

# Charles Hodge on the Doctrine of the “Adorable Trinity”

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## INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the untimely death of his brother’s son in December 1850, Charles Hodge wrote to his brother Hugh gently to remind him that the only way to cultivate the kind of sorrow that “is [in] every way healthful to the soul” is to mingle sorrow “with pious feeling, with resignation, confidence in God, [and] hope in his mercy and love.”<sup>1</sup> “The great means of having our sorrow kept pure,” Hodge counseled, “is to keep near to God, to feel assured of his love, that he orders all things well, and will make even our afflictions work out for us a far more exceeding and an eternal weight of glory.”<sup>2</sup> But precisely how did Hodge encourage his brother Hugh to “keep near to God,” and in so doing to cultivate the kind of sorrow that works life and not death, the kind of sorrow that is best described as “sorrow after a godly sort”?<sup>3</sup> In short, Hodge encouraged his brother to cultivate godly and not “worldly”<sup>4</sup>

sorrow by remembering the doctrine of the Trinity. “When we speak of keeping near to God,” Hodge maintained, “we mean God in Christ, and God as reconciled and made propitious to us by his blood. And Christ is near to us, and dwells in us, and shows us His love, and works all grace in us by the Holy Spirit ... If, therefore, God will graciously give you and Margaret the Holy Ghost, He will thereby give you Himself, and open to you the infinite sources of peace and consolation that are to be found in Him [alone].”<sup>5</sup>

Among other things, what this rather poignant exchange between Hodge and his brother serves to illustrate is Hodge’s understanding of the formative and immensely practical role that doctrine ought to play in the life of every believer. While Hodge is well known in the historiography of North American evangelicalism for his relentless insistence upon doctrinal rigor and precision, he is perhaps less well known for his unambiguous insistence that God did not reveal the “doctrines of the Bible” merely “to teach men science, but to bring them to the saving knowledge of Himself.”<sup>6</sup> The doctrines of the Bible “are ... intimately connected with religion, or the life of God in the soul,” he maintained, for they not only “determine the religious experience of believers,” but they “are [also] presupposed in that experience,”<sup>7</sup> and for that reason they are essential to “the Christian’s practical faith, [and constitute] the truth on which he daily lives.”<sup>8</sup> As the exchange between Hodge and his brother Hugh makes clear, Hodge was persuaded that this is especially the case with what he refers to in a number of places as the doctrine of “the adorable Trinity.”<sup>9</sup> “It is a great mistake,” he argues in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*,

to regard that doctrine as a mere speculative or abstract truth, concerning the constitution of the Godhead, with which we have no practical concern, or which we are required to believe simply because it is revealed. On the contrary, it underlies the whole plan of salvation, and determines the character of the religion (in the subjective sense of that word) of all true Christians. It is the unconscious, or unformed faith, even of those of God’s people who are unable to understand the term by which it is expressed. They all believe in God, the Creator and Preserver against whom they have sinned, whose justice they know they cannot satisfy, and whose image they cannot restore to their apostate nature. They, therefore, as of necessity, believe in a divine Redeemer and a divine Sanctifier. They have, as it were, the factors of the doctrine of the Trinity in their own religious convictions.

No mere speculative doctrine, especially no doctrine so mysterious and so out of analogy with all other objects of human knowledge, as that of the Trinity, could ever have held the abiding control over the faith of the Church, which this doctrine has maintained. It is not, therefore, by any arbitrary decision, nor from any bigoted adherence to hereditary beliefs, that the Church has always refused to recognize as Christians those who reject this doctrine. This judgment is only the expression of the deep conviction that Antitrinitarians must adopt a radically and practically different system of religion from that on which the Church builds her hopes. It is not too much to say with [G. A.] Meyer, that “the Trinity is the point in which all Christian ideas and interests unite; at once the beginning and the end of all insight into Christianity.”<sup>10</sup>

How, then, did Hodge conceive of the doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine that he regarded as the most essential and practical of all the biblical doctrines? In the discussion that follows, I summarize Hodge’s understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity by considering what he calls the biblical, ecclesiastical, and philosophical “forms”<sup>11</sup> of the doctrine, and I do this while paying particular attention to the precise nature of the “subordination” that he believed is characteristic of the enduring relationships between the distinct persons of the Godhead. Following an analysis that is largely descriptive, I conclude by offering a brief assessment of how the subtleties of Hodge’s understanding of subordination might be relevant to discussions of the Trinity that are currently taking place in the evangelical camp.

### **THE “BIBLICAL FORM” OF THE TRINITY**

Charles Hodge’s discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity is characterized by the same erudition and restraint that typifies his approach to discussions of other biblical doctrines more generally. While aware of the many ways that all sorts of commitments can and do inform how theologians move from the text of Scripture to the formulation of particular doctrines, his discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity is grounded in an aversion to all forms of presumptuous speculation on the one hand, and a readiness to defer to what he repeatedly refers to as the “facts” of biblical revelation on the other.<sup>12</sup> As such, Hodge’s approach to the doctrine of the Trinity is marked by an unwillingness to extrapolate beyond what he believed is warranted by the

teaching of Scripture, an unwillingness that he insisted was sorely lacking in the approaches of those contemporaries who spoke and wrote as if “‘the deep things of God’ had [all] been revealed to [them,]” and who as a consequence imagined that their powers of perception were so profound that they could, so to speak, march “through rivulet and river, puddle and ocean, with equal ease, ... [and find] bottom everywhere.”<sup>13</sup> For example, just as he was persuaded that Horace Bushnell’s “cheating mirage of a trinity”—a “trinity of revelations” rather than a Trinity of distinct persons<sup>14</sup>—was finally grounded not in the teaching of Scripture but in Bushnell’s eagerness to submit to nothing more than the determinations of his own understanding, so too he insisted that Samuel Baird’s perhaps overstated insistence “That man’s nature was designed to reveal the relations of the persons of the Trinity” was finally informed not by careful attention to the nuances of the text, but by “an overweening and unfounded confidence” in his own powers of discernment, an “absence of modesty” that led him to read Scripture while mistakenly presuming that he had “a special gift for philosophical discrimination and analysis.”<sup>15</sup> So what did Hodge believe a faithful reading of the Bible would lead believers to think about the doctrine of the Trinity? What did he think is included, in other words, in the “biblical form” of the doctrine?

Near the beginning of his discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge implicitly acknowledges that Scripture is not a textbook on systematic theology, but an organic book that reveals “all the great doctrines of the Bible” in a progressive fashion.<sup>16</sup> “What at first is only obscurely intimated is gradually unfolded in subsequent parts of the sacred volume,” he argues, “until the truth is [finally] revealed in its fullness” in the New Testament.<sup>17</sup> Hodge contends that the “great doctrine” of the Trinity is no exception to this rule. While the Trinity is nowhere explicitly “presented in a doctrinal formula in the Word of God,” nevertheless “the several constituent elements” of the doctrine “are [gradually] brought into view, some in one place, and some in another,” and together they yield a biblical doctrine that can be summarized according to what Hodge calls five “particulars.”<sup>18</sup>

The first “particular” has to do with the unity of the divine essence, and it asserts that “There is one only living and true God, or divine Being.”<sup>19</sup> The Scriptures, Hodge contends, unambiguously and “everywhere” affirm that there is one, and only one, God.<sup>20</sup> The second “particular” relates to “the

true and equal divinity of the Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>21</sup> According to Hodge, just as the Scriptures make clear that “all [the] divine titles and attributes are ascribed equally to the Father, Son, and Spirit,” so too they reveal that “The one is as much the object of adoration, love, confidence, and devotion as the other.”<sup>22</sup> The third “particular” relates to the distinct personhood of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Hodge maintains that “The terms Father, Son, and Spirit do not express [merely] different relations of God to his creatures,” but they point to the real existence of three “intelligent subject[s] who can say I, who can be addressed as Thou, and who can act and can be the object of action.”<sup>23</sup> As such, the third “particular” declares that according to the Scriptures, “The one divine Being subsists in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.”<sup>24</sup>

The fourth and fifth “particulars” are of particular relevance to the central focus of this essay because they have to do with the ultimately mysterious nature of the relations in which the distinct persons of the Godhead stand not only to one another, but also to “the Church and the world” in which we live.<sup>25</sup> According to the fourth “particular,” although it is no doubt true that Scripture reveals the Father, Son, and Spirit to be “the same in substance, and equal in power and glory,” nevertheless “it is no less true” that “according to the Scriptures, (a.) ... the Father is first, the Son second, and the Spirit third. (b.) The Son is of the Father ... and the Spirit is of the Father and of the Son. (c.) The Father sends the Son, and the Father and Son send the Spirit. [And] (d.) The Father operates through the Son, and the Father and Son operate through the Spirit.”<sup>26</sup> Since “The converse of these statements is never found” in the teaching of Scripture—since, in other words, the Son “is never said to send the Father, nor to operate through Him; nor is the Spirit ever said to send the Father, or the Son, or to operate through them”—Hodge concludes that according to the Scriptures, there is within the Trinity (i.e., the Trinity *ad intra*) a subordination of the persons not in terms of nature or essence, but “as to the mode of subsistence and operation.”<sup>27</sup> The fifth and final “particular” of the “Biblical form” of the doctrine—the form which Hodge contends “is the form in which the doctrine has always entered into the faith of the Church, as a part of its religious convictions and experience”<sup>28</sup>—addresses the way in which the distinct persons of the Godhead relate to one another in all of their actions. According to Hodge, while the Scriptures clearly teach that “the persons of the Trinity concur in all acts *ad extra*,” nevertheless they

also make clear that not only are there some acts “which are predominantly referred to the Father, others to the Son, and others to the Spirit,” but there are also “certain acts, or conditions predicated of one person of the Trinity, which are never predicated of either of the others.”<sup>29</sup> In this regard, Hodge ends his discussion of the “biblical form” of the doctrine of the Trinity by insisting that those who read Scripture faithfully will conclude that within the Trinity (i.e., the Trinity *ad intra* and not *ad extra*), “generation belongs exclusively to the Father, filiation to the Son, and procession to the Spirit.”<sup>30</sup>

### THE “ECCLESIASTICAL FORM” OF THE TRINITY

Throughout his discussion of the “biblical form” of the doctrine of the Trinity, Hodge maintains that the “particulars” outlined above—which, in his estimation, form the at least implicit “foundation” of the “religious consciousness” of every believer—are informed by “no philosophical element,” but are “simply an arrangement of the clearly revealed facts bearing on this subject.”<sup>31</sup> While Hodge insists that this form of the doctrine “includes everything that is essential to the integrity of the doctrine, and all that is embraced in the faith of ordinary Christians,”<sup>32</sup> nevertheless he acknowledges that the biblical “particulars” alone could never have provided an adequate basis for the ongoing life of the Church. Indeed, not only was there an increasingly apparent necessity for a statement of the doctrine that would guard the truth “from the evil influence of false or erroneous exhibitions of it,” but there was also—within the Church—an “inward” as well as an “outward necessity ... for a clear, comprehensive, and consistent statement of the various elements of this complex doctrine of the Christian faith.”<sup>33</sup> According to Hodge,

When a doctrine so complex as that of the Trinity is presented as an object of faith, the mind is forced to reflect upon it, to endeavor to ascertain what it includes, and how its several parts are to be stated, so as to avoid confusion or contradiction. Besides this internal necessity for a definite statement of the doctrine, such statement was forced upon the Church from without. Even among those who honestly intended to receive what the Scriptures taught upon the subject, it was inevitable that there should arise diversity in the mode of statement, and confusion and contradiction in the use of terms. As the Church is one, not externally merely, but really and inwardly, this diversity and confusion are as

much an evil, a pain, and an embarrassment, troubling its inward peace, as the like inconsistency and confusion would be in an individual mind.<sup>34</sup>

For Hodge, then, the “ecclesiastical form” of the doctrine of the Trinity relates to the shape it assumed in the early centuries of the Church as believers sought not only to clarify the Biblical “particulars” for those who already claimed to believe them, but also—and at the same time—to defend those “particulars” in response to the burgeoning theological controversies of their day.<sup>35</sup> According to Hodge, the definitive statements that are associated with this process of historical development are found in the Nicene, Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds, and together, these constitute—with only minor differences of “amplification”—what he calls the “Church Form of that fundamental article of the Christian faith.”<sup>36</sup> In his overview of the relevant history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity—and before distinguishing his understanding of the Trinity from that of those who insisted upon going “beyond”<sup>37</sup> what he contends are the biblical affirmations that are found in these doctrinal standards—Hodge highlights what he believes are the affirmations of these creeds that are essential to the confessional orthodoxy of the Church. The first is in response to the Sabellians, or those who endorsed some form of “a modal trinity,” and it affirms “that the terms Father, Son, and Spirit were not expressive merely of relations *ad extra*,” but of “internal, necessary and eternal relations in the Godhead; ... they are personal designations, so that the Father is one person, the Son another person, and the Spirit another person.”<sup>38</sup> The second is in response to the Arians and Semi-Arians, or those who denied that all of the members of the Godhead are “the same in substance, and equal in power and glory,” and it affirms that “Whatever divine perfection, whether eternity, immutability, infinity, omnipotence, or holiness, justice, goodness, or truth, can be predicated of the one, can in the same sense and measure be predicated of the others.”<sup>39</sup> “It is not the Father as such, nor the Son as such, who is self-existent, infinite, and eternal,” these Creeds affirm, “but the Godhead, or divine essence, which subsists in the three persons.”<sup>40</sup>

The third affirmation expands upon the second by addressing what Hodge believes the Nicene Creed asserts about the mutual relations of the distinct persons of the Godhead. In the first place, and perhaps most controversially, Hodge insists that Nicaea’s articulation of the orthodox consensus entails

the affirmation of the Son's "subordination" to the Father, and of the Spirit's "subordination" to the Father and the Son, not in terms of essence, but in terms of "the mode of subsistence and operation, implied in the Scriptural facts that the Son is of the Father, and the Spirit is of the Father and the Son, and that the Father operates through the Son, and the Father and the Son through the Spirit."<sup>41</sup> In the second place, Hodge argues that the Nicene Creed affirms that the relations between the distinct persons of the Godhead are expressed "by their distinctive appellations. The first person is characterized as Father, in his relation to the second person; the second is characterized as Son, in relation to the first person; and the third as Spirit, in relation to the first and second person. Paternity, therefore, is the distinguishing property of the Father; filiation of the Son; and procession of the Spirit."<sup>42</sup> In the third and final place, Hodge contends that the Nicene Creed affirms "the intimate union, communion, and [co-]inhabitation"<sup>43</sup> of the distinct persons who always and everywhere relate to one another as Father, Son, and Spirit. "As the essence of the Godhead is common to the several persons," Hodge argues, "they have a common intelligence, will, and power. There are not in God three intelligences, three wills, three efficiencies. [Rather,] The Three are one God, and therefore have one mind and will," and for this reason the faithful must insist that "the Son is in the Father, and the Father in the Son; that where the Father is, there the Son and Spirit are; [and] what the one does the others do."<sup>44</sup>

Near the end of his discussion of what he contends are the essential contributions of the Nicene Creed to the "ecclesiastical form" of the doctrine of the Trinity, Hodge distinguishes the affirmations of the Nicene Creed—which he is eager to embrace precisely because he is persuaded that they are "nothing more than a well-ordered arrangement of the facts of Scripture which concern the doctrine of the Trinity"—from what he claims are the extra-confessional "speculations" of those who "framed" and "defended" that Creed.<sup>45</sup> According to Hodge, "the Nicene Fathers" were not content, in their own writings, merely to state "the facts of Scripture" in a well-ordered and comprehensive fashion, but they were eager to find a rational explanation for those facts by "go[ing] beyond" the clear teaching of the text, particularly on matters relating "to the subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father, and to what is meant by generation, or the relation between the Father and the Son."<sup>46</sup>

With respect to “the subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father,” Hodge maintains that while the Nicene Creed unambiguously affirms, “without any attempt at explanation,” that both the “unity of essence” and the simultaneous “subordination” of the distinct persons are compatible within the Trinity, the Nicene Fathers “endeavored to explain what was the nature of that subordination” by doing something that Hodge himself was loath to do, namely “go beyond” what he again calls “the facts of Scripture.”<sup>47</sup> According to Hodge, the explanation of subordination put forward by the Nicene Fathers is “objectionable”<sup>48</sup> because, while they denied to the Father “any priority or superiority to the other persons of the Trinity, as to being or perfection,” nevertheless they “still spoke of the Father ... as having in order of thought the whole Godhead in Himself; so that He alone was God of Himself ... he [alone] was the fountain, the cause, the root, *fons, origo, principium*, of the divinity as subsisting in the Son and Spirit ... [and thus] he [alone] was greater than the other divine persons.”<sup>49</sup> In short, Hodge takes “exception” to the speculations of the Nicene Fathers on these matters because he is persuaded that “self-existence and necessary existence, as well as omnipotence and all other divine attributes, belong [not to the Father alone, but] to the divine essence common to all the persons of the Trinity.”<sup>50</sup> He is convinced, in other words, that “it is the Triune God who is self-existent, and not one person in distinction from the other persons,” and for this reason he insists—in opposition to the speculations of the Nicene Fathers—that “when the word God is used indefinitely [in Scripture and in the Creed] it means the Triune God, and not the Father in distinction from the Son and Spirit.”<sup>51</sup>

This tendency to “go beyond the facts of Scripture” in transparently problematical ways is also seen, Hodge contends, in the Nicene Fathers’ treatment of the “eternal generation” and “sonship” of the second person of the Trinity. According to Hodge, while the Nicene Fathers were fully persuaded that “the relation between the First and Second persons of the Trinity ... is that of filiation or sonship,” nevertheless in their own writings they were not content to leave the matter of sonship “where the Scriptures [and the Creed] leave it.”<sup>52</sup> Indeed, they undertook not simply to affirm the notion of sonship as it is set forth in Scripture and in the Nicene Creed, but “to explain what is meant by sonship.” They concluded that sonship, whether among men or within the Trinity, first and foremost has to do with the “derivation of essence.” They

based this conclusion largely on their assumptions regarding “the nature of sonship among men” and their interpretation of Jesus’ insistence in John 5:26 that “As the Father hath life in Himself, so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself.”<sup>53</sup> “The First Person of the Trinity is Father,” they reasoned, “because He communicates the essence of the Godhead to the Second Person; and the Second Person is Son,” not because “the essence of the Son” is eternally and necessarily generated by the Father, but because the Son “derives that essence from the First Person” in the sense that “the person of the Son is generated (i.e., He becomes a person)” by “an eternal [and necessary] movement in the divine essence” itself.<sup>54</sup>

While Hodge recognizes that this understanding of eternal generation certainly follows from the Nicene Fathers’ more speculative construal of the subordination of the Son to the Father, he nevertheless contends that it is problematic. The problem is not only that “it is unreasonable to assume” that “derivation of essence”—whether “in human paternity” or in the generation of the Son by the Father “in the Trinity”—is “essential to sonship,” but also because it privileges an interpretation of John 5:26 that is open to challenge.<sup>55</sup> According to Hodge, while the word “Son” is often used in Scripture “as a designation of the ... Second Person of the Trinity,” it is also often used to refer to the incarnate Logos, or “the Word made flesh.”<sup>56</sup> Accordingly, Hodge maintains that if the word “Son” in John 5:26 “means Logos, then it does teach that the First Person of the Trinity communicated life, and therefore the essence in which that life inheres, to the Second Person,”<sup>57</sup> and the Fathers’ more speculative construal of eternal generation can be tethered directly to the teaching of the Bible. However, if the word “Son” refers to the incarnate Logos, the God-man, or the Word made flesh, then, Hodge contends, “the passage teaches no such doctrine,”<sup>58</sup> and the Fathers’ construal cannot be justified, at least not by this text.

So what does Hodge believe the word “Son” refers to in this text, and why does he insist that the question of what it refers to really matters? In short, Hodge contends that in this text, the word “Son” does not refer to the Logos, or the second person of the Trinity, but to the incarnate Logos, or the Word made flesh. As such, the “subject of discourse” in the context of this verse does not have to do, as the Nicene Fathers maintained, either with “the nature of the relation of the Father to the Son in the Godhead,” or with the notion “that [the] derivation of essence is essential to sonship.”<sup>59</sup>

Rather, it has to do with the “constitution” of “the historical person who ... could be called both God or man, because He was both God and man.”<sup>60</sup> For Hodge, if this is the correct interpretation of the word “Son” in John 5:26, then it matters because it suggests despite what the Nicene Fathers would have us believe, that “the divine essence” essential to sonship is not derived in any sense, but, on the contrary, is already the possession of the one who is properly called “Son”—a name that according to the Creed is rightly applied not just to the divine Logos, the second person of the Trinity, but also to Jesus of Nazareth, the God-man, the Word made flesh. This is so “because of the eternal relation which He sustains to the First Person of the Trinity.”<sup>61</sup> “The [Nicene] Council declared,” Hodge maintains,

that our Lord is the Eternal Son of God, i.e., that He is from eternity the Son of God. This of course involves the denial that He became the Son of God in time; and, consequently, that the primary and essential reason for his being called Son is not his miraculous birth, nor his incarnation, nor his resurrection, nor his exaltation to the right hand of God. The Council decided that the word Son as applied to Christ, is not a term of office but of nature; that it expresses the relation which the Second Person in the Trinity from eternity bears to the First Person, and that the relation thus indicated is sameness of nature, so that sonship, in the case of Christ, includes equality with God. In other words, God was in such a sense his Father that He was equal with God.<sup>62</sup>

Before moving on to his discussion of the “philosophical form” of the doctrine of the Trinity, Hodge concludes his overview of what he contends are the essential contributions of the confessional consensus to the “ecclesiastical form” of the doctrine by addressing—almost as an afterthought—what he insists the Nicene, Constantinopolitan, and Athanasian Creeds require the faithful to believe about the relation of the Spirit to the other persons of the Godhead. Just as Hodge is persuaded that the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople were “fully justified by Scripture in teaching” that the second person of the Trinity relates eternally to the first person of the Trinity as “Son,” so too he contends that they had “Scriptural grounds” for affirming that “the relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son ... is [best] expressed by the word procession.”<sup>63</sup> According to Hodge, there are three Scriptural grounds for expressing the relation of the Spirit to the other persons of the

Trinity by the word “procession.” The first has to do with the “signification of the word spirit.”<sup>64</sup> The word “spirit,” Hodge maintains, “means breath, that which proceeds from, and which gives expression and effect to our thoughts. Since Father and Son, as applied to the First and Second persons of the Trinity, are relative terms, it is to be assumed that the word Spirit as the designation of the Third Person, is also relative.”<sup>65</sup> The second Scriptural ground relates to “the use of the genitive case”<sup>66</sup> when addressing the relation of the Spirit to the Father. “The revealed fact is that the Spirit is of the Father, and the Church in calling the relation, thus indicated, a procession, does not attempt to explain it.”<sup>67</sup> The third ground is associated with John 15:26 and “the Latin and all other Western” churches’<sup>68</sup> affirmation of the *filioque* clause that was added to the Nicene Creed by the Synod of Toledo in 589 A.D. That “the Latin and all other Western” churches “are authorized in teaching that the Spirit proceeds not from the Father only, but from the Father and the Son, is evident,” Hodge insists, “because whatever is said in Scripture of the relation of the Spirit to the Father, is also said of his relation to the Son.”<sup>69</sup> The Spirit, in other words, “is said to be the ‘Spirit of the Father,’ and ‘Spirit of the Son;’ He is given or sent by the Son as well as the Father; the Son is said to operate through the Spirit. [And] The Spirit is no more said to send or to operate through the Son, than to send or operate through the Father. The relation, so far as revealed, is the same in the one case as in the other.”<sup>70</sup> Based on these Scriptural grounds, Hodge summarizes “the common Church doctrine” of the relation that is expressed by the word “procession”—and in so doing brings his overview of the “ecclesiastical form” of the doctrine of the Trinity to an end—by insisting: “(1.) That ... [procession] is incomprehensible, and therefore inexplicable. (2.) That it is eternal. (3.) That it is equally from the Father and the Son. ... [And] (4.) That this procession concerns the personality and operations of the Spirit, and not his essence.”<sup>71</sup>

### THE “PHILOSOPHICAL FORM” OF THE TRINITY

Hodge begins his discussion of the third and final “form” of the doctrine of the Trinity by insisting that this “philosophical form” of the doctrine is related to the “philosophical statements” that are typically advanced either “to vindicate the doctrine of the Trinity, by showing that it is not out of

analogy with other objects of human thought,” or to “explain it away” so that “something which has not the least analogy with the doctrine of the Christian Church” can be embraced in its place.<sup>72</sup> While Hodge demonstrates that he is aware of these latter kinds of statements and notes that they proliferate among those who are eager to substitute “the formulas of speculation for the doctrine of the Bible,” nevertheless his primary interest in this section of his discussion is with the former kinds of statements, i.e., with those statements of the doctrine that “have been intended by their authors either to prove it, or to illustrate it.”<sup>73</sup> According to Hodge, no matter how useful these kinds of statements might be in calling our attention to “the fact that in other and entirely different spheres there is ... [a kind of] community of life in different subsistences,” still such statements are of “little value” and “do not serve to make the inconceivable [finally] intelligible,” he contends, for the “mysteries” of the Godhead—particularly the mystery of how God can be simultaneously one in essence and three in person—are “ineffable,” and they are so precisely because they are supernatural and as such have “no counterpart in the constitution of our nature, or in anything around us in the present state of our existence.”<sup>74</sup>

Since this is the case, and since Hodge is persuaded that whatever “philosophical statements” the believer puts forward can never “hold as to the main point” of the Trinity’s supernatural three in oneness,<sup>75</sup> then in what sense does he believe that such statements might still play a positive role in helping the faithful to vindicate at least some aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity? Such statements for Hodge are helpful, it seems, neither because they serve as comprehensive “illustrations of the [ineffable] relations of the persons of the Trinity,” nor because they absolve the faithful from having to believe “what we cannot [finally] understand.”<sup>76</sup> Rather, such statements are helpful because they offer “somewhat analogous” examples of “triplicity in unity,” that help the faithful begin to make at least some sense of the “Scriptural fact” that “Subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation” is “consistent” with “the perfect and equal Godhead of the Father and the Son [and the Holy Spirit].”<sup>77</sup>

That this is the case is perhaps nowhere more clearly manifest in Hodge’s work than in what he insists is the parallel between the “triplicity in unity” of the Trinity, and what he contends is the “triplicity in unity” of the human soul. Throughout his works, including in his discussion of the doctrine of the

Trinity in his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge makes it clear that in his estimation, the human soul is not comprised of discrete faculties or powers that have the ability to operate in isolation from one another. Rather, according to Hodge, the soul is a single unit that always acts as a single substance. This is the case despite the fact that the intellect which, like the other faculties or powers of the soul, is simply a particular manifestation of the psychic totality of the whole soul or mind itself, always enjoys a kind of primacy in all rational and moral activity.<sup>78</sup> “We distinguish between acts of the intellect, and acts of the will,” Hodge maintains, “and yet in every act of the will there is an exercise of the intelligence; as in every act of the affections there is a joint action of the intelligence and will.”<sup>79</sup> Hodge concedes that the analogy between the human soul and the Trinity is finally inadequate because the “triplicity in unity” of the soul tends necessarily towards a form of modalism that is anathema to the “triplicity in unity” of the Trinity. The analogy, he asserts in conclusion, is nevertheless helpful because it offers an illustration of how there can be a form of subordination that is consistent with identity of essence within a single entity that manifests or expresses itself in a multiplicity of different subsistences. “In the consubstantial identity of the human soul there is,” Hodge simultaneously asserts and concludes, “a subordination of one faculty to another, and so, however incomprehensible to us, there may be a subordination in the Trinity consistent with the identity of essence in the Godhead.”<sup>80</sup> Clearly, what this quote suggests is that for Hodge, although the analogy between the “triplicity in unity” of the Trinity and the “triplicity in unity” of the human soul does not finally explain the mystery of how subordination “as to the mode of subsistence and operation” can be “consistent” with “the perfect and equal Godhead of the Father and the Son [and the Holy Spirit],”<sup>81</sup> nevertheless it still tells us something about the nature of subordination within the Godhead that is essential for a better understanding of this foundational doctrine of the Christian faith.

#### **CONCLUSION: SUBORDINATION AND SUBJECTION IN HODGE’S DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY**

To this point in this essay I have tried to summarize the broad outline of Charles Hodge’s doctrine of the Trinity, particularly as it is found in the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*. Having completed that task, and having

seen how Hodge, among other things, distinguishes the affirmations of the Nicene Creed from what he contends are the more problematic speculations of the Nicene Fathers, I will now conclude my analysis by offering a brief assessment of how Hodge’s understanding of subordination might be relevant to discussions of the Trinity that are currently taking place in the evangelical camp.

As we have seen in our overview of his understanding of the biblical, ecclesiastical, and philosophical “forms” of the doctrine of the Trinity, Hodge is persuaded that affirming a form of subordination in the ontological Trinity (i.e., in the Trinity *ad intra*) is essential to the biblical and confessional orthodoxy of the Church. According to Hodge, the biblical, ecclesiastical, and philosophical “forms” of the doctrine all affirm that within the Trinity, the Son and Spirit are subordinate to the Father, not in terms of essence, but in terms of “the mode of subsistence and operation, implied in the Scriptural facts that the Son is of the Father, and the Spirit is of the Father and the Son, and that the Father operates through the Son, and the Father and the Son through the Spirit.”<sup>82</sup> While this affirmation of subordination in the ontological Trinity centers on that ordering of distinct persons that is associated with what Hodge refers to as their “distinguishing propert[ies]”<sup>83</sup> of generation, filiation, and procession, what is notably absent in his discussion is any suggestion of the notion that subordination within the Trinity has to do with the subjection of either the Son or the Spirit *to the authority of the Father*.

The same cannot be said, however, for the form of subordination that Hodge believes is found in the economic Trinity (i.e., in the Trinity as it relates to the works of the Godhead *ad extra*). In his *Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hodge offers a concise summary of what he believes the Scriptures teach about the subordination of the second person of the Trinity to the first. According to Hodge, there is in Scripture “a threefold subordination” of the Son to the Father:

1. A subordination as to the mode of subsistence and operation, of the second, to the first person in the Trinity; which is perfectly consistent with their identity of substance, and equality in power and glory.
2. The voluntary subordination of the Son in his humbling himself to be found in fashion as a man, and becoming obedient unto death, and therefore subject to the limitations and infirmities of

our nature. [And finally,] 3. The economical or official subjection of the theanthropos. That is, the subordination of the incarnate Son of God, in the work of redemption and as the head of the church. [In this form of subordination,] He that is by nature equal with God becomes, as it were, officially subject to him.<sup>84</sup>

What is noteworthy about this summary of the ways in which the Son is subordinate to the Father is what it suggests about Hodge's understanding of the basic difference between the subordination of the Son to the Father in the ontological Trinity, and the subordination of the Son to the Father in the economic Trinity. While the subordination of the Son to the Father in the ontological Trinity does not entail, for Hodge, the subjection of the second person of the Trinity to the first, the subordination of the Son to the Father in the economic Trinity in fact does entail the subjection of the Son to the Father, but the Son that is subject is "not the second person of the Trinity as such, but that person as clothed in our nature."<sup>85</sup> The subjection described by Hodge is not, in other words, the subjection "of the Son as Son, but of the Son as incarnate; and the subjection itself is official and therefore perfectly consistent with equality of nature."<sup>86</sup>

If this is the case, and if it is therefore true that for Hodge, the Son is subject to the Father only as the God-man and within the context of the economic Trinity,<sup>87</sup> then how might Hodge's understanding of subordination be relevant to discussions of the Trinity that are currently taking place in the evangelical camp? In short, Hodge's understanding of subordination is relevant precisely because it does not lend itself to the more partisan claims of those on either side of the "eternal subordination of the Son" divide, claims that more often than not are grounded, it seems, in the mistaken assumption that for Hodge, subordination is always and everywhere synonymous with subjection. While Hodge certainly affirmed the "eternal subordination of the Son" to the Father, he did not equate the "eternal subordination of the Son" with the "eternal subjection or submission of the Son," and as such he offers a mediating perspective on the notion of subordination that, if recovered, could offer fresh – even if not entirely original – insights into the mutual relations of the three distinct persons that constitute the Godhead.

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- <sup>1</sup> Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1880), 373.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 373-74.
- <sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 vols; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989; 1871-73), 1:442.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge*, 374.
- <sup>9</sup> For examples just in his systematics, see Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:473; 2:361, 431, 639.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:443. As this quotation suggests, Hodge was persuaded that the doctrine of the Trinity is the “fundamental doctrine” of the Christian religion (Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [New York: A. C. Armstrong & Son, 1891; 1857], 314). In this regard, see also, for example, *idem.*, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974; 1860), 243; *idem.*, “The Promise of the Spirit,” in *Conference Papers: Analyses of Discourses, Doctrinal and Practical; Delivered on Sabbath Afternoons to the Students of The Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, N.J.* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1879), 68; and *idem.*, “The Unpardonable Sin,” in *Conference Papers*, 113.
- <sup>11</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:443.
- <sup>12</sup> In his treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Systematic Theology*, Hodge’s first of many references to “the Scriptural facts” is found on 1:444.
- <sup>13</sup> Charles Hodge, review of *The First and Second Adam: The Elohim Revealed in the Creation and Redemption of Man*, by Samuel J. Baird, in *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 32 (1860): 336.
- <sup>14</sup> Charles Hodge, review of *God in Christ: Three Discourses Delivered at New Haven, Cambridge, and Andover, with a Preliminary Dissertation on Language*, by Horace Bushnell, in *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 21 (1849): 261; cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:58-59.
- <sup>15</sup> Hodge, review of *The First and Second Adam*, 336, 335, 337.
- <sup>16</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:446; cf. Charles Hodge, review of *The History of the Apostolic Church, with a General Introduction to Church History*, by Philip Schaff, in *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 26 (1854): 164-66.
- <sup>17</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:446.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:446, 443.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:443.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:443-44.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:446.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:444.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Note that for Hodge, the acts of these distinct persons are voluntary acts. For example, see Hodge, “The Promise of the Spirit,” 69.
- <sup>24</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:444.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:445.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:444-45.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:445.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* On the concurrence of the persons of the Trinity in all acts *ad extra*, see, for example, Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993; 1886), 261; *idem.*, *A Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1991; 1856), 113; *idem.*, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 303; and *idem.*, *Systematic Theology*, 2:629, 639.
- <sup>30</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:445.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:448, 445.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:448.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:449.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>35</sup> Cf. *ibid.*
- <sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:459. For a brief summary of how the Westminster Confession is related to this consensus, see *ibid.*, 2:407.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:465.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:452, 459.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:459.

- <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1:459-40.
- <sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1:461.
- <sup>42</sup> Ibid. According to Hodge, the first person of the Trinity is Father “in virtue of the eternal relation subsisting between the first and second persons in the Godhead” (Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 300); the second person of the Trinity is Son not just because “he is consubstantial with the Father,” but also because of “the relation of the second to the first person in the Trinity, as it exists from eternity” (idem, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 18); and the third person of the Trinity is Spirit because “He is of the Spirit of Christ in the same sense in which he is the Spirit of God. In other words, the Spirit stands in the same relation to the second, that he does to the first person of the Trinity” (ibid., 258).
- <sup>43</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:462.
- <sup>44</sup> Ibid., 1:461. On the concurrence of the distinct persons of the Trinity in all acts *ad extra*, see note 29 above.
- <sup>45</sup> Ibid., 1:462, 471, 465.
- <sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1:465, 462.
- <sup>47</sup> Ibid., 1:462, 467, 465.
- <sup>48</sup> Cf. ibid., 1:464-67.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 1:465.
- <sup>50</sup> Ibid., 1:468, 467.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid., 1:467.
- <sup>52</sup> Ibid., 1:468.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1:468, 469, 468.
- <sup>54</sup> Ibid., 1:468-69.
- <sup>55</sup> Ibid., 1:469, 470.
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., 1:470.
- <sup>57</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>58</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1:470, 471, 470.
- <sup>60</sup> Ibid., 1:470-71.
- <sup>61</sup> Ibid., 1:474, 472.
- <sup>62</sup> Ibid., 1:471.
- <sup>63</sup> Ibid., 1:477.
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>67</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>68</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., 1:477-78.
- <sup>70</sup> Ibid., 1:478. In his *Commentary on Romans*, Hodge insists that “all Christians” owe a debt of gratitude to the Latin Church for the *filioque* clause, “as it vindicates the full equality of the Son with the Father. No clearer assertion, and no higher exhibition of the Godhead of the Son can be conceived,” he contends, “than that which presents him as the source and the possessor of the Holy Ghost. The Spirit proceeds from, and belongs to him, and by him is given to whomsoever he wills” (Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, 258).
- <sup>71</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:477.
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., 1:478, 481, 478, 481.
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., 1:481, 478.
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., 1:462, 478, 462, 478.
- <sup>75</sup> Ibid., 1:479.
- <sup>76</sup> Ibid., 1:462.
- <sup>77</sup> Ibid., 1:478, 474.
- <sup>78</sup> Note that Hodge’s emphasis upon the “primacy” of the intellect should not be confused with an emphasis upon the “final dispositive authority” of the intellect. For Hodge, it is possible to affirm the “primacy” of the rational faculty in all rational and moral activity without at the same time affirming the “final dispositive authority” of the rational faculty in all rational and moral activity. Note that the quotation marks here are mine. For clarification of this point, see Paul Kjoss Helseth, *“Right Reason” and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010).
- <sup>79</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:461-62.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 1:474.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 1:461.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Hodge, *An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 63.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:394.