Equality and Hierarchy within the Trinity

Introduction

1. Formal debate within the Church over the nature of the Trinity began in the 2nd century and continued through the 4th century:
   a. Initially, the debates revolved mostly around the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and how they could be God if God was One God
   b. If was out of these debates, and specifically the church councils held at Nicaea and Constantinople, that the doctrine of the Trinity was recognized, defended, and formalized:
      1) God exists eternally as one God in three distinct persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit—each of which is fully God, sharing the same divine nature, will, and attributes
      2) This is captured in part by the Nicaean Creed:
         a) "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen."
         b) "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father…"
         c) "We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the give of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets."

Display Triangle Diagram on Screen

2. While this seemed to settle the question over the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit and whether they shared the same nature as God the Father, there was another debate over hierarchy or rank within the Trinity:
   a. The early Church fathers used the term "taxis" (Greek for order) when addressing the concept of hierarchy or rank within the Trinity:
      1) Some Church Fathers like Justin Martyr and Origen believed that Jesus was subject to the Father while the Holy Spirit was subject to Christ; Martyr even referred to Jesus and the Holy Spirit as the "second god" and "third god"
      2) Other Church Fathers adamantly opposed the idea of subjection or submission within the Trinity suggesting that it wasn't compatible with Father, Son and Spirit being co-equal and of the same divine nature
      3) This led many to try to solve this debate by making a distinction between the nature or essence of the Trinity and the roles or responsibilities within the Trinity:
         a) In other words, they claimed that there was no hierarchy or rank between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in terms of who they are (their divine nature),

but claimed that there is a hierarchy or rank in the roles or responsibilities they fulfill as part of the Trinity

b) An example often used is that of marriage and the family: a husband and wife, as well as their children, all share the same nature (humans made in the image of God), but they do not share the same authority or responsibilities in the family (husband as head, wife as helpmate, and children as subordinate to parents)

b. Modern theologians have their own terms when discussing this idea of hierarchy:
   1) Ontological Trinity: this focuses purely on the Trinity's divine nature; who Father, Son, and Spirit are apart from their work; it is universally accept that in this regard they are completely and fully co-equal without hierarchy or rank
   2) Economic (Administrative) Trinity: this focuses purely on the roles and responsibilities among the Father, Son, and Spirit; this is where some (but not all) believe there is a hierarchy or rank

c. One way this is explained using salvation as an example (this is NOT a perfect example):
   1) The Father acts as the SOURCE by initiating, planning, and willing His plan for salvation, even sending His Son
   2) The Son, having been sent by the Father, acts as the AGENT by obeying the Father, mediating between man and God, and accomplishing salvation at the Cross
   3) The Spirit, having been sent by the Father and Son, acts as the APPLIER by regenerating, sealing, sustaining, and perfecting salvation in the believer

3. You would think that after nearly 2000 years of Church history, we'd finally have the debate over whether there is a form of hierarchy within the Trinity settled, but that's not the case:
   a. In fact, a new modern debate on this subject began in the 1970's-80's as a means to counter the rise of feminism in the Church by claiming that marriage and family are modeled off hierarchy within the Trinity
   b. In the 1990's-2000's, Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware formalized something called Eternal Functional Subordination (EFS) which argued that Jesus didn't just submit to the Father in the incarnation, but was submissive to the Father before the incarnation and continued to be in submission now
   c. Then in 2016 the debate exploded with intense arguments online and all-over social media in what some have described as an "academic civil war" because of the heated and divisive nature of the disagreements; they've come to be known as "The Trinity Debates" (you can google the phrase)

4. So, that brings us to the question, is the issue of hierarchy within the Trinity important? Do we really need to discuss or debate it?

a. Let me answer by stating unequivocally that I am not going to solve the debate this morning; in fact, while I lean toward some form of hierarchy in what the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do, I don't hold a dogmatic conviction on it
b. With that said, I believe there's always value in trying to understand as much as we can about God
c. NOTE: THIS WILL BY NO MEANS BE EXHAUSTIVE!!!

5. So this morning I want to do just two things:
   a. Look at some passages that address equality within the Trinity
   b. Look at some passages that address hierarchy within the Trinity

A. Equality within the Trinity

**There is no single passage that directly states something like, "The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all equal in their nature, power, and eternal status"; rather, like most theology, this issue is supported in various ways throughout the Bible and through a variety of passages

1. One way their equality is reflected is when all three are mentioned together:
   a. Luke 1:35: "**The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High [God the Father] will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God**."
   b. Matthew 28:19: "**Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**"
   c. John 15:26: "**When the Helper comes, whom I [God the Son] will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me**"
   d. 2 Corinthians 13:14: "**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all**."
   e. 1 Peter 1:2: "**according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood**"

2. A second way their equality is demonstrated is when they appear to be working in unity:
   a. Luke 3:22: "**and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased'**"
   b. John 14:26: "**But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you**"
   c. 1 Corinthians 12:4: "**Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons**."

d. NOTE: all three of these verses also reveal that Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct persons

3. A third way their equality is demonstrated is when the Bible ascribes the same divine attributes to each:
   a. They are all described as being ETERNAL: God (Psalm 90:2); Jesus (Revelation 1:8); Spirit (Hebrews 9:14)
   b. They are all described as being OMNICIENT: God (Proverbs 15:3); Jesus (John 2:24-25); Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10-11)
   c. They are all described as OMNIPOTENT: God (Genesis 1:1); Jesus (John 1:3); Spirit (Romans 8:11)
   d. They are all described as OMNIPRESENT: God (Jeremiah 23:23-24); Jesus (Matthew 18:20); Spirit (Psalm 139:7-12)
   e. They are all described as the SOURCE OF LIFE: God and Jesus (John 5:21); Spirit (Romans 8:11)

4. A fourth way is through direct statements:
   a. The phrases "**Son of God**" and "**Spirit of God**" imply that Jesus and the Spirit are the same nature as God
   b. The phrases "**Spirit of the Lord**" and "**Spirit of Jesus**" imply that Jesus and the Holy Spirit share the same nature
   c. Philippians 2:6: "**who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped**."
   d. In John 10:30 Jesus declared, "**I and the Father are One**" and in 14:9 He said, "**If you've seen me, you have seen the Father.**"
   e. In Acts 5:3-4 Peter directly related lying to the Holy Spirit as lying to God

B. Hierarchy within the Trinity

**This is where it gets a little trickier. While God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are equal in nature, power, glory and will, there are a host of passages that seem to suggest that there is an order or a hierarchy in how they related to one another in their actions or roles (much like in marriage)

1. The Bible indicates the Father has authority over the Son (4 examples):
   a. First example: The Bible says that God the Father gave, sent, delivered, raised the Son which suggests a form of authority over the Son:
      1) John 3:16: "**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son**…"
      2) 1 John 4:9: "**By this the love of God is manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him**."
      3) Romans 8:32: "**He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all…**"
      4) Ephesians 1:20: "**which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places**."

5) In John 20:21 Jesus appeared to suggest God the Father's authority in sending him in when He exercised authority over His disciples when He sent them: "**So, Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, I also send you.**" (See also John 7:33; 16:5, 28)

b. Second example: Jesus's obedience and exaltation indicate his submission to the Father
   1) John 5:30: "**I can do nothing on My own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I don not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.**"
   2) John 6:38: "**For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me."**
   3) John 8:29: "**And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him**."
   4) John 12:49:50: "**For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak. "I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me**."
   5) John 14:31: "…**but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me**…"

c. This example: Jesus explicitly declared that God the Father was greater than Him (John 14:28): "**I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I**"—this may explain why when the end comes, Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24)
d. Fourth example: Probably the most compelling evidence is that the Bible directly states that God is the head of Christ (1 Corinthians 11:3): "**But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.**"

2. The Bible indicates that God the Father and God the Son have authority over the Holy Spirit (3 examples):
   a. First example: God sends the Holy Spirit:
      1) John 14:26: "**But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.**"
      2) Galatians 4:6: "**Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!"**"
      3) Luke 11:13: "**If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?"**

   b. Second example: Jesus sends the Holy Spirit:

1) John 15:26: "**When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me**"
2) John 16:7: "**But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you**"
3) John 20:22: "**And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit**."

c. Third example: Maybe the most compelling statements regarding the Holy Spirit's submission to the Father and Son are found in John 16:13-14: "**But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for <u>He will not speak on His own initiative</u>, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. <u>He will glorify Me</u>, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you.**"

C. Takeaways

1. The model of equality and hierarchy within the Trinity serves as our model for marriage and the family:
   a) Husband and wife are equal, having both been created in God's image
   b) However, there is a hierarchy of authority and responsibility within the family
   c) The husband serves as head, the wife as helpmate, and together they raise and disciple their children

2. The model of equality and hierarchy within the Trininity serves as a model for culture and society:
   a) All men are equal because we are created in God's image
   b) But, God raises up governments and civil authorities over us and expects us to honor and submit to these
   c) Likewise, the Bible recognized the roles of master and servant (today employer and employee) and expects us to recognize this hierarchy

3. It serves as the model for the Church:
   a) As believers, we are all equal in Christ, but there is a hierarchy within the local Church
   b) Christ is the head of the Church, but the Bible says the local church is to be shepherded by elders
   c) These elders are given authority and responsibility over the local body, and the Bible says we are not only to honor them but submit to them