**Torrance and Gunton on Structure in the Trinity**

By Mark Bird

In this paper, I will examine the position of Thomas Torrance on order/structure in the Trinity, and I will compare this position to that of another great British theologian of the Trinity, Colin Gunton.[[1]](#footnote-1) Torrance held to a more “egalitarian” view of the members of the Trinity, while Gunton saw more “structure” within the Godhead. While presenting their views in contrast, I will also interact with these theologians, especially Torrance, and spend a little time at the end discussing some biblical passages related to this issue.

First, I will define a few terms that are relevant to this paper.

1. *Homoousios* – this Greek word means “same substance,” “same essence,” or “same being,” and it is used in the Nicene Creed to make it clear that the nature of the Son is identical to the nature of the Father. It does not refer to physical substance, of course, so “substance” might not be the best translation.
2. Subordinationism – this term denotes the view that the Son (or the Holy Spirit) is actually of a lesser quality of being than the Father. The Son in this view is not of the same substance as the Father. Homoousios is denied, because the Son is inferior to the Father in his essence. This term “subordination*ism*” is not to be confused with the belief that there is an authority structure within the Godhead, while the Son is still seen as exactly of the same nature as the Father. Sometimes the word “subordination” is used in the literature to describe the obedience of the Son to the Father, but this may have nothing to do with an ontological “subordination*ism*”.
3. Immanent (or Ontological) Trinity vs. Economic Trinity – The immanent Trinity refers to God as He exists in eternity. The economic Trinity refers to God as He is revealed in history (how He functions in the world to bring about our salvation). Theologians debate about the extent to which the God who is revealed in the Bible through salvation history reflects the God as He is in Himself, as He has always existed. Does the way we see the Son relating to the Father in the pages of Scripture reflect the way that the Son related to the Father from all eternity?
4. Eternal generation –**“**that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby he, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like his own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It’s important to affirm that this generation is eternal, necessary (happening inevitably by divine nature and not an act of the will), and non-physical.

**Thomas Torrance’s view**

T. F. Torrance emphasized the doctrine of *homoousios*, and heavily relied on the church father Athanasius to support this emphasis. In his *Trinitarian Faith*, Torrance explains Athanasius’s view that the Son is everything that the Father is, except whatever gives the Father the distinctive role of Father:

“Properly understood the Nicene *homousios* with the Father means ‘**of identically the same being as the Father**’. It is the self-same God who is revealed to us as the Son and the Father –the incarnate Son is the very same being as God the Father. (Athanasius, D syn., 49-54; Ad Afr.; 8). No statement about this could be stronger than that of Athanasius when he argued that ‘the whole being of the Son is proper to the being of the Father’, and that ‘**the being of the Son is the fullness of the Father’s Godhead’** (Athanasius, Con. Ar.’ 3.3 6; 4.1ff). The Son and the Father are so essentially and completely one and the same God that – a phrase Athanasius reiterated – **the Son is everything that the Father is, except ‘Father’**. (See Athanasius, *Con. Ar*., 3-4; *De syn*., 49; *Ad Afr*., 8, etc.)…. As Jesus himself taught, he who honours the Son, honours the Father, but he who does not honour the Son, does not honour the Father who sent him. **The incarnate Son has all the prerogatives of God, except Fatherhood.** (Athanasius, *Con. Ar*., 1.8, 15ff, 33; 2.24f, 32, etc.)[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Homoousios* means that the Father and Son are so completely of the same essence that the Son has all the prerogatives of God, except Fatherhood. Understanding that *homoousios* means that the Father and Son are of the same nature, let’s focus on this distinctive of Fatherhood. What does that entail, and how does that relate to the issue of structure in the Trinity?

**Eternal Generation**

To describe the nature of Fatherhood, Torrance follows Athanasius in teaching eternal generation, though I’m not sure Torrance fully embraced the language that Athanasius used to describe this Father/Son relationship:

[The Son] proceeds in His goodness from the Father **as from a good Fountain**, and orders all things and holds them together (*Against the Heathen*). Neither can we imagine three Subsistences separated from each other, as results from their bodily nature in the case of men, lest we hold a plurality of gods like the heathen. But just as a river, produced from a well, is not separate, and yet there are in fact two visible objects and two names. For neither is the Father the Son, nor the Son the Father. For the Father is Father of the Son, and the Son, Son of the Father. For like as the well is not a river, nor the river a well, but both are one and the same water which is conveyed in a channel from the well to the river, so **the Father’s deity passes into the Son without flow and without division**. For the Lord says, ‘I came out from the Father and am come’ (John xvi. 28). But He is ever with the Father, for He is in the bosom of the Father, nor was ever the bosom of the Father void of the deity of the Son” (Athanasius).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Athanasius refers to the Father as the Fountain of the Godhead. According to Athanasius, the Father’s deity passes into the Son. The Father is seen as having the priority in the relationship. As expressed in other writings, Athanasius even thought of the Father as the “Origin” (*arche*) of the Son in that he eternally begot the Son.[[5]](#footnote-5) However, as Torrance thought, since the Son is inseparable from the Father who is the Origin, he is himself associated with the Origin and should be considered a member of the Monarchy of the Trinity.[[6]](#footnote-6) Torrance says, “While the Father was on occasion [by Athanasius] denoted as the ‘author’ (aitios) and the ‘origin’ (arche) of the Son that was meant to express the truth that the Father is Father of the Son and that the Son is Son of the Father, but not to withdraw anything from the equality of the Son with the Father.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Yet, using language of fountain, author, and origin of the Father in a way that is not quite applied to the Son (the Son is associated with these concepts but not in the same way), shows that even Athanasius saw clear distinctions in the Godhead, beyond labels, in the way the members related to one another. There are particular properties unique to each Person of the Godhead though the deity of each Person is exactly the same.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In his *The Trinitarian Faith*, Torrance interprets the Nicene Council,[[9]](#footnote-9) helping us understand how he also viewed the relationship between the Father and the Son:

“The crucial point in the debates of the [Nicene] Council was over how the biblical expressions by, from, and of God, applied to the incarnate Son, were to be understood. Were they to be understood to mean, as the Arians claimed, that he is the Son of the Father only by an act of his will, by grace? Or did they mean that he is Son of the Father from his very being, that is, from his essential reality and nature as God? **If he is from the very being of God,** as the Nicenes held, **then what is of the being of the Father is entirely the Son’s,** for the Father and the Son are each ‘proper’ to the other. Thus the Father/Son relation falls within the one being of God, the Father and the Son inhering and coexisting eternally, wholly and perfectly in one another.God is Father precisely as he is eternally the Father of the Son, and the Son is God of God precisely as he is eternally Son of the Father. **There is perfect and eternal mutuality between the Father and the Son**, without any ‘interval’ in being, time or knowledge between them. (Athanasius, Con. Ar., I.1-29, 34; 2.22ff 33, etc.). In Gregory of Nazianzen’s expressions, **the Son is begotten of the Father** **‘timelessly’, ‘causelessly’, and ‘unoriginately’** (Gregory Naz., Or., 30.11 & 19)…. It is not to be imagined as having taken place at some ‘moment’ or by ‘an act of will’ in God, as Arius and Eusebius evidently did, (Cf. C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 1977, pp. 26 and 229), but as an ineffable relation between Father and Son eternally subsisting in God. “God, in that he ever is, is ever Father of the Son’. (Athanasius, *De Decr*., 12; cf. 20).[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Son is from the very being of God, which means that the being of the Father is entirely the being of the Son. Following Gregory the Theologian at this point, Torrance insists that the generation of the Son from the father is ‘timeless’, ‘causeless’, and ‘unoriginate.’ Eternal generation is understood by the Nicenes as a necessary, natural act, not an act of the will.

My response to this is that if one affirms this eternal generation as causeless or unoriginate, it is still an eternal *generation*.[[11]](#footnote-11) This entails a Father who is “ingenerate” and a Son who is “generate.” The Father and the Son inhere and coexist eternally, “wholly and perfectly in one another,” yet one is the Father and one is the Son from the Father. The distinction between Father and Son is a meaningful distinction, not an arbitrary or superficial one. I bring this up to make it clear that Athanasius and Torrance, by teaching the doctrine of eternal generation, were affirming that the members of the Trinity had distinctive personal properties, which would have to exist if there were “structure” in the Trinity. And I would argue that these distinctive properties set the structure up.

Torrance continues his explanation of the Nicene view by quoting Athanasius on the actions of the Father and the Son.

“The *homoousios* of the Father clearly asserted, not only that there is no division between the being of the Son and the being of the Father, but that there is no division between the acts of the Son and the acts of God. As Jesus said in the Gospel, ‘My Father works hitherto and I work’, thereby identifying his activity with that of God the Creator (John 5:17). ‘He who made us through his Word made all things small and great. It is not for us to divide the creation, and say this is the Father’s and this is the Son’s, for they are of one God, who uses his proper Word as his hand, and creates all things in him’ (Athanasius, *De decre*., 7).[[12]](#footnote-12)

As Athanasius said, there is no division between the acts of the Son and the Father. Christ’s acts are in some way also the acts of the Father. But notice that Athanasius speaks of the Father using the Word (the Son) as his hand. This implies some kind of authority structure within the Godhead. It appears that Athanasius recognized an order (a “vertical order”?) in the Trinity even as he emphasized that the being of the Father and Son are the same.

Furthermore, we must be careful to recognize that the Father does not participate in every action the same way that the Son does; for example, when the Son gave up his life on the cross. The Father and Son have different roles in each action. We must understand Athanasius’s point, though, that when the Son acts, his action is just as much a divine act as the Father’s act, and it is the same God acting in either case (with all members of the Trinity involved in some way in each action), because of *homoousios.*

Nevertheless, Torrance, in emphasizing *homoousios*, downplayed the monarchy of the Father, speaking of the monarchy of the whole Trinity. Paul Molnar explains Torrance’s view in *T.F. Torrance, Theologian of the Trinity:*

“The divine monarchy (the location of supreme power) cannot be limited to the Father alone. Because each of the divine Persons is fully God and Lord, the divine monarchy must be understood to reside in the being of God as one and three. Here Torrance is critical of some of the Cappadocians, namely, Basil and Gregory (not Nazianzen), because they made too sharp a distinction between the immanent and economic Trinity and because they never referred to the Holy Spirit as God. Further, they thought of the Father as the *arche* and this implied degrees of deity, thus opening the door to subordinationism which, of course, Torrance strongly opposes because any such thinking undermines the Deity of the Son and Spirit and thus calls into question God’s actions ad extra as Savior and Redeemer…..Torrance objected to the main thrust of their argument which suggested that it was the first Person of the Trinity who was the “sole Principle or Cause or Source of Deity” because this weakened Athanasius’ view that “whatever we say of the Father we say of the Son and the Spirit except ‘Father’” (*The Trinitarian Faith,* p. 241).[[13]](#footnote-13)

Torrance rejected the *arche* of the Father (though he admits elsewhere[[14]](#footnote-14) that Athanasius uses the term of the Father, and that the term doesn’t necessarily imply degrees of deity), but he did see that the relationship between the Father and Son is irreversible; that is, moving in one direction, not the other. There is an order that applies to the persons, not the deity:

**“[T]he Father is first, the Son is second and the Spirit is third….** The Father is not to be seen as the cause of the divine Being but only as first in the order of the persons. (*Christian Doctrine of God*, 180.) The Son is not less than the Father but wholly God. Since each Person is fully God, **the order within the Trinity does not apply to the Being of the divine Persons or to their Deity;** ‘**they are distinguished by position** **and not status**, by form and not being, by sequence and not power, for they are fully and perfectly equal” (*Trinitarian Perspectives*, 136).[[15]](#footnote-15)

So in Torrance’s Trinitarian theology, the Father is not the cause of the being of the Godhead, though he is the first of the order of the Persons. I see this to be a form of structure within the Godhead (though Torrance may not acknowledge it is). Torrance explains this further:

This priority in order or Monarchy of the Father within the Trinitarian relations is consonant with the Father’s relation to the Son within the indivisibility of the Triune Being of God. Hence the priority or Monarchy of the Father within the Holy Trinity must not be taken to imply a priority or superiority in Deity. It refers to the fact that ‘the Son is begotten of the Father, not the Father of the Son, which is **the order manifested in the incarnation between the Father and his only begotten Son,** and is **reflected in the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father in the name of the Son**. This has to do in part, then, with the history of God’s revealing and saving acts, but it **is** **governed by the irreversible relation between the Father and the Son intrinsic to them in which, while the Father ‘naturally’ comes first, the Son is nevertheless everything the Father is except being Father.**[[16]](#footnote-16)

Torrance asserting that that acts of the Trinity are governed by the irreversible relation between the Father and the Son intrinsic to them seems to be another way of saying that the order that we see in the economic Trinity is based on the order in the immanent Trinity.

**Torrance on the Procession of the Spirit**

From whom does the Spirit proceed? From the Father or from the Father and the Son? Torrance thought that we should say that ‘the Holy Spirit proceeds from the one Monarchy of the Triune God,’[[17]](#footnote-17) though it is acceptable to say both that the Spirit proceeds “from the Father and the Son and “from the Father through the Son,” as long as one understands the homoousial relationship of the members of the Trinity, that there is not a ‘derived’ deity of the Son and Spirit, and that the monarchy is not limited to the Father.[[18]](#footnote-18)

The Spirit is from the Father, but from the Father “in the Son,” since He is in both the being of the Father and in the Being of the Son. This being the case, “he could not but proceed from or out of the Being of God inseparably from and through the Son.”[[19]](#footnote-19) If this understanding of eternal procession were accepted by the East and the West Churches, it could make the *filioque* debate a moot issue.

However, does this mean we should say with Torrance that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Monarchy of the Triune God? According to Torrance, the Monarchy is both the One and the Three. If the Monarchy includes the three Persons, then does that not mean that the Holy Spirit proceeds from himself, since the being of the Father, which is the being of the Son, is also the being of the Spirit? In a sense, yes, according to Torrance.

The Spirit is to be thought of as proceeding from the Being of the Father which as Spirit he himself is….The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son by Nature as well as the Spirit of the Father by Nature, and it is as such that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and is given by the Son, as from the one Being which they both equally share, but share also with the Holy Spirit himself, for the Father is not Father and the Son is not Son apart from the Holy Spirit.[[20]](#footnote-20)

But does this really mean the Holy Spirit proceeds from himself? Obviously the person of the Holy Spirit cannot be derived from the person of the Holy Spirit. The answer may lie in the distinction between the deriving of “identity” and the deriving of “being.” Torrance taught that since each Person is wholly God in Himself, the Son and the Spirit do not derive their being from the Father (as Person), but they do derive from Him their distinctive identities:

“With Didymus, Torrance wants to avoid any suggestion that the Son and Spirit derive their being from the Father because each Person of the Trinity is wholly God in themselves and together in the one being of God (*The Trinitarian Faith,* 244). So while the persons of the Trinity do indeed derive their distinctive *identities* as Son and Spirit from the Father, they do not derive their *being* from the Father as Person. That is why Torrance insists that it is from the being of the Father that the Son and Spirit proceed and not from the Person of the Father only (See also Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 186).[[21]](#footnote-21)

The term “derived” is being used here to describe eternal generation and eternal procession, though what is said to be derived from the Father is *identity* not *being*. Does *identity* refer to Person? If so, the *Person* of the Son is derived (or generated) from the Father, while the *being* of the Son is simply shared since the being of the Son is the same as the being of the Father. We can say the same thing about the Holy Spirit -- his deity is shared from the being of the Triune God, but his identity (his distinctive personal properties) is derived from the Father himself (the Monarchy within the Trinity).

**Colin Gunton’s view**

Gunton saw structure both in the economic Trinity and in the immanent Trinity.

The Father who begets and the Son who is begotten are together one God in the *koinonia* of the Spirit. They are one because **the Son and the Spirit are, in a sense, though as God, subordinate in the eternal *taxis* as they are in the economy**. **But in another sense they are not subordinate, for without his Son and Spirit, God would not be God.** So Athanasius: ‘for, whereas the Father always is, so what is proper to his essence must always be; and this is his Word and his Wisdom’ (Athanasius, *Against the Arians*, 1.29). It follows that the distinctive personhood of each – their being each what they are and not someone else – derives first from the **constituting action of the Father**, but also from the **responsive action of the Son** and the **particularizing action of the Spirit**. Accordingly, in both the mutuality and reciprocity but also the distinctive particularity of the three persons consists the eternal love of the one God. In other words, **it is thus possible to maintain an Eastern – and scriptural – sense of the monarchy of the Father without succumbing to an ontological hierarchy which renders the Son and the Spirit as less than fully divine.**[[22]](#footnote-22)

Gunton is not reluctant to speak of the Son and Spirit being subordinate to the Father, but he doesn’t mean that in the sense that they lack any divine attribute, for they are fully God. He does see *taxis*, or structure, within even the immanent Trinity, just as he sees it in the economic Trinity (with God sending the Son, etc.). Gunton also sees the mutuality of the members of the Trinity, so in another sense they are “not subordinate.” The Father depends on the Son and the Spirit to be what he is in his particular properties, just as they depend on the Father for theirs. Yet the Father still has the priority in the relationships of the Trinity.

Gunton reiterates that the economic subordination he teaches regarding the Son and the Spirit is not subordinationist theology:

The economic or functional subordination suggested by the two hands imagery [the Son and Spirit are the hands of God the Father that do work] –the inescapable implication of the biblical story that the Son obeys and the Spirit is sent—does not entail a correspondingly subordinationist theology, because Son and Spirit are, as obedient and sent, truly God. The Father may be, in the traditional language, the fount of the Trinity, but the Son and the Spirit are equally constitutive of the eternal being of the one God.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Are the Son and the Spirit obedient to the Father in a way that he is not obedient to them? Yes, but they are obedient as truly God, not anything less than God. Is the Father the Fount of the Trinity? Yes, but the Son and Spirit are just as important for the constitution of the being of the one God as the Father is.

**Gunton’s Response to Torrance**

In a book edited by Elmer Colyer, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*, Colin Gunton contributes a chapter reflecting on Torrance’s writing and influence. In this chapter, Gunton considers both the positive and negative sides of Torrance’s Trinitarian theology. Gunton said that the positive side of Torrance’s theology of the economy was that his emphasis on homoousios prevented a particular heresy: “The function of the *homoousion* in this development is to obviate any hint of subordinationism in the relation of the persons of the Trinity.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The emphasis on homoousios also helped to keep the economic and the immanent Trinity closer.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Gunton considered the negative side of Torrance’s view to be that it downplays what is called “the monarchy of the Father,” a concept taught in Scripture:

We must say that there is clearly an element of economic subordination (to be strictly distinguished from ontological subordination*ism*) in the Scriptures. The Son obeys the Father, does the Father’s work and will hand over the kingdom to the Father, and so on (to combine elements of the Fourth Gospel’s Christology with that of 1 Corinthians 15: 24-8).”[[26]](#footnote-26)

According to Gunton, this scriptural theme was recognized by the church fathers, such as Irenaeus:

The concept of monarchy denotes the fact that the Son and the Spirit are mediators of the Father’s work and rule. This is clearly expressed in Irenaeus’s conception of the Son and the Spirit as the “two hands” of God, but it is not that which Torrance tends to draw upon, but rather the bishop’s (equally real, but less prominent) insistence on the true divinity of the hands. Rightly or wrongly, the authority of Athanasius is played against the view that the Son and the Spirit mediate the Father’s kingly rule: “the formula ‘one Being, three Persons’ … carried with it a doctrine of the *Monarchia* … as identical with the one indivisible being of the Holy Trinity.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

Gunton also noticed that on this issue Torrance distanced himself from Barth, his teacher at Basel, who said that it is as godlike to be humble as it is to be exalted:

In Barth, there is an element of subordination in the economy, in the sense that the Father commands and the Son obeys. However, this subordination is then, so to speak, read up into the eternal Trinity, where the economic subordination becomes, without being taken away, also and at once an immanent equality of being. So it is that Barth can say, on the basis of Christology, that it is as godlike to be humble as to be exalted: that there are within the being of God elements of commanding and obeying, of superordination and subordination." This will serve as a useful way of understanding the ways in which Torrance is like and different from his great teacher, because what we can call the *homoousian* drive of his thought operates to minimize such elements and to stress the complete equality of the action and divinity alike of the three persons.[[28]](#footnote-28)

It’s not just that Torrance disagrees with Barth. Torrance also evidently does not adequately deal with the biblical data that seems to support a structure within the Trinity:

One key to Torrance’s theology is a vision in some ways more patristic than biblical. Whether that be the case, it is remarkable how little exegesis of Scripture, as distinct from the Fathers, is to be found in the major treatments of Trinitarian themes. It is also the case that (and in this our subject is scarcely different from other theologians) texts appealed to tend to be those supporting the tendency we have already noted, to bring the economic Trinity as close as possible to the immanent. Do the apparently subordinationist texts of l Corinthians 15 and some of those in the Fourth Gospel receive the attention they perhaps need if the subordinationist elements of the economic Trinity are to be adequately correlated with the necessarily and rightly egalitarian note in the treatment of the immanent Trinity? They at least appear to be counterevidence to the central thesis, and therefore require careful interrogation.[[29]](#footnote-29)

I would like to take Gunton’s suggestion and take a longer look at these “apparently subordinationist texts.” I will do that in the last section of this paper.

Gunton believed that Torrance may have been reading the Eastern fathers too much through Western eyes, and thus was flattening out the distinctions within the Godhead. Gunton questions: “whether the immense stress on the homoousion does not run the risk of flattening out the particularities, so that divine being tends to be stressed at the expense of the divine persons” (129-130).

Can we not see in the reading of the Eastern Fathers the dominance of a rather Augustinian eye? We have seen that for Torrance the divine *monarchia* is that of the whole Trinity. The question we must ask of him is whether Athanasius supports his position as clearly as he is claimed to. He is too good a scholar not to cite the crucial evidence, and the following piece is crucial. In it, God is identified by Athanasius as “the all-holy Father of Christ beyond all created being." This is then glossed to mean that: “When Athanasius applied the term *ousia* to speak of the Being of God the Creator and of God the Father of Christ… it is ‘being’ understood in the light of the truth that the Son and the Spirit are each of one and the same being or *homoousios* with God the Father; or … that the fullness of the Father’s Being is the Being of the Son and of the Spirit.”

Is there a subtle move here from the *homoousion* to something more than that? Does the final move, that “the fullness of the Father’s Being *is* the Being of the Son and the Spirit” (my emphasis) follow from what has gone before? May it not at least be asked whether both Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers express the particular being of the three persons of the Godhead rather more strongly than that.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Gunton accused Torrance of minimizing subordination elements in the economy and interpreting Athanasius in a more egalitarian way than what Athanasius really was. It is true, as we have shown earlier in this paper, that Torrance recognized some clear distinctions between the members of the Trinity. He even acknowledged some kind of order (an irreversible direction) in the Godhead (though I’m sure he considers it a “horizontal” order). But it does seem that Athanasius saw greater distinctions between the members of the Trinity than Torrance could see. I’ve already cited as pieces of evidence Athanasius’ reference to the Father as the Fountain of the Trinity, and the Son as being the hand of the Father in the world. Did Torrance anywhere use this language to talk about the Godhead?

**Torrance responds to Gunton**

In *Theologians in Dialogue*…, Torrance was given a chance to respond to those who were reflecting on his teaching. In regards to structure in the Trinity, he responded to Gunton by saying that one must not read up into the immanent Trinity any “subordination” he might see in the economic Trinity; that is, unless he “operates with the altogether dubious idea that the Father is the ‘cause’ of the being of the Son, as both Basil and Gregory Nyssen held, a notion which Gregory of Nazianzus rightly rejected in line with the teaching of Athanasius.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Torrance said that it was a great mistake to import causality into our understanding of the Trinitarian relations. He declared, “One of the ideas that I have found distressing is the use of causality (aitia) by Basil and his brother Gregory to speak of the relations of the Persons in the Holy Trinity in terms of a chain of causality, spelled out particularly by Gregory Nyssen, and which is compounded by the Greek stance on the *filioque* clause.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Torrance said that using causality “has a disastrous effect of distinguishing between God the Father as uncaused or underived Deity, and the Son and the Spirit as caused or derived Deities, a heretical notion found sometimes in English theology.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

My response: I think Gunton would reject the idea that the Son and Spirit are derived *deities.* *Persons* are generated or emitted, not *deities*. He would probably also say that the Cappadocians are mischaracterized as teaching that the Son and Spirit are derived deities. All of the Cappadocians, along with Athanasius, would say that the deity of the members of the Trinity is One. They would not say that deities are multiplied. Yet they all would say that there are Persons that are ‘derived’. Even Athanasius speaks of the Father as the Fountain of the Godhead, and uses the term *arche* to refer to the Father as the source/origin of the Trinity, though he was also careful to qualify that in a way that Basil and Gregory Nyssen didn’t.

Gunton understood the importance of the oneness of the Son’s and the Holy Spirit’s nature with the Father’s, even while recognizing structure in the Trinity. As we mentioned earlier, Gunton believed that “The Father may be, in the traditional language, the fount of the Trinity, but the Son and the Spirit are equally constitutive of the eternal being of the one God.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

I do see a sense in which it would be heretical to believe that the Son is “caused” by the Father—as if the Son was contingent/could have not existed. But if one accepts the doctrine of eternal generation, which Torrance does, isn’t there a sense in which the Son is derived from the Father? Isn’t that what eternal generation is? To repeat Berkhoff’s definition, eternal generation is*that eternal and necessary act of the first person in the Trinity, whereby He, within the divine Being, is the ground of a second personal subsistence like His own, and puts this second person in possession of the whole divine essence, without any division, alienation, or change.[[35]](#footnote-35)* To affirm eternal generation is to affirm some sort of derivativeness of the Son from the Father, a begottenness. A problem would arise if one suggested that this act was not eternal nor necessary; that it was a free act or an act that occurred in time. It would also be problematic to say that *deities* were “multiplied” in the generation of the Son or the procession of the Spirit, rather than *persons*. These ideas are heretical; if that is what Torrance meant when he said that the teaching of a caused Son is heretical, then I agree with him. But one can say that there is a sense in which the Son is “derived” from the Father (the Son’s Person, not his nature). And if one can teach that the Son is in any sense derived from the Father (through eternal begottenness), then talk of personal distinctions within the relations in the Trinity is legitimate. It does seem that Torrance flattens out the distinctions of the persons of the Godhead somewhat with the way he interpreted *homoousios*. *Homoousios* ought to be emphasized but not in a fashion that downplays the unique ways in which each member of the Trinity relate to one another.

**The Orthodox-Reformed Agreement on the Trinity**

In his response to Gunton, Torrance also points out the role he played in the East/West debates regarding the *filioque* clause – how he had found a way to talk about the relationship between the Father and Son that he thought would help resolve that conflict:

Professor Gunton gives little attention to the way in which I have sought to clarify the issues involved, in putting forward a way of understanding the relation of the Son and the Spirit to the Father which I believe cuts behind the sad division between the East and the West over what was added to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Torrance is referring to an agreement that he was instrumental in working out between leaders in the Reformed Church and leaders in the Orthodox Church.[[37]](#footnote-37) I’m including here large excerpts of that agreement so that we can see what elements of equality and what elements of structure are present:

**Orthodox-Reformed-Agreed Statement on the Holy Trinity – 1992[[38]](#footnote-38)**

**Three Divine Persons**

The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are **perfectly and completely consubstantial** in their mutual indwelling of one another and in their containing (*perichoresis*) of one another.

**While the three Divine Persons differ from one another precisely as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they are nevertheless conjoined in all their distinctiveness, for the entire and undivided Godhead resides in each Person, and each Person dwells in or inheres in the Other; so that the whole of one Person is imaged in the whole of the Other.** Each Person is ‘whole God’ and the ‘whole God’ is in each person.

**Eternal Relations in God**

The three Divine Persons are also conjoined through their special relations. Thus **the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and abides in the Son, in ineffable ways that are beyond all time (*achronos*), beyond all origin (*anarchos*), and beyond all cause (*anaitios*).** The generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit are unknowable mysteries which cannot be explained by recourse to human or creaturely images, although some images (e.g. Light from Light) may provide a way for us to grasp some aspects of the reality to which they are used to refer (cf. Athanasius, *Con. Ar.* 2.36; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 11.11). They indicate distinctions in relations not partitions or divisions.

The three Divine Persons are also inseparably conjoined in all the manifestations of God’s activity, in creation, providence, revelation, and salvation, as they are consummated in the Incarnate Economy of the Son. In fact **all divine activity begins with the Father, extends through the Son and reaches its fulfillment in the Spirit.** **Thus, as St. Basil taught, *creation is initiated by the Father, effected by the Son and perfected in the Spirit*** (*De Spir. Sanct.* 16:38).

**The Order of Divine Persons in the Trinity**

In the Trinitarian formulae of the New Testament, as Gregory the Theologian, among others, pointed out, there is a variation in the order in which ‘the Father’, ‘the Son’, and the ‘Holy Spirit’ are mentioned, which indicates that the order does not detract from full equality between the three Divine Persons (Gregory the Theologian, Or. 36.15). Nevertheless, as we learn from the institution of Holy baptism, **there is a significant coordination which places the Father first, the Son second, and the Spirit third** (cf. Athanasius, Ad Ser. 3.5; Basil, Ep. 125.3). **The priority of the Father does not imply that there is something more in him compared to the Son, for all that the Father is the Son is apart from ‘Fatherhood’, and likewise all that the Son is the Spirit is apart from ‘Sonship’. Thus the order inherent in the Trinitarian relations is grounded on the fact that the Son is begotten of the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father. This applies also to the unique revelation of the Father through the Incarnation of his only begotten Son and the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father in the name of the Son.**

**This priority of the Father or Monarchy of the Father within the Trinity does not detract from the fact that the Father is not properly (*kurios*) Father apart from the Son and the Spirit,** that the Son is not properly Son apart from the Father and the Spirit, and that the Spirit is not properly Spirit apart from the Father and the Son.Hence the *Monarchia* of the Father is perfectly what it is in the Father’s relation to the Son and the Spirit within the one indivisible Being of God. ‘The perfection of the Holy Trinity is an indivisible and single Godhead’ (Athanasius, *Ad Ser*. 1.33).

**Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity, the One Monarchy**

Since there is only one Trinity in Unity, and one Unity in Trinity, there is only one indivisible Godhead, and only one *Arche* (arche) or *Monarchia* (monarchia). As such, however, Gregory the Theologian reminds us, ‘***It is a Monarchy that is not limited to one Person****’* (*Or* 29.2). ‘*The Godhead is one in Three, and the Three are One, in whom all the Godhead is, or, to be more precise, who are the Godhead’* (Or. 39.11). ‘*Each person is God when considered in himself; as the Father, so the Son, and as the Son, so the Holy Spirit; the Three One God when contemplated together; Each God because consubstantial; one God because of the Monarchy. I cannot think of the One without being enlightened by the splendor of the Three; nor can I distinguish them without being carried back to the One*’ (Gregory the Theologian, Or. 40.41)….The *mia arche* or *Monarchia* is inseparable from the Trinity, the *Monas* from the *Trias*. As such **the Monarchy of the Father within the Trinity is not exclusive of the Monarchy of the whole undivided Trinity in relation to the whole of creation.** Hence all worship and glorification by the creature is offered ‘*to God the Father through the Son and in the Spirit’* or ‘*to the Father with the Son and together with the Holy Spirit*’, that is, to the one indivisible God who is Three in One and One in Three, the Holy Trinity who is blessed for ever.

**Perichoresis: the Mutual Indwelling of Father, Son and Holy Spirit**

The Holy Trinity remains invariable, known in one Godhead and one Monarchy, but in which Each of the three Divine Persons indwells and is indwelt by the Others…. **It is in the light of this eternal *perichoresis* of the three Divine Persons in God, or the co-indwelling and co-inhering of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in One Another, that we are to understand the mission of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit by the Son.** **The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, but because of the unity of the Godhead in which each Person is perfectly and wholly God, he proceeds from the Father through the Son for the Spirit belongs to and is inseparable from the Being of the Father and of the Son. He receives from the Son and through him is given to us.** Thus ‘*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.’* (The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed).

So if this reflects what Torrance actually believed, we do see a monarchy of the Father within the Trinity (to account for eternal generation and eternal procession), without recognizing the Father as the “cause” of others, while seeing the monarchy of the entire Trinity in relation to the whole of creation. We see that “all divine activity begins with the Father, extends through the Son and reaches its fulfillment in the Spirit.” It seems that this reflect an authority structure in the economic Trinity, which is based in the immanent Trinity.

**Scripture and Authority Structure**

At Gunton’s suggestion, let’s return to some of the Scriptures that support an authority structure within the Trinity. Some of the “subordination” language in John includes Jesus’ comments like, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). One might think that Jesus is speaking out of his humanity here, but Jesus also said essentially the same thing about the Holy Spirit:

John 16:12 - “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear *them* now. 13 However, when He, **the Spirit of truth**, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for **He will not speak on His own *authority,* but whatever He hears He will speak;** and He will tell you things to come. 14 He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare *it* to you. 15 All things that the Father has are Mine. Therefore I said that He will take of Mine and declare *it* to you.

The Spirit does not speak on his own authority, but that what he hears he speaks, not because he was human—he was not incarnate—but because he is under the authority of the Father and Son. This does not imply that the Spirit is inferior; he is simply under authority. Why is he under authority? A reasonable explanation is that it is because the Father is the 1st in the order of Persons within the immanent Trinity.

In the same way that the Spirit yields to authority, the Son submits to the will of him who sent him. He is under authority--not simply because he became a human, but because He is the Son (he was sent because he was the Son; he isn’t the Son because he was sent). If the Spirit is under the authority of the Father (and Son) apart from being incarnate, there is no need to ground the submissiveness of the Son to the Father in the Son’s humanity.

Another one of the passages that has been used to argue for the inferiority of the Son is John 14:28:

You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming *back* to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I.

How is the Father greater than the Son? Not in essence, for the Son is both God and man. Whatever Jesus means by this, he does not mean that he is actually inferior to the Father. Considering the context of the passage (see the other references from John above), he likely means that he is under the authority of the Father and in that sense the Father is greater. This does not make the Son inferior to the Father, any more than my administrative assistant is inferior to me simply because she is under my authority. Torrance agrees that Jesus’ statement, ‘My Father is greater than I’ should be understood economically in the way Gregory Nazianzen, Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine did, and not ontologically[[39]](#footnote-39) (*The Christian Doctrine of God*, 65). Jesus is not saying that he is a lesser being than the Father; but he is saying that he is under authority.

**I Cor 11:3-10** may explain what the authority structure is based on.

I Cor. 11:3, 7-10 -- Now I want you to realize that **the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God**…. A man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. **For man did not come from woman, but woman from man**; neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. For this reason, and because of the angels, the woman ought to have a sign of authority on her head.

This passage helps us understand that since woman came from man, she is under the authority of man (though they are equal in nature, essence), and since the Son is begotten of the Father, he is under the authority of the Father. The Father is the (eternal) Source (Fount)[[40]](#footnote-40) of the Son, the Son is the Source of man (the Son created him) and the Man is the “source” of woman (woman came from man’s side). That is why man is the head of woman, Christ is the head of man, and God the Father is the head of God the Son. Order in relationships is based on the source of the relationship.

I Corinthians 15:23-28 is a passage Gunton specifically referred to:

I Cor. 12:23 -- But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. 24Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. 25For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27For he "has put everything under his feet."[[c](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=I%20cor%2015&version=31#fen-NIV-28730c#fen-NIV-28730c)] Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. 28**When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.**

Verse 28 clearly states that Christ will be submissive to the Father in the future, of an undetermined time or for eternity. Why will the Son be submissive to the Father possibly forever? Was it because he decided to become a man? That would make it seem that the Son becoming a man forever altered the relationship between the Father and the Son. The better explanation is that there is nothing inferior about being submissive to someone in the first place. The Son has always been submissive to the Father because he is the Son.[[41]](#footnote-41)

I think the biblical evidence is on the side of structure in the Trinity. And the authority structure we see in the economic Trinity seems to be based on the eternal relations in the Trinity.

**Conclusion**

Both T.F. Torrance and Colin Gunton are orthodox Trinitarians, but there is a difference in how they view structure within the Trinity. Torrance emphasizes the equality of the members of the Trinity. Gunton affirms the equality of the persons but thinks that Torrance “flattens” the distinctions of the Persons with an overemphasis on the *homoousios*. I appreciate Torrance’s contribution here (he may be right about the danger of causal language, there is a sense in which there the entire Trinity is the Monarchy, the agreement between the Reformed and Orthodox churches is rather amazing). I see more “order” in his view of the Trinity than I thought I’d see, but I also share the concerns of Gunton. It seems to me that Torrance assumes that an authority structure within the Godhead implies degrees of deity. But submission to authority does not necessarily imply inferiority of being. Homoousios is a true doctrine, but its applications to the functions of the Godhead can be overdone. There is biblical and theological evidence that challenges an egalitarian view of the Trinity.

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1. I chose Torrance and Gunton because of their influence in Trinitarian studies [they are major British theologians who contributed to the literature such important works as *The Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine* and *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Gunton) and *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* and *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Torrance)], and because there does seem to be a clear distinction between their views on this issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Athanasius, “Statement of Faith.” *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV*. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, ed., p. 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Thomas Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives,* p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, pp. 17-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. These personal properties are relational properties. The properties that distinguished the divine hypostases are “neither essential (which would amount to a denial of the homoousion) nor accidental (which would make the divine hypostases contingent), but…the divine hypostases are distinguished by personal properties. In other words, the hypostases are distinguished by relational properties – properties had by virtue of the relations to the other divine persons…. Personal properties (as traditionally understood) are relational properties; they are the properties that make the person the distinct entities they are *in relation to the other persons.*” (Tom McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism*, pp. 200-201). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The creed that the Council developed is considered by Torrance to represent the orthodox position (normative for the whole of Christianity). “After more than fifty years during which the Nicene Creed was subjected to detailed analysis, against and in support of it, it became so deeply and firmly established in the convictions of the Church that it was revised and finalized at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. this in turn was reaffirmed at the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D.; when a canon was passed banning the use of any other Creed. However, it was evidently only at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D. that complete ratification was formally given to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. (T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, p. 28.) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Torrance, *Trinitarian Faith*, pp. 119-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The discussion of eternal generation presupposes an exegetical decision regarding the semantics of μονογενης and John’s use of γενναω in 1 John 5:1. Without the use of these terms in Johannine literature, this discussion would not exist, and thus is still subject to exegetical evaluation. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Paul Molnar, *T.F. Torrance, Theologian of the Trinity,* p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Thomas Torrance, *Trinitarian Perspectives,* p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Ibid.*, 64-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Thomas Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God,* p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 190. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *T.F. Torrance, Theologian of the Trinity*, pp. 64-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *The Christian Doctrine of God,* p. 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. *T. F. Torrance, Theologian of the Trinity*, p. 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*, pp. 73-74. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Gunton*, The Christian Faith*, p. 186. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Elmer Colyer, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology: Theologians in Dialogue with T. F. Torrance*. p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Theologians in Dialogue, p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. *Theologians in Dialogue*, p. 120 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid, pp. 120-121. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid, pp. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Theologians in Dialogue,* p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., pp. 130-131. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Theol*ogians in Dialogue*, p. 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., p. 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., p. 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Gunton*, The Christian Faith*, 186. Gunton also explains in *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* that the “Father is what he is not only because he begets the Son, but also because the Son responds in the way made known in his obedience as the constitution of the being of God by means of his eternal response of obedience and love. Similarly, the movement of the Spirit can be argued also to be constitutive of the being of God the Father, in that it is the Spirit who ensures that the love of Father and Son is not simply mutual love, but moves outward, so that creation and redemption are indeed free acts of God, but acts grounded in his being as love.” He is here emphasizing the importance of “communion” to “being”. *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Louis Berkhoff, *Systematic Theology*, p. 94. This seems similar to Torrance’s view that the Son is generated from the being of the Father. It’s not the being that is generated but the person. The deity is the same. Is this concept the same as saying that the Son is generated from Being of God (especially if one says that the identity is derived from the person, but not the nature)? Is this the same as saying that the Father is the ground of a second subsistence and that the Father communicates the divine nature to the Son (the nature isn’t generated)? In Berkhoff’s definition, the deity of the Father is not multiplied since the deity of the Father is the same as the deity of the Son. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. *Theologians in Dialogue*, p. 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. A theologian friend of mine in the Greek Orthodox Church, Anastasios Ioannides, confirmed for me that The Joint Statement is a document sanctioned by the Orthodox Church in general, and the Patriarchates of Constantinople and Moscow, in particular. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. A copy of this agreement can be found in *Trinitarian Perspectives*. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. *The Christian Doctrine of God*, p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. We need to make sure we don’t understand Father as the Source of the Son, in the sense that the Father is the cause of another deity, or the cause of One who could have not existed. I’m referring to eternal generation, the way that Berkhoff understood it. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. We could also cite Galatians 4:4 (“God sent forth his Son to redeem”) and Romans 8:32 (God “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all”). To say, “The Son has always been submissive to the Father because He is the Son” may be another way of saying what Augustine said about the relationship between Father and Son. “But if the Son is said to be sent by the Father on this account, that the one is the Father and the other the Son, this does not in any manner hinder us from believing the Son to be equal, and consubstantial, and co-eternal with the Father, and yet to have been sent by the Father. Not because the one is greater, the other less, but because one is the Father, the other Son; the one begetter, the other begotten; the one He from whom He is who is sent; the other He who is from Him he sends.”

    [Augustine,“On the Holy Trinity.“ *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. III*, p. 83. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)