

The Eternal Subordination of Christ and of Women

(This article is written by Dr. Kevin Giles and has appeared in the Vol. 32 No. 3 March 2006 issue of Catalyst magazine pp. 1,3-5. For further study, Giles has also written two books on this subject: *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* and *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity*.)

In the later part of the twentieth century the doctrine of the Trinity captured the attention of theologians more than any other doctrine, and this interest has not waned. At no time in history, since the theologically stormy days of the fourth century, has there been so much discussion on this topic. Books on the Trinity by Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox theologians continue to be published. No longer is it thought that the Trinity is an obtuse, secondary, and impractical dogma. It is recognized today that it is nothing less than a summary of the Christian understanding of God given in revelation. The Trinity is the foundation on which all other doctrines are built. It is of immense theological and practical significance.

Contemporary discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity agree that the God revealed in Scripture is by nature trinitarian. He is one and yet three differentiated “persons” who eternally co-exist in the most intimate communion of love and self-giving. In this “model” of the Trinity the equality of the divine three, both in unity and in relation to one another as persons, is very much to the fore. For this reason any suggestion that the divine three are ordered hierarchically, or divided in being, work, or authority is rejected. T. Peters in his 1993 book, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life*, describes contemporary thinking about the Christian God as “antibordinationist trinitarianism.” Similarly, the conservative evangelical, M. Erickson in his 1995 study, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Baker; 331), says that, along with other contemporary theologians, he believes in “the complete equality of the divine three.” David Cunningham, in his 1998 book, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology* (Blackwell; 112), is of much the same opinion. He speaks of “a radical, relational, co-equality” in modern trinitarian thinking. In my opinion, the finest study on the Trinity in the last ten years is that by T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (T&T Clark, 1996). He too emphasizes the co-equality of the differentiated, mutually indwelling, divine persons. Building in particular on the work of Athanasius, he makes the Trinity itself the monarche (sole source or origin) of the divine three and the Son the monarche of divine saving revelation. He is totally opposed to subordinationism in any form.

In the light of this powerful, contemporary stress on the co-equality of the divine persons who are understood to be bound together in the most intimate bond of love and self-giving, it is no surprise to find that some of the best contemporary expositions of the doctrine of the Trinity understand the Trinity as a charter for human liberation and emancipation (cf. L. Boff, *Trinity and Society* [Obis, 1988]; J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* [Harper and Row, 1981]; C. LaCugna, *God for Us* [Harper, 1991]; M. Erickson, *God in Three Persons* [Baker Academic, 2003]). If no one divine person is before or after, greater or lesser because they are “co-equal” (as the Athanasian creed says) this suggests, we are told, that all hierarchical ordering in this world is a human construct reflecting fallen existence, not God’s ideal. God would like to see every human being valued in the same way.

It is thus the Christian's duty to oppose human philosophies and structures that oppress people, limiting their full potential as human beings made in the image and likeness of God. Erickson is one evangelical who is sympathetic to this agenda predicated on the belief that the persons of the Trinity relate as equals in self-giving love (333).

Evangelicals of Opposite Opinion

Paradoxically, in this same thirty-year period in which the co-equality of the divine persons has been powerfully reaffirmed and the implications of this teaching for our human social life recognized, many conservative evangelicals have been moving in the opposite direction. They have argued that the Trinity is ordered hierarchically, with the Father ruling over the Son. The Father is eternally "head over" the Son just as men are permanently "head over" women. In this model of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Trinity, rather than being a charter for emancipation and human liberation, becomes a charter to oppose social change and female liberation.

This novel teaching was first enunciated by G. Knight III in his highly influential 1977 book, *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Baker, 1977). He argued that the God-given permanent subordination of women in role and authority in the church and the home was supported and illustrated by the Trinity. For him, the Son is eternally subordinated in role and authority to the Father, despite the fact that the Father and the Son are both fully divine. He thus spoke of a "chain of subordination" (33) in the Father-Son and the man-woman relationship, and of an eternal subordination of the Son that has "certain ontological aspects" (56).

This new teaching on the Trinity came to full fruition in 1994 with the publication of W. Grudem's, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1994). Two chapters in this book outline his doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son in function and authority. The impact of this book on evangelicals cannot be underestimated. Over 130,000 copies have been sold and the abridged version, *Bible Doctrine* (ed. J. Purswell; Zondervan, 1999), with exactly the same teaching on the Trinity and women, has sold over 35,000 copies. For Grudem the Son's role subordination, like that of women, is not a matter of who does certain things as we might expect on seeing the word "role," but rather a matter of who commands and who obeys. He writes, "the Father has the role of commanding, directing, and sending" and the Son has "the role of obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us" (*Systematic Theology* [Zondervan, 1995] 250) These words disclose the key issue; that is, the Son is eternally set under the authority of the Father. Grudem insists that this understanding of the Trinity is historic orthodoxy (cf. his latest book, *Evangelicals, Feminism, and Biblical Truth* [Multnomah, 2004] 405-43). It is, for him, what the creeds and the best of theologians have maintained throughout church history.

This hierarchical understanding of the Trinity has now almost won over the conservative evangelical community. Most evangelicals seem to believe this is what the Bible and "the tradition"—that is, the interpretive tradition—teach. However, I am also an evangelical, but I am convinced the opposite is the truth. The Bible (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13; etc.) and the interpretative

tradition summed up in the creeds and Reformation confessions speaks of a co-equal Trinity where there is no hierarchical ordering.

Grudem and the many evangelicals who follow him say they are only advocating the eternal functional or role subordination of the Son, not the ontological subordination of the Son. Indeed, all Christians believe that the Son voluntarily and temporally choose to be subordinated for our salvation in the incarnation (Phil 2:4-11). The problem arises with the word “eternal.” If the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father, and cannot be otherwise, then he does not just function subordinately, he is the subordinated Son. His subordination defines his person or being. Eternal functional subordination implies by necessity ontological subordination. Blustering denials cannot avoid this fact.

The Appeal of Eternal Subordination

To understand how this doctrine—ambiguous at best, and heretical at worst—of the Trinity has emerged in the last thirty years and almost taken over the more conservative side of evangelicalism, one thing has to be recognized. The issue is not really the Trinity at all. What has generated this novel and dangerous doctrine of the Trinity is “a great cause,” the permanent subordination of women. For some evangelicals “the woman question” is the apocalyptic battle of our age. They are convinced that the Bible gives “headship” (“leadership,” in plain speak) to men. If this principle were abandoned because of cultural change the authority of the Bible would be overthrown and the door would be opened to homosexual marriages, the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and believe it or not, the obliteration of sexual differentiation. To bolster support for this “great cause” the doctrine of the Trinity has been redefined and reworded to give the weightiest theological support possible to the permanent subordination of women. Every evangelical who has written in support of the eternal subordination of the Son is committed to the permanent subordination of women in the church and the home. This agenda is what drives them to advocate the eternal subordination of the Son.

The Tail Has Wagged the Dog

Until the twentieth century Christians universally spoke of the “superiority” of men and the “inferiority” of women. After the 1970s, with the advent of “women’s lib,” Christians had to abandon this language, and, in addition, most abandoned the idea that women were subordinated to men. Conservative evangelicals, without exception, gave up this language as well, although some sought a new way to uphold male hegemony with more genteel wording. They affirmed that men and women are equals, yet God has given them different roles. This sounds fine, but when unpacked it means women have the “role” of obeying and men the role of leading; no other “role” is in mind. What is more, this “role” is permanent since God ascribes it in creation. Since God established this social hierarchical order before the Fall, it cannot be changed. It is the ideal. As this difference in “role” (in plain speak, difference in authority) is the one essential difference between men and women, to deny the permanent subordination of women is to deny male-female differentiation as such. This novel case for women’s permanent “role” subordination raises exactly the same problem as their novel case for the Son’s eternal “role” subordination. If women are permanently subordinated in role,

and their subordinate role can never change, then they are the subordinated sex. They do not merely function subordinately. Their God-given subordination defines their person or being. They are the subordinated sex.

Having creatively constructed this novel theology predicated on obfuscating terminology to uphold male hegemony, these same theologians then reformulated the doctrine of the Trinity using the same terminology, thereby justifying the leadership of men. They began teaching that the Father and the Son are equally divine: the Father and the Son simply have different roles or functions. And what are these differing roles? Not surprisingly, the Father has the “role of commanding, directing, and sending” while the Son has the “role of obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us” (cf. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 250). Differing roles again means differing authority. The Father rules over the Son like men are to rule over the women set under them. If anyone denies that the Father and the Son are differentiated by their differing authority, then they are accused of denying divine differentiation itself—that is, of falling into the heresy of modalism. To cap off the case, the claim is then made that this teaching is historic orthodoxy. This is what Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Augustine, Calvin, Barth, and Rahner teach on the Trinity. In reply to these claims I have carefully surveyed the evidence and found that the teaching of Scripture and the interpretative tradition directly oppose these ideas (*The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* [InterVarsity, 2002], and in greater detail on the Trinity, *Jesus and The Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Trinity* [Zondervan, forthcoming]). What we have here is simply a newly worded case for an old heresy called “subordinationism.”

What has to be noted in all this is the circular nature of this reasoning.

1. A novel theology was first devised to theologically ground the permanent subordination of women based on the argument that men and women are equal yet differentiated by their God-given, unchanging roles; and then
2. the wording and ideas used to develop this novel case for the permanent subordination of women were utilized to develop a novel doctrine of the Trinity that spoke of the Son as equal, yet eternally subordinated in role or function; and then
3. this novel doctrine of the Trinity was quoted to theologically justify and explain the permanent role subordination of women.

If this line of reasoning is correct, then this means that the doctrine of the Trinity has been reformulated in terms of fallen male-female relationships to support what was already believed: women are permanently subordinated to men. Instead of correcting sinful human thinking, the primary doctrine of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity, has become a theological justification for such thinking. In the end, the doctrine of the Trinity, rather than being seen as a charter for human liberation, has become a charter for human oppression.

Thus, just as some have spoken of “Rahner’s rule,” “Pannenberg’s principle,” and of “LaCugna’s corollary,” I suggest a “Giles’ guideline”: “Whenever the Trinity is construed to support some prior belief, then the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is inevitably corrupted and distorted.”

To conclude it may be helpful if I spell out the doctrine of the Trinity as I would enunciate it in the light of biblical teaching, the interpretative tradition, and the best discussions of the doctrine in recent years.

The Key Affirmations of Historic Orthodoxy

1. The God of Christian revelation is one divine being and three “persons.” Unity and divine differentiation are both absolutes. The unity of God is not to be thought of in terms of one substance, but rather, as the most intimate, most loving, and most profound triune communion. The triune God’s unity is the unique Being-in-Communion of the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. What ultimately underlies this divine union and communion is the mutual interpenetration (Greek: perichoresis) of the three divine persons. The divine persons, on the other hand, in their eternal and immutable distinctions as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, are not to be thought of as three individuals or centers of consciousness, but rather as the one God in tri-personal existence and self-revelation, distinguished, but not divided. The Father, Son, and Spirit exist as Being-in-Relation.
2. The three divine persons are one in being. The divine three must not and cannot be differentiated on the basis of differing being. What they are in unity they are as differentiated persons. To suggest otherwise is to deny the homoousian principle, enshrined in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds. This principle points to the real distinctions between the three divine persons and their absolute oneness in being. It categorically excludes the idea that any one divine person is more or less true God.
3. Inseparable in operations. Inseparability in being implies and necessitates inseparability in work/operation/function. The divine three are one in who they are and what they do. In every divine action all three divine persons work cooperatively and in harmony. They are never divided or separated in their operations. The doctrine of inseparable operations, it must be added, does not infer identical operations. It is agreed that the Father sent the Son, the Son took human flesh and died on the cross, and the Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost. These and other things are indelibly associated with one or another of the divine persons. To divide and separate the work of Father, Son, and Spirit is to undermine the unity and simplicity of the one God.
4. Indivisible in power and authority. The Father, Son, and Spirit are indivisible in power and authority. Since each divine person is fully God, each is omnipotent without any caveats. If the divine persons are one in being, equal God, they must be one in power and authority. If they are not one in power and authority they are not one in being and divinity. The Son is, then, subordinated God, not just in function but in his person. The idea that the Son must eternally obey the Father implies that the Father and the Son each have their own will. The Son must submit his will to the will of the Father. If the divine three each have their own will, then divine unity is breached and tritheism follows. To argue in reply that the Son can do no other than obey the Father—the language of compulsion is not appropriate—does not solve the problem. If the Father and the Son (and the Spirit) have one will, the actions of one cannot be conceived as obedience to another. In the NT, Christ is obedient as a human.
5. Differentiated but not divided. The Father, Son, and Spirit are not divided in being, work, or power, but they are eternally differentiated. Their distinctiveness is grounded in the tradition principally on three things, individual identity (the Father is the Father and not the Son, etc, etc), differing origination (the Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds), and

differing relations (the Father is the Father of the Son, the Son is the Son of the Father, the Spirit proceeds from the Father, or the Father and the Son). Differentiating the persons in these ways does not divide them. Differentiating them in being or power does divide them, leading both to subordinationism and tritheism.

6. There is order among the divine persons. The way the divine persons are revealed, how they relate to one another, and how they work, is never random or arbitrary. It is ordered. There is a pattern and consistency in the divine life that is unchanging. To argue that this order is a sub-ordering in being or power is to deny that the divine three are “co-equal” in being and power. The divine persons are ordered horizontally, not hierarchically.

7. The Son is subordinated in the incarnation. In taking human flesh the Son of God voluntarily relinquished his status, not his divinity or being as God, assuming the form of a servant. What is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth is true and provides an accurate knowledge of God, but it is a revelation of God in kenotic form, of God in human flesh, of self-subordinated God. This means what is creaturely in Christ must not be read back into the eternal or immanent Trinity.

It is my case that the Bible, implicitly, and the historically developed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, explicitly, affirm divine unity, the eternal personal distinctions of Father, Son and Spirit, the oneness of being of the divine three, their inseparable operations, their indivisible authority, an order among them, understood as a disposition, and the temporal and voluntary subordination of the Son in the incarnation.