience and submission it is love and free participation.<sup>24</sup>

72. Moltmann appeals precisely to the Sonship relation revealed by the 'Abba' language to show that authority is not present between Father and Son.

73. Moltmann cites Jeremias' work on 'Abba',<sup>25</sup> although without specifying how much of Jeremias' argument he accepts. Jeremias certainly stresses the novelty of Jesus' father terminology, which naturally makes it an important

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<sup>24</sup> Moltmann 1981:70.

<sup>25</sup> Moltmann 1981: 69 n. 17; 70 n. 19.

field of inquiry. Jeremias has also been associated with arguing '...that Jesus held and taught a unique and novel view of God as near, loving and accessible, rather than distant and remote.'<sup>26</sup> M. Hooker describes Jeremias' case as being that 'Abba' is 'especially intimate'.<sup>27</sup>

74. However, M. Thompson notes that Jeremias both retracted the view that 'Abba' is baby-talk and anyway held it is not *simply* an indication of familiarity.<sup>28</sup> In fact, Jeremias includes obedience as an element: 'He spoke to God as a child to its father: confidently and securely, and yet at the same time reverently and obediently.'<sup>29</sup>

75. Hence Jeremias does not support Moltmann's contention of familiarity excluding authority. Nevertheless Moltmann may still have correctly understood the 'Abba' language, where Jeremias has not, a possibility now falling for consideration.

76. It has often been observed that 'Abba' is recorded just once on Jesus' lips (Mark 14:36). This is perhaps a slender basis on which to construct a dominant theological theme.<sup>30</sup>

77. However, while Mark 14:36 certainly reflects intimacy, the whole verse and its context must also be considered. The context is prayer. While prayer may suggest intimacy, it may also imply acknowledgement of authority and obedience. The rest of the verse bears this out. God is addressed as 'Abba' in

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<sup>26</sup> Thompson 2000:25.

<sup>27</sup> Hooker 1991:348.

<sup>28</sup> Thompson 2000:27. Hooker notes the criticism that the term can be a courtesy address from a disciple to a rabbi (Hooker 1991:348), and refers to the objections of Vermes and Barr to Jeremias' case.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted at Thompson 2000:27 from Jeremias *Prayers of Jesus* 62-63.

<sup>30</sup> The occurrences in Romans and Galatians do not materially affect the points made here.

a petition where the Father's will is preferred to Jesus'. Hooker comments both on the echo of the Lord's Prayer and also that 'Once again we are reminded by Mark that Jesus is obedient to God's will.'<sup>31</sup> Moltmann's disjunction between obedience and intimacy is not apparent.<sup>32</sup> As such his proposal fails.

*summary*

78. In the light of this, the suggestions that the obedience of the Son is not found in Scripture or is limited to the human nature, or is somehow inimical to Jesus' divinity must be judged a failure. The data of obedience is simply there, and the primacy of the Father's will features in both the giving and sending motifs, and cannot be restricted simply to Jesus' life after he has been sent into the world.

79. The charge however has been made that this approach is a novelty, so a brief survey of some major figures in the Trinitarian debate is called for.

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<sup>31</sup> Hooker 1991:349. See too her stress on obedience in the Passion 1991:22f. Similarly Cranfield 1977:433f sees the verse as upholding Jesus' obedience.

<sup>32</sup> Moltmann cannot have recourse to the 'Athanasian' style of response that the 'will' refers, as a matter of 'Scope', to Jesus' humanity. Moltmann's argument requires the divinity to be in view.

## **Is the concept of the Son's obedience alien to Nicene Trinitarian theology?**

*Tertullian*

80. In the ante-Nicene period, the obedience of the Son is clearly evidenced in Tertullian's *Against Praxeas*. He argues for a single divine monarchy or dominion,<sup>33</sup> which is the Father's, and into which he calls the Son.<sup>34</sup> There is no alternative sovereignty (*alia dominatio*) because all authority traces back to one source. The Son's authority derives from the Father and the Son does his will (propositions drawn from Matthew 28:18 and John 5:19).

81. Tertullian's debate was with the modalist theology of Praxeas.<sup>35</sup> In this he was determined to uphold the distinction of the Persons, but was also contending for the principle of revelation in the Incarnation: if the relation between Father and Son shown in, for example, prayer is not the 'real' relationship then God has not truly been revealed as John 14:9 insists. In the present context this is a forceful point. The Incarnation shows us the Son obeying his Father. To be invited to see the Son as ordinally as well as ontologically equal to his Father is not only to move beyond what the Incarnation reveals, but to move against what the Incarnation reveals.

82. The obvious response to this is that the Son only obeys in his human nature, that is in the Incarnation and not otherwise. Two points should be made briefly here. The Third Council of Constantinople (681 A.D) dealt with the relation of

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<sup>33</sup> *Against Praxeas* 3

<sup>34</sup> *Against Praxeas* 4.

<sup>35</sup> Possibly a name coined by Tertullian, suggesting 'Twister'.

the work of the two natures of the Son. It upheld, of course, the two energies or operations of the Son, but preserved the concept of the unity of the **Person** who operated. The Council stated:

We glorify two natural operations indivisibly, immutably, inconfusedly, inseparably in the same our Lord Jesus Christ our true God, that is to say a divine operation and a human operation...

83. For Constantinople III, building unmistakably on the Chalcedonian Formula, one is faced with two questions about actions of the Son. The first is, in what nature? Thus the Son dies in his human nature. The second, though, is, Who acts? And the answer for either nature is, the Son. In answer to the question who obeys, the response is, the Son obeys in his Person. This goes to personal relationship.

84. The second brief point is that the Son continues to be incarnate after the Ascension. The Son's obedience, even if one did think it was only in his human nature, appears to extend into future eternity.

85. However, it may well be objected that Tertullian has defective streaks in his Trinitarian theology and that it is precisely his subordinationist tendencies that are disowned in the Nicene theology of the fourth century as the Arian question came to the fore.

### *Athanasius*

86. Athanasius is the obvious person with whom to start a consideration of Nicene theology. The Creed of 325 had dwelt forcibly on the Second Person as Son, for from this springs the distinction between being begotten and being made.

87. Athanasius was well aware, though, that the Bible uses son in different senses. There is a sonship of believing and obedience only and a sonship of nature, such as Isaac's to Abraham.<sup>36</sup> Arians will only concede the former, while Athanasius contends for the latter. The question then is, does Athanasius think that natural sons do not have relationships of obedience?

88. Several features suggest that Athanasius did think natural sonship involved a father's natural authority. He notes that sons are often called servants, and properly so, because of fathers' authority (*exousia*).<sup>37</sup> Moreover, Solomon is called servant but treated as a son, and hence it does not contradict the true sonship of the Son for him to be called servant too, as the scriptures do.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Athanasius notes how unlike Adonijah and Absalom the Son is. They try to overthrow their father's kingdom, but the Son foments no such rivalry. Rather he glorifies the Father and does his will, argues Athanasius, citing John 6:38.<sup>39</sup>

89. Athanasius' thought is clear. The Son is a 'good' son, and as such naturally does his Father's will and 'serves' him. Like Tertullian before him, it is this way of integrating Father and Son that preserves the cosmic monarchy and offsets any charge of polytheism.

### *Hilary of Poitiers*

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<sup>36</sup> *De Decretis* 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Contra Arianos* II.3

<sup>38</sup> *Contra Arianos* II.4

<sup>39</sup> *Contra Arianos* III.7.

90. However, does this imperil the deity of the Son? Hilary of Poitiers answers this by appealing strongly to the notion of sonship itself. Sons share the nature of their fathers: human fathers beget other humans, not dogs or cats. In the case of a divine nature, a divine father will beget another perfect divine person,<sup>40</sup> but since that divine nature is indivisible, the Father and Son in such a relationship will themselves be indivisible.

91. Hilary comments on the fact that the Son is subject to the Father, but nevertheless truly divine. This subjection does not mean the Son is a creature as Arians contended. Hilary writes:

For a distinction does exist, for the subjection of the Son is filial reverence, the subjection of all other things is the weakness of things created.<sup>41</sup>

92. Hilary therefore focuses us strongly on the notion of sonship. Sonship both guarantees the Son's full deity and his consubstantiality with his Father, but also his subjection in filial reverence.

### *Augustine*

93. Augustine has several answers to the homoian arguments of his day (some 60 years after Hilary), but one of them moves very much along Hilary's lines.

94. Augustine faced a homoian argument which had three parts:-

- (a) obedience meant inferiority of nature.
- (b) the scriptures showed the Son did obey,
- (c) therefore, he could not be fully divine.

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<sup>40</sup> *De Trinitate* II.11

<sup>41</sup> *De Synodis* 79.

95. Augustine comments:

Of what else are they trying to convince us by these testimonies of the sacred scriptures but that the Father and the Son have different natures, because the Son is shown to be obedient to the Father? They would not, of course, say this in the case of human beings. After all, if a human son is obedient to his human father, it does not follow that the two of them have different natures.<sup>42</sup>

96. Therefore Augustine (like Athanasius and Hilary before him) simply did not accept premise (a) of the Arian/homoian case. To those arguing for an ordinal relational Trinity it seems odd to be charged with arianising when it seems that egalitarians actually share premise (a) with Arian/homoians.

## Conclusions

97. There are good reasons for seeing 1 Cor 11:3 as including connotations of authority in the headship relations it describes. There are also good reasons for thinking 1 Cor 11:3 applies to the eternal God-Christ relationship. Even if it does not, the question arises whether the Father-Son relationship in eternity is to be considered ordinal or egalitarian. John's Gospel depicts the Son as one who does his Father's will and major patristic theologians, including those from the formative stage of Nicene theology, see sonship as having relational submission as a natural feature.

98. For these reasons, those opposing women bishops and who argue that obedience is not necessarily inconsistent with ontological equality cannot be dismissed as holding an unbiblical or even heretical view of the Trinity.

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<sup>42</sup> *Answer to the Arian Sermon* VI.6. See also *Answer to Maximinus* II.xiv.8 and 9.

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