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drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 24, 2007

"The Father is Greater than I" (Bible Brain Busters)

"The Father is Greater than I" - Jesus

Is the Son less than the Father? Is the Father greater than the Son? Even as it lifts up Jesus Christ to a high position in relationship to God the Father, the New Testament repeatedly and variously subordinates the Son to the Father. Since the church rejected the subordinationism of Arius at the most crucial moment in the development of the doctrine of the trinity (Nicaea 325), these texts deserve comment.

I would love to discuss each text in context with great detail. I may do so at some time. At this point, I'd simply like to highlight the subordinationist language of the Gospel of John, exemplified by but not limited to John 14:28: "The Father is great than I." How might we go about interpreting such statements?

Let me identify a few interpretive options:

(1) **Functional Christology.** One option is to say, "These are functional, not ontological statements." These statements ascribe a certain saving function to Jesus Christ and that's it. This may not necessarily imply a denial of Jesus' ontological status (a.k.a., the constitution of his being). One could simply say that such affirmations are post-Biblical and not relevant to interpreting the texts at hand. This approach has the advantage of letting the texts speak without overloading them with doctrinal questions. The disadvantage is that one's doctrinal reflection becomes dislodged from scriptural interpretation. Also, it's kind of a cop-out.

(2) **Jesus is not divine.** Another option is to say that these texts undermine the doctrines of the trinity and the incarnation. These are later traditions that do not match up with the scriptures. The New Testament tells the story of the man Jesus of Nazareth who is a great teacher, leader, and maybe even savior (in some sense), but he is certainly not God. He is a man under the authority of God. The

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strength of this position is it has the guts to take the scriptures at face value and see where they lead. (Whether this move is "gutsy" anymore is debatable.) The weakness of this approach is that is not only gives up on the tradition of the church but must now deal with the amazing affirmations the New Testament does makes about Jesus. How can the word-become-flesh have been with the father from the beginning? How can Christ be the firstborn of all creation? Basically, this approach trades one set of Bible brain busters for another. As before, one's "problem texts" reveal one's commitments!

(3) **Jesus is divine-ish.** A mediating option is to affirm the divinity of the Son, but in the sense of a heavenly being mediating between God the Father and us. He is a sort of a half-man, half-God. So the subordination language makes sense because Jesus is on the rung of the ladder right between God the Father and the rest of creation. This is actually a common Christian way of thinking. The strength of this position is that it is probably the easiest position to understand while still assenting to all the various and seemingly contradictory Christological affirmations in the New Testament. The problem with this approach is that it undermines the two-natures doctrine of the church by "mixing" the natures of Christ. It says Jesus is both divine and human, but so undermines the meaning of divinity and humanity that the affirmation becomes meaningless. Jesus becomes a sort of mythic being between God and humanity, rather than true God and true human.

(4) **The Father and the Son are equally divine, but the Son's human flesh is subordinated to the Father.** One classic "solution" to these subordination texts is to assign all of them to the human nature of Jesus Christ. The Son is the fully equal and co-eternal second person of the trinity. In the course of time, the Son adds a human nature. As a creature, this human flesh is of course subordinated to the Father as its creator. But this in no way impinges on Jesus' divine status. The advantage of this approach is that it is able to account for all kinds of texts by strategical attributing some to the divine nature and others to the human nature. It is also has a long pedigree in the history of the church, and so should be treated as serious option. The disadvantage of such an approach is one is forced to play hermeneutical games: Who are we to say that Jesus is talking about his human nature in one verse and his divine nature in another? On what basis can we make such decisions? Does it even make sense to divide Christ up this way?

(5) **The Father and the Son are equally divine, but divinity permits some kind of subordination.** A final option is to permit some kind of subordination within the divine nature. The driving assumption here is that one's God-concept should be based on the concrete revelation of God. Where has God revealed himself? In Jesus Christ, who is God-incarnate. If we start with where and when God shows up, the first

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thing we learn about God is that God can become human. More specifically, the Son became human. And this Son, who is fully God, willingly subordinates himself to the Father -- not just in time, but from all eternity, as the Father sends the Son and the Son proceeds from the Father. This approach helps make sense of why the same Gospel of John has both strong statements of Jesus' divinity and his subordination to the Father. The advantage of this approach is that the unity of Christ's person is held together even as his divinity and humanity are affirmed. No need to deny either of his natures or split up his natures to account for subordination texts. Rather, subordination is permitted but within God's very life, so that we can still proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God. The disadvantage should be obvious: how do we think coherently about subordination *within* God? This truly is a "hard saying." It might be worth the trouble, but is it inherently dangerous. Such an approach should not be taken without counting the cost.

Any thoughts?

Which of these options appeals to you? Why?

Any distinct options missing?

What are some additional benefits and costs of each of these approaches?

How do you generally deal with subordination texts?

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Labels: [Bible Brain Busters](#), [Christology](#), [Trinity](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:06 PM

[8 comments](#)

8 Comments:

At [6:53 PM, January 24, 2007](#), [WTM](#) said...

I would have to side with either 4 (Augustine) or 5 (Barth), and I don't rule out the possibility of employing both of these.

At [8:46 PM, January 24, 2007](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

I am inclined to 4 unless 5 convinces me.

At [9:59 PM, January 24, 2007](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

wtm,

Thanks for the accurate name-dropping. I should note that Athanasius is probably the first one to explicitly and systematically practice #4.

At [10:49 AM, January 25, 2007](#), [The AJ Thomas](#) said...

I like 5 and I don't see an issue with it so long as that submission is an act of will on the part of the Son rather than an act of domination on the part of the Father, seems to fit with the prayer in

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the garden. It's not that Jesus is "less" it's that he humbles himself to submit to the Father. However if he in the Father are one you could say it's a bit semantic.

At [2:05 PM, January 25, 2007](#), [David Drury](#) said...

I'm really drawn to 5.

It has a compelling force to it in application and doesn't just "solve" the Bible Brain Buster but goes far enough to open a new world of what God might be like. For that reason I think I'd say the others "may work" but aren't interesting to me, and I wonder if God's nature should always compel us to worship more and more his mystery... and 5 leads me to a place of confounding peace about that nature.

Good stuff here, John. Thanks for laying out the "options" for us as you always do so well.

-David

At [6:45 PM, January 25, 2007](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

I suspect John was some sort of a 3. I consider 4 the officially orthodox position at present, although 5 is causing a tremor in the force. It's probably more "biblical" than 4, although I don't like the way some use it to argue for subordination in the home.

At [12:14 PM, January 26, 2007](#), Anonymous said...

John,

I've recently written a paper arguing that, (5) is either trivially true (and not really worth talking about) or, if understood differently, leads directly to the denial of the homoousion. I'd appreciate your feedback, but I don't want to burden you. Let me know if you are interested.

Tom McCall

At [4:50 PM, January 26, 2007](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Tom,

I would very much like to see your paper, especially as I find my self dancing on the line b/w #4 and \$5.

John

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