The doctrine of the Triune God is difficult to understand. It has, therefore, come under attack from many quarters over the centuries. Even orthodox theologians differ among themselves when it comes to the explanation of the details. Today the doctrine has come into discussion again and this time among evangelical believers. The influence of feminism has produced two camps among them, one called egalitarians and the other complementarians, the former asserting that men and women are equal in all things and the latter saying men and women are equal as human beings, but have different or complementary roles or functions. To buttress their arguments these two camps have had recourse to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The claim is that since man was made in God's image, how God is in His Triune Self must have something to say about how men and women ought to relate. Nuances aside, the egalitarians claim that the position of the church has always been that there is no subordination of one person to the other in God, while the complementarians claim there is functional subordination of one person to the other. To be clear about this, there is no disagreement between the two camps that how God is in Himself models for us how we ought to relate. The disagreement is about how God is in Himself. In this article I want to quickly examine if how God is in Himself determines how men and women ought to relate to each other and, if so, what Scripture and our confessions say about how the three Persons in God relate.

When God said "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" He created them "male and female".

Since man is made in God's image and the plural pronouns us and our are used by God there is a prima facie case for accepting that how the Triune God is in Himself is a pattern for how man and woman are to relate. The more detailed revelation how God first made the man and then made woman from man to be a help fit for him may then, however, not be separated from this provisional conclusion. We conclude that the first two chapters of Genesis furnish sufficient evidence to allow us to provisionally adopt the Triune God as model for how man and woman ought to relate.

The Church has made pronouncements with respect to the Triune God from the beginning of the New Testament era. The Apostolic Creed is the second of our early creeds. It does mention that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Father's only begotten Son, but has nothing to say about the Holy Spirit's mode of existence.

The Nicene Creed is the earliest creed we subscribe to. It speaks of the three Persons as follows: the Father is called God, while the Son is called Lord as is the Holy Spirit. God could equally be applied to all three Persons and it does this of the Son, but not of the Holy Spirit. The Son is called God of God, true God of true God, whereas the Holy Spirit is called the Lord and Giver of life, who is worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. There is then a somewhat nuanced understanding of the divinity of the three Persons. While all are God there are distinctions and they tend in the direction of subordination.

This differentiation is also apparent where the Son is called the only begotten of the Father, begotten of the Father before all ages, begotten, not made and here the differentiation tends in the direction of subordination due to the names of the Persons.

Subordination is also apparent with respect to the Holy Spirit. In the original creed He proceeds from the Father only. In the Western form He proceeds from the Father and the Son. This was usually understood as a secondary procession. Whichever form is chosen, it is obvious that the
Nicene Creed is not scared of subordination of a sort. God the Son and God the Spirit both are fully God and eternal, but derive their being from the Father or from the Father and the Son. This subordination is not an essential subordination since they are all equally divine, but it is an existential subordination.

The Athanasian Creed is the latest of our early creeds. It was never accepted by the Eastern Church because it too accepts the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Son. It is very strong on the essential equality of the three persons of God. However, it too speaks of the Father being from none, but the Son is begotten from the Father alone, while the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. The existential subordination we noted with the Nicene Creed is also maintained here and this leads to a functional subordination in theology.¹

A problem that has arisen for this ancient doctrine is the rejection of the translation only begotten of the term 'monogene'. Nowadays many would translate it as one of a kind. The question hinges on whether the second part of the word is derived from the verb gennaw – to beget, or from the noun genos – kind. The argument does not amount to much for genos can also mean child, descendant, kin. The Nicene Creed definitely favours the meaning only begotten as can be seen from the twofold use of the verb gennaw – begotten – after the use of 'monogene'. The Latin translation (unigenitum) of the Creed and the Latin Bible, the Vulgate, also understood it this way. The early creeds then seem to favour, not an essential, but an existential subordination and so a functional subordination.

The Belgic Confession does not speak to our problem in Article 8 where we would expect it, but it may speak to it in Article 10, where it says

"We believe that Jesus Christ according to His divine nature is the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from eternity, not made, nor created – for then He would be a creature – but of the same essence with the Father, equally-eternal, the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of His being (Heb 1:3), and is equal to Him in all things."

The question is if this refers to their essential equality, or includes existential equality and excludes functional subordination.² It seems to refer to the essential equality between the Father and the Son as the text quoted implies existential and so functional subordination.

The French Confession, which heavily influenced the Belgic Confession, does not have this phrase. Calvin, one of its authors, however, is interesting in this regard, because he may still have influenced the Belgic Confession. In his Institutes of the Christian Religion (I.13.19-26) He argues that the Son and the Holy Spirit did not derive their divine essence from the Father. They are God of themselves. He is against the existential subordination of the Son to the Father or the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son with respect to essence or substance.

He says: "Yet we teach from the Scriptures that God is one in essence, and hence that the essence both of the Son and of the Spirit is unbegotten; but inasmuch as the Father is first in order, and from himself begot his Wisdom, as has just been said he is rightly deemed the beginning and fountainhead of the whole of divinity. Thus God without particularization is unbegotten; and the Father also in respect to his person is unbegotten."

"Therefore we say that deity in an absolute sense exists of itself; whence likewise we confess that the Son since he is God, exists of himself, but not in respect of his Person; indeed, since he is the Son, we say that he exists from the Father. Thus his essence is without beginning; while the beginning of his person is God himself."

(I.13.25).

We can agree with what Calvin argues for – one essence and auto-existence, but the distinction between the Son's auto-existence and the derivation of the Son's personhood from the Father is less than clear. Further, Calvin's changes do not seem to affect the question of functional subordination materially, for that can still exist where the person of the Son and the Holy Spirit are derived from the Father, or the Father and the Son, in contradistinction to their essence. Even if
each Person is God of themselves we still are forced in the direction of existential subordination of personhood by his formulation.

Scripture is the one source of our knowledge of the Triune God and it is to them that we now turn to shed some light on this question. There we find that God the Father is never sent, but sends. The name Father already implies this. If God the Father wishes to be so known, then the name carries meaning, and it is a meaning well understood by us of authority. It would strike us as extremely strange if the Son sent the Father.

The Father sent the Son Joh 6:38; 7:28, 29; 8:42; 10:36; 16:5; 17:18. This sending must at least imply authority for authority resides with the sender. Some may think that this only applies to the Lord Jesus Christ in His incarnation, but that is not so. The incarnation was a result of His sending. The above texts are chosen because they imply that the Lord Jesus Christ was sent from heaven, while in a purely divine state. The name by which He has revealed Himself to us, the Son of God, implies that He accepts that He is under authority.

The Holy Spirit never became man, but was also sent. The Father sent the Holy Spirit together with the Son, but the latter sent in a secondary way Joh 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7. This secondary sending is somewhat complicated by the fact that it is done by the incarnate Christ, our Lord Acts 2:33, 36. What is pertinent to this investigation is if the Son sends the Spirit because He proceeds from the Son, or by virtue of His victory over sin, death and Satan as Man. Biblically we cannot exclude either. The two function together. If the sending of the Holy Spirit is in any way related to the mode of His existence i.e. His proceeding from the Son, we have another case of existential subordination of at least personhood and so of function. The name Spirit also implies subordination, for Spirit is understood as the inner person of God cf. 1 Cor 2:11; 14:32.

It seems then that there is an authority structure in the Triune God. God is one. His will and mind are one. When God the Father wills something it is as Father. The Son wills the very same thing as Son. The Holy Spirit wills it as both the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son. There is no potential for conflict in God, for the love of the Persons for each other is perfect and complete and that love includes the acceptance of the relation in which they stand to each other. Each keeps their place and fulfils their proper function. There is no competition, but a common desire to fulfill their common will. Together they execute their one will and mind, each in His respective place. In the sending of the Son by the Father and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son the one will and mind of God was the salvation of His people and the destruction of Satan. Each fulfilled and continues to fulfill His role. The functions of the Son and the Holy Spirit were and still are subordinate to the Father's. So whatever the truth may be about the existential subordination, whether of essence or personhood, there is a functional subordination and it seems rooted in an existential subordination.

What does all this imply for the relation of man and woman? If being created in God's image as male and female, and female from male, and even child from father and mother – if God's image determines how we ought to conduct our relationships, then there is functional subordination derived from existential subordination and the weight of evidence is on the side of the complementarians.

The egalitarians would portray God as a democracy of persons and in this way bring human relationships into line with today's democratic ideals, but if we are to model especially the church on what God has revealed of Himself in His triune existence, then to democratize the church will take it away from being in the image of God and will be the death of the church. If I have correctly portrayed the interrelationships of the Triune God, and being in God's image is constitutive of true humanity, then any departure from that will destroy us. We should understand that God desires to renew us in His image by His Spirit. Therefore, it is essential that we know how God interrelates.

Does that mean that how we now live as husband and wife and family, or in the church is the ideal? We are sinful people, and rarely do we even approach that oneness of mind and will that is God's. Rarely do we truly reflect the image of God and, therefore, the church and its families often
show grave defects and sometimes the worldly solutions might seem attractive. They always attract the flesh, for they come from the flesh.

However, the solution is not to follow the world with its humanity destroying ideals, but let us follow God who will reinstate us in full honour and glory and is recreating us with one will and mind to glorify Him by truly being His image. Then husband, wife and children find their true place. Then men and women find their true functions. Then the whole functions as God intended it and peace reigns in faith working through love in the image of God.

JGR Kroeze

© 2016
www.christianstudylibrary.org

Endnotes:

1 By essential subordination I mean that there is no subordination as far as God's essence or substance goes. They are all equally God and so equally participate in everything that is God. By existential subordination I mean that the Son derives His existence from the Father and the Spirit from the Father and the Son. By functional subordination I mean that there is an authority structure in God among the Persons.

2 We do not find such a statement in Article 11 about the Holy Spirit, who is there simply said to be in order the third person of the Holy Trinity.