

# HIERARCHY OR MUTUALITY IN THE TRINITY?

## A Case Study on the Relationship of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament

### Statement of the Problem

Over the last forty years, the Trinity has become a central topic of debate among evangelical theologians in all disciplines due to the popularization of a newer conception of the Trinity—referred to by many as eternal, functional subordination (EFS), but will hereafter be called “neo-subordinationism.”<sup>1</sup> Neo-subordinationism affirms that the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son and Spirit—are fully equal *ontologically*, but denies equality in terms of *roles, functions, and authority*. It asserts that there is a unilateral-hierarchical ordering pattern that is *essential* to the triune God in which the Son is *exclusively* subordinated in function and authority to the Father, and the Spirit is *exclusively* subordinated in function and authority to the Father and the Son (for those who accept the *filioque* clause) in *eternity*. Although neo-subordinationism continues to grow in popularity, there are many evangelical theologians, who have heavily criticized this conception of the Trinity, declaring it to be a significant departure from Scripture and traditional Christian orthodoxy. While these scholars join neo-subordinationists in upholding the full ontological equality of the Trinitarian persons, they adamantly disagree with an eternal, essential, unilateral hierarchy in the Trinity.

### Purpose

This poster seeks to test the theses of these two positions regarding intra-Trinitarian relationships by way of a case study on the relationship between the Son and the Spirit in the New Testament (NT) in order to answer the following research question: does the NT portray the relationship between the Son and the Spirit as a unilateral-hierarchical relationship in which the Spirit is eternally subordinated in role, function, and authority to the Son or as a mutual-reciprocal relationship in which they equally share authority and have overlapping roles and functions?

### Methodology

This poster seeks to answer this question through an exegetical and canonical-theological analysis of relevant NT textual data by (1) exploring whether there is a consistent, unilateral-hierarchical ordering pattern of the Son and the Spirit, (2) ascertaining whether the Son and the Spirit share any economic actions in the plan of redemption, and (3) examining the major historical, christological movements of the Trinity in the NT to determine if there is a unilateral-hierarchical or mutual-reciprocal relationship between the Son and the Spirit.

### 1 Is there a consistent, unilateral-hierarchical ordering pattern of the Son and the Spirit?

In his research on Trinitarian ordering patterns in the NT, Rodrick K. Durst identifies “seventy-five triadic order passages” in which all three persons of the Godhead—Father, Son, and Spirit—are mentioned within a range of one to five verses.<sup>2</sup> He found that these “seventy-five triadic instances ... can be organized into” six different categories of patterns, “with all six used in surprisingly balanced percentages overall.”<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1.** Categories and Occurrences of Triadic Ordering Patterns

Pattern Category	Number of Occurrences
Father-Son-Spirit	18
Son-Spirit-Father	15
Son-Father-Spirit	14
Father-Spirit-Son	11
Spirit-Father-Son	9
Spirit-Son-Father	8
= 75	

Source: Rodrick K. Durst, *Reordering the Trinity: Six Movements of God in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 68–69.

In these seventy-five passages, “the Father is named first twenty-nine times ... , the Son is named first twenty-nine times, ... and [the] Spirit is named first seventeen times.”<sup>4</sup> The table below compares the ordering patterns of ten of Durst’s seventy-five triadic passages, sufficiently exhibiting his findings.

**Table 2.** Example Triadic Passages in the New Testament

Passage	Triadic Ordering Pattern		
Matt 28:19	τοῦ πατρὸς	τοῦ υἱοῦ	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος
Acts 2:38–39	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος	κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν
Rom 15:30	τοῦ κυρίου ... Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ	τοῦ πνεύματος	τὸν θεόν
1 Cor 12:4–6	τὸ ... αὐτὸ πνεῦμα	ὁ αὐτὸς κύριος	ὁ ... αὐτὸς θεός
2 Cor 13:14	τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ	τοῦ θεοῦ	τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος
Eph 4:4–6	ἐν πνεύμα	εἷς κύριος	εἷς θεός καὶ πατήρ
Heb 2:3–4	τοῦ κυρίου	τοῦ θεοῦ	πνεύματος ἁγίου
1 Pet 1:2	θεοῦ πατρὸς	ἁγιασμῶ πνεύματος	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
Jude 20–21	πνεύματι ἁγίῳ	θεοῦ	τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
Rev 1:4–6	ὁ ὢν καὶ ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ἐρχόμενος	τῶν ἐπτὰ πνευμάτων	Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

Source: Matthew L. Tinkham Jr., “Neo-subordinationism: The Alien Argumentation in the Gender Debate,” *AUSS* 55.2 (2017): 267.

Thus, the above data reveals that there is no consistent ordering pattern of the three persons of the Trinity in the NT. This suggests that the NT writers “did not believe [that] the three divine ‘persons’ are ordered hierarchically.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, equality, mutuality, and reciprocity—rather than unilateral hierarchy—seem to characterize intra-Trinitarian relationships, including the relationship between the Son and the Spirit.

<sup>1</sup>See Matthew L. Tinkham Jr., “Neo-subordinationism: The Alien Argumentation in the Gender Debate,” *AUSS* 55.2 (2017): 237–290.

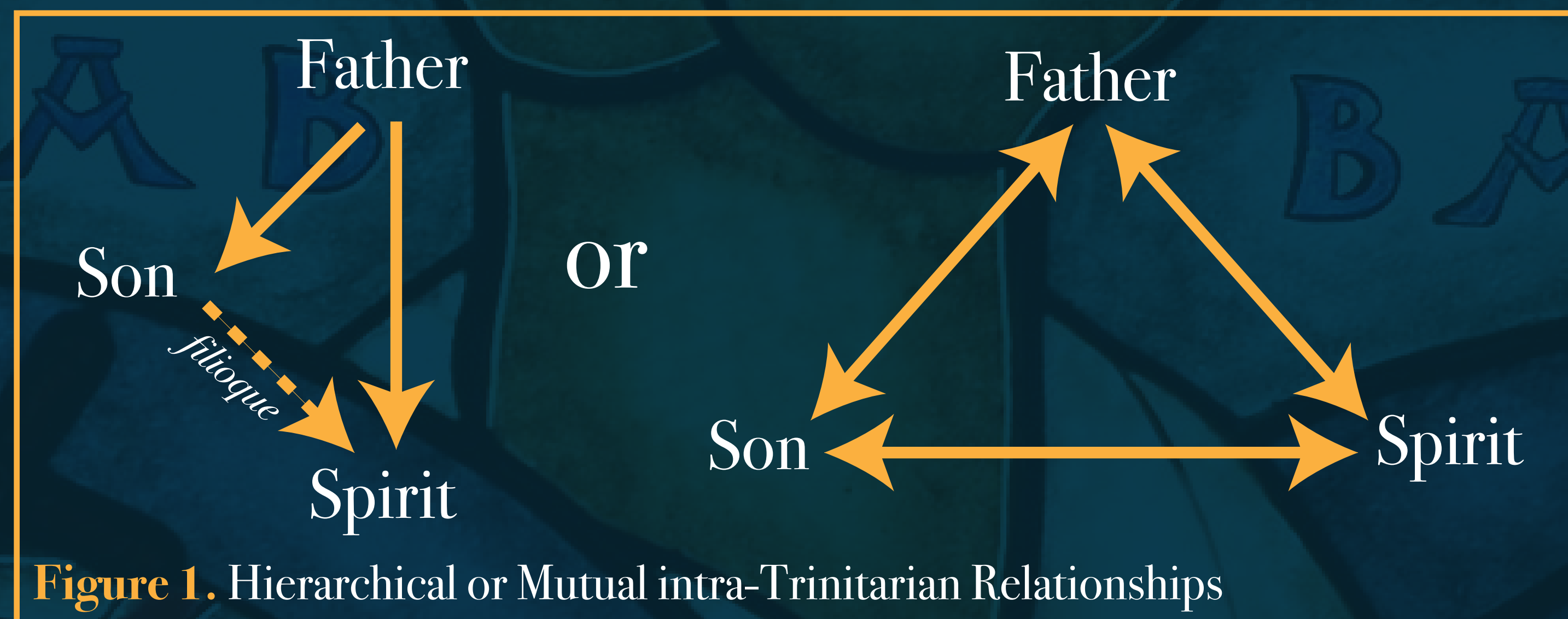
<sup>2</sup>Rodrick K. Durst, *Reordering the Trinity: Six Movements of God in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 68.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Kevin Giles, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 84–85.

<sup>5</sup>Idem, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 110.

<sup>6</sup>See James M. Hamilton Jr., *God’s Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006), 56.



**Figure 1.** Hierarchical or Mutual intra-Trinitarian Relationships

### 2 Do the Son and the Spirit have entirely distinct or shared economic roles and functions?

While they do have some distinct roles and functions (ex., the Son incarnated, not the Spirit), the Son is the *παράκλητος* (1 John 2:1) and the Spirit is the *ἄλλος παράκλητος* (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7). As such, they share numerous roles and functions in the NT.

In John,<sup>6</sup> the Son (3:16–17; 4:34; 5:23–24, 36; 6:29, 57; 7:28–29, 33; 8:16, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44–45; 13:20; 15:21; 17:3, 8, 18, 23, 25; 20:21) and the Spirit (4:10–14; 14:16, 26; 15:26) are given/sent by the Father. The Son (3:32, 34; 5:19, 30; 6:38; 7:16; 8:26, 40; 12:49–50; 15:15) and the Spirit (16:13) speak not from themselves, but only what they hear, namely that which belongs to God (the Son [1:18]; the Spirit [16:13–14]). The Son glorifies/testifies about himself (1:14; 2:11; 8:12–14, 18; 13:31–32; 17:5, 24), and the Spirit glorifies/testifies about the Son (15:26; 16:14). The Son is the truth (14:6) and the Spirit is the “Spirit of truth” (14:17; 15:26; 16:13). The Son (13:19, 26, 36–38; 14:3, 29; 16:1–4, 16–28, 32; 20:18) and the Spirit (16:13) proclaim the future. The Son (3:19–20; 4:16, 18; 5:27; 8:7, 34, 40; 11:40; 12:7–8; 13:8) and the Spirit (16:7–11) convict hearts. The world did not know/receive the Son (1:10–11; 15:18) or the Spirit (14:17), but the Son (1:10–12) and the Spirit (7:39; 14:17) are received by believers. The Son (5:21, 25–26, 40; 6:33; 17:3) and the Spirit (3:6, 8; 6:63) give life. Finally, the Son (7:14; 8:2; 8:20; 13:13–14) and the Spirit (14:26) teach believers.

For believers, the “circumcision of the heart” is christological (Phil 3:3; Col 2:11–12) and pneumatological (Rom 2:28–29; Phil 3:3). Believers are to “walk” (*περιπατέω*) in the Son (Col 1:10; 2:6; 1 Thess 4:1–12; 1 John 2:6) and “in” or “according to the Spirit” (Rom 6:4 [cf. 7:6]; 8:4; 1 Cor 3:1–3; Gal 5:16; 1 Thess 4:1–12). The Son (John 14:20, 23; 15:4–7; 17:23, 26; Rom 8:9–11; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 2:20; Col 1:27) and the Spirit (John 14:17; Rom 8:9–11; 2 Cor 3:16–17; 6:19) indwell believers. Fruit-bearing in the lives of believers is accomplished by the Spirit (Rom 7:4–6; Gal 5:22–23) and by the Son (Phil 1:6, 9–11). Spiritual gifts are given by the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4, 7–11; Eph 4:1–6) and the Son (1 Cor 12:5; Eph 4:7–16). For example, the Spirit (1 Cor 2:6–16; 12:8, 11; Eph 1:17; Col 1:9) and the Son (Col 2:2–3, 8) are the source of the gifts of σοφία, γνῶσις, and σῶνσεις. Additionally, in Revelation, the Son (Rev 1:1–3, 9; 12:17) and the Spirit (1:10; 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 4:2; 17:3; 19:10) reveal prophecy.<sup>7</sup> Thus, according to the NT, the Son and the Spirit have some distinct roles and functions but together share in many others.

<sup>7</sup>See Ranko Stefanovic, “The ‘Spirit of Prophecy’ in the Revelation of John,” in *The Gift of Prophecy in Scripture and History*, ed. Dwain Neilson Esmund and Alberto R. Timm (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2015), 186–197, esp. 193.

### 3 Is the economic subordination in the relationship between the Son and the Spirit characterized as unilateral-hierarchical or mutual-reciprocal?

#### ■ The Son’s Economic Subordination to the Spirit

Like all humans (Matt 1:3, 5, 6), the Son was born from a human mother (Matt 1:16), yet unlike all humans, he was uniquely born ἐκ πνεύματος ἁγίου (Matt 1:18, 20; cf. Luke 1:35). Jesus’s childhood was directed by the Spirit (Luke 1:80; 2:40, 52) in fulfillment of Isa 11:1–3a (also cf. Isa 42:1; 50:4–5; Luke 2:49, 52). The Son was also continually submitted to the empowerment of the Spirit throughout his entire ministry as “the unique bearer of the Spirit.”<sup>8</sup> The Spirit anointed the Son (Acts 10:38) at his baptism by descending upon him (Matt 3:16–17; Mark 1:10–11; Luke 3:22; John 1:32–33) to consecrate him for his messianic ministry. Afterward, the Son, “full of the Holy Spirit” (Luke 4:1), was driven (ἐκβάλλει; Mark 1:12) by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt 4:1; Mark 1:12; Luke 4:1). The Son returned from this experience “in the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14) to begin his messianic ministry. The Son’s whole ministry was Spirit-enabled in fulfillment of Isa 61:1–2 (Luke 4:16–21), for he was given “the Spirit without measure” (John 3:34). Thus, the works of the Son were done “by the Spirit of God” (Matt 12:28). The Son concluded his ministry by “offer[ing] himself without blemish to God” as a sacrifice διὰ πνεύματος αἰωνίου (Heb 9:14). The Son was raised from the dead by himself (John 2:19–21; 10:17–18), the Father (Acts 2:32; 17:31; Rom 4:24–25; 6:4; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:15; 2 Cor 4:14; Gal 1:1; 1 Thess 1:10), and the Spirit (Rom 1:4, 8; 11; 1 Pet 3:18). This data reveals the Son’s deep dependence upon and subordination to the Spirit from the womb to the tomb.

#### ■ The Spirit’s Economic Subordination to the Son

The submission that the Son rendered to the Spirit on earth was reciprocated back to him during the time between his ascension and the *parousia*. After the sacrifice of the Son was accepted in heaven and he was enthroned as the Priest-King in the heavenly sanctuary (Acts 2:32–33; Eph 1:20–23; Rev 4–5), the Son received the promise of the Spirit from the Father and sent him to the apostles at Pentecost (Acts 2:33). John referred to this as the Son’s giving/sending of the Spirit (John 4:10–14; 7:37–39; 15:26; 16:7; 20:22). As such, the Son “is the unique dispenser of the ... Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> What the Spirit shares with Christ’s disciples is received from the Son (John 16:13–14). The Spirit’s main responsibility during this period is to testify of and glorify the Son (John 15:26; 16:14). Thus, the Spirit is functionally subordinate to the Son until this role is completed at the *parousia*. Also during this time, the Son is dependent upon the Spirit to represent him as the *ἄλλος παράκλητος* (John 15:26; 16:14), making him present to believers on earth, while he serves as the Priest-King in heaven. “So the Spirit is dependent upon Christ to be sent, to know what to say, and to bring glory to Christ. But at the same time Christ is dependent upon the ... Spirit to be made spiritually present on earth while [he] ministers bodily in heaven’s sanctuary.”<sup>10</sup> This survey of the Son-Spirit relationship in the NT reveals that, at certain times in the plan of redemption, the Son takes a subordinate role to the Spirit, while, at other times, the Spirit takes a subordinate role to the Son until the *parousia*. Contra neo-subordinationism, this data suggests that the Son-Spirit relationship is mutual-reciprocal, not unilateral-hierarchical.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Green, *I Believe in the Holy Spirit*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 37.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>10</sup>Norman R. Gulley, *God as Trinity*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology*; 4 vols. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011), 148.