

# **Equality and Priority in Hilary of Poitiers' *De Trinitate***

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Dr. Sinclair Ferguson

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Tim Black



## I. Introduction: Relation between Equality and Priority in the Trinity

### A. East versus West

It has commonly been said that the Eastern tradition of trinitarian theology has begun from the diversity of persons and concluded to the unity of the essence in the Trinity (diversity → unity), and that the Western tradition has done the opposite: begun from the unity of essence and concluded to the diversity of persons (unity → diversity). It could equally well be said, however, that the Eastern tradition began from the hierarchical order of priority among the persons and concluded to the equal ultimacy of the persons (priority → equality), while the Western tradition again has moved in the opposite direction (equality → priority).<sup>1</sup> It is this latter distinction between the Eastern and Western traditions on which we will focus in this paper.

<i>East</i>	diversity → unity	priority → equality
<i>West</i>	unity → diversity	equality → priority

### B. Hilary's Synthesis

Hilary of Poitiers (ca 310-368) translated the Cappadocian fathers' treatment of the Trinity into the Latin tradition, having begun his theological career in the West but developing his doctrine of the Trinity while in exile in the East. Particularly since Calvin's watershed reformation of the doctrine, today Hilary appears strongly Eastern in his formulation, yet by defending the Eastern Athanasius against Arianism in the West, Hilary represents an early synthesis between the two traditions.

### C. Calvin's Synthesis

Calvin himself similarly sought not to pit the East against the West, but rather to draw together the essential biblical strands of both traditions, and to affirm them as biblical despite his critics' inability to logically harmonize those strands. More clearly and absolutely than any before him, he emphasized the ontological equal ultimacy of the persons, and likewise the ontologi-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bray, 111-196.

cal equal ultimacy of their unity of essence and diversity of persons. Thereby Calvin absolutely resisted subordinationism in his doctrine of the Trinity. Yet also very clearly and absolutely, Calvin emphasized the reality of a hierarchical order of priority among the persons, strongly denying that this order is *primarily* ontological, but yet allowing that this order retains an ontological character by virtue of its not being separated from the essence. This is enough to drive his critics mad; is the order ontological or not? Calvin leaves room for mystery, saying

“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.” (*Institutes*, 1.13.25)

“Divinity” here refers not only to the Persons, but also to the “essence” of God. The Father does not beget the Son’s “essence,” but is the “fountainhead” of “the whole of divinity.” We must conclude that for Calvin, ontology is distinct from order, but ontology is orderly. Order is distinct from ontology, but order is ontological. Equality and priority are distinct from one another, but priority remains integral to equality, and equality remains integral to priority. This is the orthodoxy of Calvin’s point.<sup>2</sup>

#### **D. So Is Hilary Orthodox?**

How orthodox by comparison then does Hilary remain? Hilary argues from the Son’s generation by the Father to His full divinity; from order of persons to equality of essence. But by characterizing that generation—that order—as *ontological* in nature, does Hilary in fact lose the equality of essence which he seeks to defend? Yes, and no. We can learn from both of these answers.

## **II. Hilary’s Argument in *De Trinitate***

### **A. The Nexus of Hilary’s Orthodoxy: The Eternal Generation of the Son**

The central fact upon which Hilary’s argument turns in *De Trinitate* is the Father’s gener-

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<sup>2</sup> We will want to argue later that in fact, ontology *is* order, and order *is* ontology; that is, that order and ontology are *both* identical and distinct. Similarly, equality and priority are likewise *both* identical and distinct.

ation of the Son. For Hilary, this generation or “birth” is the nexus of both ontological equality of essence and the ordered priority within the Godhead. This generation is what guarantees both the Godhead’s unity of essence and its hierarchically-ordered diversity of persons. Bringing out both of these aspects together as he does in many other places, Hilary says succinctly in Book 3 section 4 (3.4):<sup>3</sup> “The One is from the Other, and they Two are a Unity.” Here he clearly desires to maintain *both* derivation and unity. Going on in that same section Hilary states the means by which both of these aspects are maintained—they are maintained by the Son’s *birth*:

“This...is not to dispute the Father's powers or to depreciate the Son, but to reverence the mystery and majesty of His birth; to set the unbegotten Father above all rivalry, and count the Only-begotten Son as His equal in eternity and might, confessing concerning God the Son that He is from God.”

## **B. Polemical Context of Hilary’s Work**

We will examine the nature of this birth or generation in what follows, noting how Hilary’s description of this birth colors his understanding of both the ontology and the priority within the Godhead, but before doing so we should recognize the way in which Hilary’s polemical context sets the backdrop against which the meaning of Hilary’s argument becomes more clear.

### **i. Two Heresies**

Hilary sought to combat two heresies: Sabellianism and the Arian view represented by Hebion.<sup>4</sup> Hilary argues throughout that both heresies err by denying the Son’s generation.

“My prime object is...to refute the insanity and ignorance of men who use the unity of God...as a cloak for their denial either that in Christ God was born, or else that He is very God.” (1.17)

Sabellius does the former, Hebion does the latter; both do so by emphasizing the unity of God.

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<sup>3</sup> Unless specified otherwise in context, references following the form (3.4) in this paper refer to Hilary’s *De Trinitate*. All quotations from this work are taken from the translation included in *Early Church Fathers v2.0: Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II, Vol. IX, at <http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/>. This translation contains numerous copying errors introduced by the Optical Character Recognition technology used to convert the text from a printed document to an electronic text, but it nevertheless appears to be the more literal and precise translation of the two consulted, both of which are listed in the bibliography.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Hilary’s discussion of both heresies in 1.26, which is only clear if you already know what Sabellius and Hebion taught.

### **a) Unity: Equality without Priority: Sabellianism**

Sabellius sought to maintain the unity of God by denying that God the Son was born, and thereby *distinct* from and *subordinate* to the Father. Sabellius' doctrine results in *modalism*, such that there is an "unbroken continuity in the Incarnation, the Father extending Himself into the Virgin, and Himself being born as His own Son." (1.16) The two then are *one Person*, and the distinction between the persons is not real. "Sabellius, for instance, makes the Son an extension of the Father, and the faith in this regard a matter of words rather than of reality, for he makes one and the same Person, Son to Himself and also Father." (2.4)<sup>5</sup> Sabellianism then maintained the equality among the persons of the Godhead, but not their clear distinction and order of priority.

In response, Hilary uses the Son's generation or "birth" to combat Sabellius' modalism:

"But we confess a birth; we reject this confusion of two Persons in One, while yet we cleave to the Divine unity. That is, we hold that *God from God* means unity of nature; for that Being, Who, by a true birth from God, became God, can draw His substance from no other source than the Divine." (6.11)

### **b) Diversity: Priority without Equality: Hebion's Arianism**

Hebion sought to maintain the unity of God by denying that the Son was born *from God*, and thereby equal to the Father by virtue of sharing His divine nature. Hilary summarizes Hebion's views as follows:

"Hebion allows no beginning to the Son of God except from Mary, and represents Him not as first God and then man, but as first man then God; declares that the Virgin did not receive into herself One previously existent, Who had been in the beginning God the Word dwelling with God, but that through the agency of the Word she bore Flesh; the 'Word' meaning in his opinion not the nature of the pre-existent Only-begotten God, but only the sound of an uplifted voice." (2.4)

Hebion's view was essentially Arian, then, as can be seen by comparing Hebion's statement with two statements by Arius (in his *Thalia*) as cited by Athanasius:

"God was not always a Father, for there was a time when God was alone and not yet a Father, but afterwards He became a Father. The Son was not always; for whereas all things were made out of nothing, and all existing creatures and works were made, so the Word of God Himself was made out of

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5 Cf. 2.23: "Sabellius...confound[s] Father and Son as two names with one meaning, making of them not Unity but One Person."

nothing and once He was not and He was not before He was made but he had an origin of creation.”<sup>6</sup>

“The Word is not true God. Though He is called God, yet He is not truly God but by participation of grace, He, as all the others, is called God only in name.”<sup>7</sup>

Hilary uses Hebion to represent Arianism in general. Just as Arius also argued, Hebion’s Christ was not God, born from God, but rather was only a creature. Hilary states this problem clearly when he says of Hebion that “Others”—contrasting Hebion with Sabellius—“...deny that He was born and declare that He was merely created.” (1:16) We can see then that Hebion maintained the unity of God (the Father) at the expense of the Son’s equal divinity with the Father. He maintained the unity of God, but not of the Persons. The Father is God, but the Son is *not* God. The order of priority between the Father and Son excludes the possibility that the Father and Son are equally divine.

### **c) Summary: Sabellianism vs. Hebion’s Arianism**

In summary, we may say that Sabellius lost the *diversity* of the Persons, and Hebion lost the *unity* of the Persons. As such, we can see that Sabellius made Personal unity exclude Personal diversity, and Hebion allowed Personal diversity to exclude Personal unity. Further, we must recognize that Sabellius’ unity would not allow a hierarchical *order of priority* among the Persons, and Hebion’s hierarchical order of priority would not allow an *equality of essence* among the Persons. Both heresies rightly emphasize the *distinction* between equality and priority, but they wrongly construe equality and priority as *mutually exclusive* of one another.

### **ii. Two Objectives**

Hilary sought then to combat these two heresies. Hilary’s two objectives were to maintain *both* 1) full divine *equality* and 2) full Personal diversity and *priority* within the Godhead. He argued that the “birth” of the Son, when understood as scripture presents it, guarantees *both*

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6 From Arius’ *Thalia*, quoted in Athanasius, *Oratio contra Arianos* I 5, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, 26.21.

7 Athanasius, *Oratio contra Arianos* I 6, in J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, Series Graeca, 26.21-2.

equality and priority within the Godhead. Hilary states this twofold concern many times throughout his book. He even says that it is his “prime object.”

“My prime object is...to refute the insanity and ignorance of men who use the unity of God as a cloak for their denial either that in Christ God was born, or else that He is very God.” (1.17)

Both objectives are plainly stated: **1) Priority:** Here “in Christ God was born” indicates that the divine nature was communicated from the first Person to the second Person of the Godhead through Christ’s birth, highlighting the *order of priority* between the Persons. **2) Equality:** “He is very God” indicates that the Person of Christ (“He”) is God, is divine, *equal* with the Father.

Hilary maintains that it is the Son’s *birth* which guarantees both this priority and this equality in the Godhead:

“We will not admit Their identity nor allow, as a compromise, that Christ is God in some imperfect sense; for God, born of God, cannot be the same as His Father, since He is His Son, nor yet can He be different in nature.” (1:17)

**1) Priority:** Again, the distinctive personal properties which prevent Hilary from saying that the Father and Son are identical, are the same Person, are what also indicate the order of *priority* between the Persons. The Father’s distinctive property is to be a Father, to beget, and the Son’s is to be a Son, to be begotten. This is why Hilary “will not admit Their identity.” **2) Equality:** Alongside this priority, Hilary will not compromise the perfection of Christ’s full divinity; he seeks to maintain Christ’s *equality* with the Father. The two are not “different in nature.”

### **C. The Eternal Generation of the Son: Its Ontological Character**

How then does Hilary combat these two heresies and accomplish his two objectives? Hilary finds the central guarantee of the Godhead’s harmonious, integral coexistence of equality and priority in one doctrine: the eternal generation of the Son. Surprisingly, it is by characterizing this generation as *ontological* that Hilary *both* remains orthodox *and* falls into error.



## **i. Ontological**

### **a) Father Alone Is Source of All Being, and of Son's Being**

The ontological character of this generation begins for Hilary with the ontology of the Father. The Father alone is the source of all being:

“It is the Father to Whom all existence owes its origin. In Christ and through Christ He is the source of all. In contrast to all else He is self-existent. He does not draw His being from without, but possesses it from Himself and in Himself.” (2.6)

The Father is likewise the source and Author of the Son's being:

“...the Begotten owes indeed to His Author the source of His being....” (11.11)

### **b) Eternal Generation of the Son**

The way in which the Father is the source of the Son's being is through the eternal generation of the Son, which Hilary defines carefully for us as follows:

“He therefore, the Unbegotten, before time was begot a Son from Himself; not from any pre-existent matter, for all things are through the Son; not from nothing, for the Son is from the Father's self; not by way of childbirth, for in God there is neither change nor void; not as a piece of Himself cut or torn off or stretched out, for God is passionless and bodiless.... Incomprehensibly, ineffably, before time or worlds, He begot the Only-begotten from His own unbegotten substance, bestowing through love and power His whole Divinity upon that Birth. Thus He is the Only-begotten, perfect, eternal Son of the unbegotten, perfect, eternal Father.” (3.3)

### **c) Two Results regarding Son's Ontology**

This ontological generation results in two facts being true of the Son's being.

#### **• Equality: Son Is Equally God**

First, the Son is equally God with God the Father. The Son has all of the ontological divine attributes of the Father, and even is the reality of the Father, the fullness of the Godhead:

“Through the Mystery of the birth the Son's power is the power of the Father, His authority the Father's authority, His nature the Father's nature. By His birth the Son possesses the nature of the Father: as the Father's image, He reproduces from the Father all that is in the Father, because He is the reality as well as the image of the Father, for a perfect birth produces a perfect image, and the *fulfillment of the Godhead dwelling bodily in Him* indicates the truth of His nature.” (9.1)

#### **• Priority: Son's Being Is Secondary**

Second, the Son's being is secondary to the being of the Father. Hilary implies in 4.9 that while the Father cannot be said to have “derived His being from any external source,” the Son's

being is “derived” from the Father’s. Hilary says of the Son, “He is not the source of His own being...” (9.53), but rather the Father is that source (cf. 11.11, above).

## **ii. Orthodoxy: Equality of Being**

The standard modern Western evaluation of Hilary here is correct: Hilary is orthodox by maintaining the absolute, full ontological deity of the Son, equal with the Father, but Hilary fails to be orthodox when he indicates that the Son’s being is secondary to the Father’s.

Hilary certainly seeks to retain the full divinity of the Son. Hilary believes that “no property of God which the mind can grasp is more characteristic of Him than existence...existence, in the absolute sense...” (1.5)

“For according to the words spoken to Moses, *He Who is, hath sent Me unto you*, we obtain the unambiguous conception that absolute being belongs to God....” (12.24)

“...the backward straining of our thoughts can never grasp anything prior to God’s property of absolute existence....” (12.24)

Hilary clearly states that the Son Himself has this full, complete, absolute divine nature, equal with the Father, saying of the Son, “...He possesses absolute being....” (12.25) When Hilary says the Son is God, he means that the Son is “perfect God,” fully God, in no way less “God” than the Father is “God.”

“For we allow nothing bodily, nothing lifeless, to have a place among the attributes of God; whatever is God is perfect God.” (6.12)

“We proclaim in answer...that the Father is eternal and the Son eternal, and demonstrate that the Son is God of all with an absolute, not a limited, pre-existence....” (1.34)

## **iii. Error: Priority of Being**

Alongside recognizing Hilary’s orthodoxy, the Western tradition also correctly recognizes Hilary’s error. Hilary believes that the Son’s ontological derivation through His eternal generation makes the Son’s being secondary to the Father’s being in order of priority. While not denying but maintaining the Son’s eternity, nevertheless Hilary says that by virtue of the Son’s birth,

the Son's "existence" is not "equivalent" to the Father's existence:

"It was not in the nature of things that His birth should avail to put His beginning back, until it was equivalent to the existence which is unbegotten, and had no beginning; and the Father reserves as His prerogative, to demonstrate His authority as the Unbegotten, the fixing of this still undetermined day." (10.8)

Rather, the Son's existence is "secondary," the position of His being is secondary, to the Father's being:

"For in relation to God we acknowledge only two modes of being, birth and eternity: birth, moreover, not after anything, but before all things, so that birth only bears witness to a Source of being, and does not predicate any incongruity between the offspring and the Source of being. Still, by common admission, this birth, because it is from God, implies a secondary position in respect to the Source of being, and yet cannot be separated from that Source, since any attempt of thought to pass beyond acceptance of the fact of birth, must also necessarily penetrate the mystery of the generation." (12.51)

It cannot here safely be objected that it is the Son's Person and not His being which is secondary; Hilary's concern clearly is that the Son's derivation by birth is a derivation of the Son's being from the Father as the Son's "Source of being." Rather, the Son's being is "second" in order of priority to the Father's being. "He does not exist of Himself, Who exists through birth" (12.2); the Son's existence is *not* autotheos.

How then, we might ask, can Calvin, who more distinctively than any other before him argued that the Son *is* autotheos, say

"Hilary also teaches the same thing, indeed speaks more sharply, that eternity is in the Father. Is that to deprive the Son of the divine essence? Yet he is wholly concerned with the defense of the very faith to which we adhere. Our enemies, however, are not ashamed to pluck out any kind of mutilated utterances, from which they would have us believe that Hilary is the patron of their error!" (Institutes, 1.13.29)

Is Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity less Western than he is sometimes perceived to be, or is Hilary more Western than contemporary Western trinitarians may be wont to think? Are Calvin and Hilary truly at one; does Hilary defend the "very faith" to which Calvin adhered?

### **III. Reevaluating Hilary's and Our Own Orthodoxy: The Relation of Ontology and Economy, Equality and Priority**

It will not be sufficient to answer these questions by merely listing disparate minor issues

on which Hilary and Calvin agree or disagree, or even to ascertain the creedal formulae to which both can agree. Rather, an attempt must be made to find the central, driving concern of each theologian's doctrine of the trinity, and only then may an adequate comparison be made of their systems. This requires that we first conceive of each theologian's doctrine as an organic whole. Because we have already examined Hilary in some detail, let us now turn to Calvin's doctrine of the trinity.

### **A. The Relation of Calvin's Orthodoxy to the Fathers' Orthodoxy**

Calvin summarizes his doctrine of the trinity in 1.13.20 of his Institutes, titled "The Triune God,"<sup>8</sup> saying

"Therefore, let those who dearly love soberness, and who will be content with the measure of faith, receive in brief form what is useful to know: namely, that, when we profess to believe in one God, under the name of God is understood a single, simple essence, in which we comprehend three persons, or hypostases. Therefore, whenever the name of God is mentioned without particularization, there are designated no less the Son and the Spirit than the Father; but where the Son is joined to the Father, then the relation of the two enters in; and so we distinguish among the persons. But because the peculiar qualities in the persons carry an order within them, e.g., in the Father is the beginning and the source, so often as mention is made of the Father and the Son together, or the Spirit, the name of *God* is peculiarly applied to the Father. In this way, unity of essence is retained, and a reasoned order is kept, which yet takes nothing away from the deity of the Son and the Spirit."

In the next section, 1.13.21, titled "The ground of all heresy: a warning to all," Calvin specifies the nature of heresy's error:

"Moreover, Satan, in order to tear our faith from its very roots, has always been instigating great battles, partly concerning the divine essence of the Son and the Spirit, partly concerning the distinction of the persons."

In both quotations we can see that Calvin speaks primarily of the unity and diversity among Persons of the Godhead; this is central to His concern. But in the first quotation we can see that Calvin is not only concerned about unity and diversity. He is also concerned about an "order" which is manifested in the diversity of the Persons, in their "particularization," in their "relation," by which we "distinguish" the Persons. When giving a careful definition of what he

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<sup>8</sup> These titles are not original to Calvin, but were provided by Otto Weber in German, and translated into English, modified, or added by John T. McNeill. Cf. "Editor's Preface," Institutes, xix-xx.

means by “person,” Calvin refers to this order as an “economy,” saying

“Nor am I displeased with Tertullian’s definition, provided it be taken in the right sense, that there is a kind of distribution or economy in God which has no effect on the unity of essence.” (1.13.6)

According to editor McNeill’s footnote here, Calvin is referring to the below in Tertullian, which confirms that Calvin has in mind a hierarchical order of *priority* when he uses the word “economy” here:

“Happily the Lord Himself employs this expression of the person of the Paraclete, so as to signify not a division or severance, but a disposition (of mutual relations in the Godhead); for He says, “I will pray the Father, and He shall send you another Comforter ... even the Spirit of truth,” thus making the Paraclete distinct from Himself, even as we say that the Son is also distinct from the Father; so that He showed a third degree in the Paraclete, as we believe the second degree is in the Son, by reason of the order observed in the Economy.”<sup>9</sup>

Calvin states clearly that this economic order of priority does not result in the subordination of the Son’s *being* to the Father’s *being*:

“They object that Christ, if he be properly God, is wrongly called Son. To this I have replied that when a comparison of one person is made with another, the name of God is not to be taken without particularization, but restricted to the Father, seeing that he is the beginning of deity, not in the bestowing of essence, as fanatics babble, but by reason of order.” (1.13.26, titled “The subordination of the incarnate Word to the Father is no counterevidence”)

Rather, it is a subordination of the Son’s *person* to the Father’s *person*:

“Thus his essence is without beginning; while the beginning of his person is God himself.” (1.13.25)

Specifying his case, Calvin argues that neither the subordinationism of Irenaeus (1.13.27) nor of Tertullian (1.13.28) was originally intended to deny the unity of God’s being, or the equality of the Son’s being with the Father’s being.

Yet Calvin does not desire in any way to separate the essence from the Persons, or the Persons from the essence:

“But they are obviously deceived in this connection, for they dream of individuals, each having its own separate part of the essence. 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. They also foolishly think they may conclude from

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9 *Against Praxeas*, ix. The footnote also references chapter ii of *Against Praxeas*, which is not as concise, but says much the same.

our statement that we have set up a quaternity, for they falsely and calumniously ascribe this fiction of their own brain to us, as if we pretended that three persons came forth by derivation from one essence. On the contrary, it is clear from our writings that we do not separate the persons from the essence, but we distinguish among them while they remain within it.” (1.13.25)

Here we see Calvin affirming the full *equality* of the Persons—they are all equally unbegotten—yet also affirming the full *priority* among the Persons in just the way the Eastern fathers did—by being unwilling to allow this priority to have no integral connection with the being of God which the Persons share fully and equally. The Father is the “beginning and fountainhead of the whole of divinity,” not by generating the Son’s essence, but by being the beginning of the Son’s Person, yet because the Son’s Person is “within” the divine essence, the Father’s priority retains an ontological character. Economic priority is not separate from ontological equality, for Calvin, but rather this equality and priority are bound up in a mutual, exhaustive, integral harmony. It is precisely in making *this* point at the end of his discussion of the trinity (1.13.25, 26, 29) that Calvin demonstrates that his emphasis that the Son is autotheos in no way prevents the whole of Calvin’s doctrine of the trinity from being the “very faith” taught by the fathers.

We must conclude then that Calvin’s concern to eradicate subordinationism by emphasizing that the Son is equally autotheos with the Father, while truly distinguishing Calvin from the subordinationist tendencies of the fathers, is not the central point on which a comparison must be made between Calvin and the fathers. Notice the remaining substantial agreement between Calvin and the fathers: Calvin’s autotheos denies the ontological derivation central to the fathers’ understanding of the eternal generation of the Son. For the fathers, this 1) ontological derivation both guaranteed 2) the order of *priority* among the Persons, as well as their ontological *equality*. The Son’s ontological derivation by “birth” eternally constituted both the Father and Son in their 3) unique, distinguishing, incommunicable personal properties of begetting and being begotten. Admittedly, 1) Calvin denied that the Son’s being was derived from and thereby secondary to the being of the Father, but notice how fully he nevertheless *retained* the fathers’

emphasis on 2) ontological equality and hierarchical priority, 3) believing the Persons' incommunicable properties to guarantee the diversity and order among the Persons without being in conflict with their essential unity and equality. So we see that Calvin had in view the same *goal* as did the fathers, but he attains that goal without the *means* of the ontological derivation of the Son. Calvin's goal, as well as the fathers', was to demonstrate that hierarchical *priority* remains in integral harmony with the ontological *equality* within the Godhead. This is why in the last words of his discussion of the trinity Calvin can dismiss as comparatively unimportant and unedifying that point which he has argued so strenuously and considers truly edifying to the church—that the Son is autotheos—saying

“For what is the point in disputing whether the Father always begets? Indeed, it is foolish to imagine a continuous act of begetting, since it is clear that three persons have subsisted in God from eternity.” (1.13.29)

To deny the autotheos is “foolish,” but Calvin recognizes there is little point in his disputing further subtleties regarding ontological derivation, because he has established the essential point which unifies Calvin with the fathers. He has sought to fully maintain the integral harmony between ontological *equality* and economic *priority*.

## **B. The Difference between Hilary's Orthodoxy and His Opponents' Heresy**

Is this then the “very faith” which Hilary defended? Yes, it is. Whereas both heresies Hilary combats construed equality and priority to be *mutually exclusive* of one another, Hilary maintains that the equality and priority are *integral* to one another; that they are bound up with one another in an harmonious fashion such that they *cannot* be exclusive of one another. Hilary's opponents certainly recognize that equality and priority in the Godhead must be *distinct* from one another, as does Hilary too, but only Hilary allows equality and priority to harmoniously and integrally coexist.

### **i. Heresy: Mutual Exclusion**

Hilary summarizes the mutual exclusion found in his opponents' heresy, saying:

"Thus their device of insisting upon the *One God* would either shut out the Second Person from the Godhead, or destroy the Unity by admitting Him as a second God, or else make the unity merely nominal. For unity, they would plead, excludes a Second; the existence of a Second is destructive of unity; and Two cannot be One." (5.1)

Hilary's opponents believe that ontological "unity" within God (which is the basis of the Persons' *equality* from an orthodox perspective) and economic *priority* (a "Second") are mutually exclusive. But Hilary argues that "the unity of God gives no sanction to the refusal of Divinity to the Son of God." (5.2) Priority does not deny equality.

## **ii. Orthodoxy: Integral Harmony**

The fact that Hilary considers the guarantee of *both* equality and priority to be found in the ontological derivation of the Son in his eternal generation or "birth" should alert us to the fact that Hilary is intent on maintaining the *integral harmony* between equality and priority. Equality and priority are integral to one another by virtue of being integral to this "birth." The "birth" then is not more important to Hilary than is this resulting integral harmony.

We can see this integral harmony in Hilary's thought in several ways.

### **a) Between Essence and Persons**

First, Hilary is unwilling to separate the Persons from the essence of God. Certainly the Persons are *distinct* from the essence due to their incommunicable personal properties which also evidence the priority among the Persons, but yet while distinct, the Persons are not *separate* from the essence. Hilary argues against Hieracas, saying

"It is as though that substance were something separate from Either Person...." (6.12)

Rather than allowing a separation of *any* of the divine substance from any of the Persons, Hilary argues that the Father is *in* the Son, so while the Son is not the source of His own being, yet the source of the Son's being is *in* the Son:

"And because He is God and God is in Him, there is no God beside Him; for God, than Whom there is



no other Source of Deity, is in Him, and consequently there is within Him not only His own existence, but the Author of that existence.” (5.37)

The net result here is that Hilary *approximates* Calvin’s doctrine that the Son is autotheos in regard to His sharing in the divine essence/substance. “Autotheos-ness” is *in* the Son. The Son’s essential equality *includes* the Father’s priority; (at least) one distinguishing mark of *priority* (autotheos) is in some sense *equally* found within both Persons by virtue of their common essence, and even, by virtue of the one distinguishable Person being *in* the other distinguishable Person. By virtue of their perichoresis, Hilary implies here that the Father and Son are simultaneously distinguishable *and* indistinguishable. This is what he means by saying that the Person of the Father is *in* the Person of the Son. More specifically, he is implying that the Persons are *in* one another not only in regard to their essence, but also in regard to their *personality*. There is a union here not only of *essence*, but of *person*. Amazingly, this means that Hilary even approximates here Van Til’s statement that “God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.”<sup>10</sup>

### **b) Economy Remains Ontological**

Second, Hilary throughout speaks of the Son’s subjection to the Father as one which is not *separate* from the ontology of the Godhead, but rather maintains that the subjection *manifests* the divine ontology. Ontology and economic priority are bound up in one another. Hilary summarizes the conclusion of chapter 11 of his book saying,

“...subjection is no evidence of want of power in Christ but that it actually is a sign of His true Divinity as God the Son...” (1.33)

Hilary summarizes his argument which leads to that conclusion at the end of chapter 11:

“But since He was self-contained even when He emptied Himself, His authority suffered no diminution, for in the humiliation of the emptying He exercised within Himself the power of that authority which was emptied.” (11.48)<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *An Introduction to Systematic Theology*, 229.

<sup>11</sup> The other half of Hilary’s point in ch. 11 is that Christ’s human body (and human nature) is deified through theosis in His exaltation, that we in union with Him will likewise be deified, and so by means of that ontological likening of man to God—just as the Son is generated by the Father so man is regenerated—thereby God will be made “all in all;” the whole process of humiliation and exaltation leads to the exaltation of God, and does not conclude in the devaluing of Christ’s divinity. Hilary’s *ontological* connection of our regeneration and bodily glorification to Christ’s eternal generation and historical exalta-

Hilary means that only a Person who had God's *full* authority could *empty* Himself of that same authority. The mark of the Son's secondary status in order of *priority* is just as much the mark of the Son's *equal* divinity with the Father. So far from *detracting* from equality, priority *reinforces* equality. Indeed, as Hilary says, this is a great Mystery.

### **iii. Orthodoxy: Real Distinction between Equality and Priority: Authority**

Along with this harmonious mutual integration between equality and priority, Hilary also maintains that equality and priority are truly distinct. His heretical opponents took this distinction too far—so that it excluded an orthodox harmonious integration—and thereby his opponents erred in this distinction as well. But by *truly* maintaining this distinction, Hilary's doctrine contains the structure and substance of later orthodox Western trinitarianism.

#### **a) Covenantal Authority in Western, Reformed, Orthodox Trinitarianism**

Post-Reformation orthodox trinitarianism has rejected the fathers' subordinationist *ontological* characterization of the priority among the Persons of the Godhead, and tended rather to characterize that priority as one of *authority* (, role and function). This paper will not substantiate this point, but rather assume it. Following Calvin's lead, orthodox, Reformed trinitarianism has sought to emphasize that while the Persons' relations as equals certainly does evidence a covenantal quality, the Persons' relations of priority evidence an even *greater* covenantal quality in contrast to the more ontological concern involved in their equality. It appears that equality qua equality is (primarily) ontological, and priority qua priority is *not* (primarily) ontological.<sup>12</sup> Rather, priority qua priority has to do with *authority*, and especially, *covenantal* authority. The

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tion is fascinating and instructive to our modern non-ontological conception of regeneration; notwithstanding the problematic elements of his exegesis, theology (kenosis, theosis, participation), and philosophy (dependence on the Greek form-matter distinction) at this point, which lie beyond the scope of this paper.

12 Calvin pushed the door open further to this conception of the trinity through his denial of the *ontological* character of the Son's eternal generation. This is in accord with his broader *covenantal* characterization of the whole of theology (especially soteriology) by which he rejected Catholicism's more ontological focus. Calvin evidences this concern throughout; cf. the quotation from 1.13.26 as discussed above on p. 11: "...the Father, seeing that he is the beginning of deity, not in the bestowing of essence, as fanatics babble, but by reason of order."

Reformation did not absolutely leave behind ancient and medieval Christianity's concern with *ontology*, but reformed it biblically by more and more consistently treating ontology within the more fully biblical context of God's *personal, covenantal* relations within Himself and with His creatures.

### **b) Covenantal Authority in Hilary's Doctrine of the Trinity**

Hilary's doctrine of the trinity contains the structure and substance of this mark by which Western trinitarianism distances itself from ancient and more Eastern trinitarianism. As such, Hilary's (orthodox) concern for the *integral harmony* between equality and priority, ontology and economy, and his resulting (erroneous) latent subordinationism, do not prevent him from respecting the concern of later orthodox trinitarianism for the full *distinction* between equality and priority, ontology and economy. Orthodox *integration* does not deny orthodox *distinction*.

To demonstrate in detail--

It is the Son's birth which gives Him the Father's authority; birth guarantees an equality of authority in regard to their equal divinity:

"Through the Mystery of the birth the Son's power is the power of the Father, His authority the Father's authority, His nature the Father's nature." (9.1)

But the Father's authority *in* the Son is yet *over* the Son; therefore the Son obeys the Father:

"Yet another example, *I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me*, and, *The Father is greater than I*. The One is in the Other: recognise, then, the divinity of God, the Begotten of God: the Father is greater than He: perceive, then, His acknowledgment of the Father's authority." (11.12)

Here Hilary clearly associates equality with divinity, and priority with authority, as he does in the next quote as well:

"...neither the confession of the birth could be held to reflect upon His divinity, nor His reverent obedience to infringe upon His sovereign nature." (11.12)

Notice that neither the Father's authority nor the Son's submissive obedience militates against their ontological equality. By virtue of their full *distinction* equality and priority are free from in-

terfering with one another. How is this so?

It is not that the Son submits because He has a lower degree of divinity:

“Nor again could the ignorance of day and hour be imputed in the Only-begotten God to a lower degree of Divinity. It is to demonstrate against the Sabellian heretics that the Father's authority is without birth or beginning, that this prerogative of unbegotten authority is not granted to the Son.” (10.8)

No, though His being is derived from the Father's, and though He honors the Father, nevertheless by virtue of His divine being He deserves equal honor with the Father:

“He is not the source of His own being, nor did He, being Himself non-existent, bring to pass His own birth out of nothing; but, existing as a living nature and from a living nature, He possesses the power of that nature, and declares the authority of that nature, by bearing witness to His honour, and in His honour to the grace belonging to the birth He received. He pays to the Father the tribute of obedience to the will of Him Who sent Him, but the obedience of humility does not dissolve the unity of His nature: He becomes obedient unto death, but, after death, He is above every name.” (9.53)

“It is in reference to the charge of breaking the Sabbath that He says, *My Father worketh hitherto, and I work*. He wished them to understand that His practice was justified by Divine authority; and He taught them by the same words that His work must be regarded as the work of the Father, Who was working in Him all that He wrought.” (7.17)

The Son does not in fact lack divine knowledge:

“Remember, God the Father set the day within His authority, that it might not come to the knowledge of man, and the Son, when asked before, replied that He did not know, but now, no longer denying His knowledge, replies that it is theirs not to know, for the Father has set the times not in His own *knowledge*, but in His own *authority*.” (9.75)

“while He proclaims that the possession of this knowledge is withheld from ourselves, He asserts that it belongs to the mystery of the Father's authority.” (9.75)

Nor does the Son lack His own authority and omnipotent freedom from the Father's control:

“So far, indeed, is He from needing the authority of precedent to enable Him to act, that He is to give life to whom He will. To will implies a free nature, subsisting with power to choose in the blissful exercise of omnipotence.” (7.19)

Nor does He lack His own strength:

“If by virtue of the authority of the Father's nature within Him, all that He works, He works with the Father in Him, and the Father works even until now on the Sabbath, then the Son, Who pleads the authority of the Father's working, is acquitted of blame. For the words, *can do nothing*, refer not to strength but to authority; He can do nothing of Himself, except what He has seen.” (9.45)

But rather it was that the Son submitted to the “Divine Plan.”

“But if, as we have maintained, when He said that He knew not the day, He kept silence not from ignorance, but in accordance with the Divine Plan, all occasion for irreverent declarations must be removed, and the blasphemous teachings of heresy thwarted, that the truth of the Gospel may be illustrat-

ed by the very words which seem to obscure it.” (10.8)

The Son subjected Himself *voluntarily*, not due to a subordination of His *nature* but of His *will*:

“Although He humbled Himself, His nature knew no humiliation: though He was obedient, it was a voluntary obedience, for He became obedient by humbling Himself. The Only-begotten God humbled Himself, and obeyed His Father even to the death of the Cross: but as what, as man or as God, is He to be subjected to the Father, when all things have been subjected to Him? Of a truth this subjection is no sign of a fresh obedience, but the Dispensation of the Mystery, for the allegiance is eternal, the subjection an event within time. The subjection is then in its signification simply a demonstration of the Mystery.” (11.30)

The Son’s personal subjection to the Father as the God-man in the state of His humiliation within time was an expression of the Son’s eternal, voluntary “allegiance” to the Father not first as the God-man, but as God.

Here Hilary reveals, in undeniable clarity, the structure and substance of a Reformed understanding of the *covenantal* nature of the eternal priority within the Godhead. Though in seed form, and still carrying the baggage of latent subordinationism, to Hilary this priority must be conceived of as one of “authority,” of “allegiance,” of “obedience,” of being humble, of will, and not of nature.

So then Hilary’s integral harmony between equality and priority in no way mitigates their full and real distinction; he can fully conceive of equality and priority as significantly independent from one another by virtue of each being unique in their own right.

#### **IV. Concluding Implications**

##### **A. Was Hilary Orthodox?**

We are brought back again, then, to our question from the beginning: Has Hilary lost the equality which he sought to maintain, by characterizing the Son’s birth as an *ontological* derivation? Yes, and no.

He *did* lose the equality of the Father and Son by maintaining that the Son’s being is derived, the Father’s underived. But we can learn even from this error, for it was driven by Hilary’s concern to maintain the full integration of ontology and priority within the Godhead. We may

even say that Hilary's attempt even to characterize the priority within the Godhead as ontological is simultaneously an attempt to characterize *all* of the Godhead as ontological; as *fully divine*. In *this* concern he is even at one with Calvin's doctrine that the Son is autotheos! We should learn from Hilary here to maintain the full integration between ontological equality and economic priority in every way scripture warrants and we can discover—even finding ways in which priority is ontological—but we should also learn to guard against the error of ontological subordinationism.

But on the other hand, Hilary did *not* lose the equality he sought to maintain. He did not lose it, because his error of subordinationism is offset by his recognition of the full distinction between equality and priority, as is evidenced by his safeguarding the distinction between authority and ontology. By recognizing and affirming the specific nature of trinitarian priority as having to do with a voluntary and free order of *authority*, and by stating that the order of authority is not forced into being by the ontology of the Godhead but rather is freely and voluntarily maintained by the Persons, he erects the safeguard against subordinationism which later post-Reformation orthodoxy would use to more thoroughly correct his error.

### **B. A Summary of Orthodox Trinitarianism**

This paper is leading the reader, then, to consider and adopt a particular formulation of the doctrine of the trinity as an historically-warranted and helpfully clear summary of the doctrine, summarized as follows:

- 1) The ontological trinity is characterized by the *equality* of the Persons as one God in three Persons. It centers on their *one-and-many* relation.
- 2) The economic trinity is characterized by the hierarchy of *priority* among the Persons, such that the Father is first in authority, the Son second, the Spirit third. It centers on their relations of being *in-authority* and *under-authority*.

3) Ontology and economy, equality and priority are harmoniously and exhaustively integrated with one another, yet remain truly distinct.

We may abstract from this that in their interrelation, ontological equality and economic priority are *themselves* simultaneously ontologically equally ultimate, and economically arranged so that ontology is primary, economy secondary; again, at this more abstract level, both ontological equal ultimacy and economic priority exist in an integral harmony. (This structure is diagrammed in appendix 1.)

### **C. Suggested Corrections to Recent Trinitarianism**

Recognizing these concerns as central to the history of the doctrine of the trinity can go a long ways toward correcting the errors both of recent analyses of that history, and of recent doctrines of the trinity.

To take only one example: In her book God For Us Catherine Mowry LaCugna begins by following the popular model which distinguishes the ontological trinity as having to do with God in eternity apart from His interaction with the temporal creation, and the economic trinity as having to do with God in relation to the temporal flux of His creation; she centers the ontology-economy distinction around *eternity* and *time*. (cf. pp. 8, 37, 42-43, 209-211) In doing so she disregards the fathers' belief in an *eternal* order of priority amongst the Persons in her analysis of their thought in the first half of her book (1-205), and exclusively associates the taxis of the economy with the trinitarian activity in redemptive *history*. That is, her view that priority is only to be found in history loses the eternal priority this paper has sought to show exists as the foundation of all priority among the Persons' activity in history.

Then as a result of her agreement with Rahner's (formally if not substantively) helpful observation that the ontological and economic aspects of the trinity must not be abstracted from one another but rather seen in their integral relation (13, 210-211), LaCugna concludes that be-

cause the trinity's *economy* is not eternal, immutable, impassible, neither must its *ontology* be (211-213). God is no longer perfectly eternal, immutable, impassible, but rather lives in *this* world, with us, partaking in its flux, and caring for our suffering, and suffering with us (34-35, 42). The orthodox would say she has therein not *maintained* but rather completely *lost* the divine nature, the ontology of the trinity!

While giving up traditional elements of an orthodox definition of God's ontological nature, she still does seek to maintain the ontological *equality* which is foundational to an orthodox understanding of the trinity. This latter emphasis is of value, but LaCugna uses it to deny that there is an order of priority, a priority of authority, among the Persons of the Godhead, and that for this reason all hierarchical relations among persons in human society are themselves a denial of the trinity (266-278, 388-400). For LaCugna, equality must reign over priority, to the extent that priority is excluded:

"God is over the world, male is over female, rational being is over inanimate. Inasmuch as this is proclaimed to be the 'natural' or divinely intended order of things, this is final proof of the defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity." (397)

"The great irony and tragedy of so-called orthodox trinitarian theology is that its proponents worked so hard to remove all subordinationism 'within' the Godhead, but then reproduced that same subordinationism in their vision of social and personal relations." (400)

"...any theological justification for a hierarchy among persons also vitiates the truth of our salvation through Christ." (400)

In sum, LaCugna has *reinterpreted* the history of orthodox trinitarianism along feminist lines, first denying that there is a priority of authority in the Godhead, then being unwilling to grant that priority held a central, rightful, and beneficial place in the orthodoxy of the fathers, and finally, refusing to accept any hierarchical relations in human society. As such she admits she is rejecting "so-called orthodox trinitarian theology," and she is. Perhaps if she had begun by analyzing the ontological-economic distinction along the lines of equality and priority rather than along the lines of eternity and time, or even more, if she had been able to love and worship the



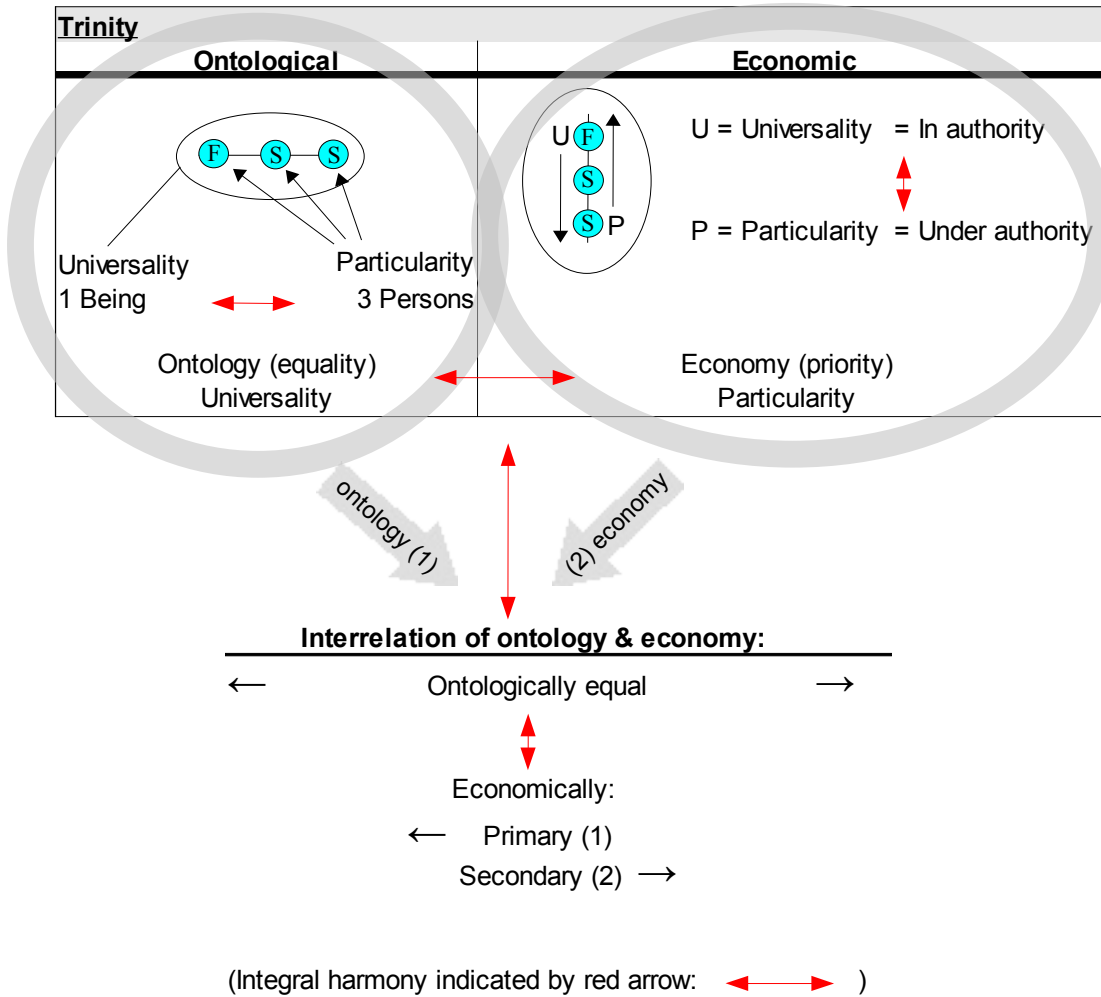
reality and value of priority within the Godhead from the outset, she could have retained the biblical respect for human authority structures in the end.

## **V. Conclusion**

Hilary of Poitiers set an excellent example for us in recognizing both the *distinction* between ontological equality and economic priority within the Godhead, as well as their mutual harmonious *integration*. Undoubtedly theological reflection in years to come will open still further vistas on the manifold wonders of the doctrine of the Trinity. We must listen and learn from those developments to come, out of respect for the greatness of the God Who has chosen to reveal Himself to us in His triune glory. But if Hilary's example from the past may point us more straight and true down the path of orthodox faithfulness to God's self-revelation in scripture, we will only desire more faithfully than he to pay full respect to God's glory in His trinitarian equality and priority.

## Appendix 1

### A Diagram of the Orthodox Doctrine of the Trinity



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 Tertullian: *Against Marcion*  
 Cyril of Jerusalem: *Catechetical Lectures*  
 Athanasius: *De Incarnatione*  
 Basil of Caesarea: *On the Holy Spirit*  
 Augustine of Hippo: *Confessions*  
 Anselm of Canterbury: *Cur Deus Homo*  
 Hilary of Poitiers: *On the Trinity*