



Giles, Kevin.

Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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Jesus and the Father is a book-length treatment of the first third of Giles' 2002 work *The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate*. In this volume Giles' argument hasn't changed, nor did I discern any real fine tuning, but rather it has been re-asserted and repeated *ad nauseum*. As I read through this book I thought to myself on numerous occasions: 'If I never again read another book on the Trinity and the gender debate it will be too soon.' And despite Giles' claims to be examining the doctrine of the Trinity apart from the modern gender debate, all we get is a treatment of the Trinity in light of it (the irony being that he charges his opponents with "*let[ting] their passion to maintain the permanent subordination of women dictate how they understand the doctrine of the Trinity*" (44) when he is guilty of this very thing!).

However, let me take a moment to highlight the one positive feature I noted in this book. Giles rightly acknowledges the importance and centrality of the Trinity to the Christian faith when he says:

I suspect many Christians think that the doctrine of the Trinity is a very abstract and somewhat impractical doctrine of little importance. Nothing could be further from the truth. The doctrine of the Trinity, it cannot be denied, is a difficult doctrine to understand, but it is of huge importance and great practical consequence. It is nothing less than the distinctive Christian doctrine of God. [...] To fail to correctly understand "our" distinctive and foundational doctrine of God can have catastrophic consequences. Almost, if not all, the so-called Christian sects either deny the doctrine of the Trinity or have a badly flawed understanding of it. [...] A right doctrine of the Trinity is needed for right belief and right behavior. No doctrine could be more important. (12-13)

And it is with these words that my agreement with Giles ends. Throughout this work Giles wears two masks: (1) the victim, and (2) the defender of orthodoxy. In the first role Giles plays the victim, believing that his earlier work has been unfairly criticized by his opponents who for no other reason than a desire for male dominance just can't be honest with themselves about the strength of his thesis. He speaks of the near impossibility of being able to get his opponents to "*consider honestly and openly what they are saying on the Trinity*" (42) because of their inextricably uniting the subordination of women to the subordination of the Son in their minds, thus implying their inherent dishonesty.

He also says:

The response by those I sought to rebut was almost entirely negative and dismissive. Much to my surprise it was my work on the Trinity that upset my critics most of all. (10)

I think this speaks volumes concerning just how unaware of his own inadequacies concerning the doctrine of the Trinity that Giles really is. It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone who has worked through his first volume that the point at which it was its weakest was on the doctrine of the Trinity! [I say this as an egalitarian who appreciated much of his case for male-female equality in his earlier work.]

This sets the stage for the highly polemical nature of this book and the second role he plays. Throughout *Jesus and the Father* Giles presents himself as a modern-day Athanasius battling the destructive heresy of Arianism and all of its proponents. All one must do is read the initial chapter to see that I am not speaking hyperbolically. On numerous occasions he refers to his opponents as Arians, heretics, and tri-theists. For example, Giles says:

Although all of these evangelical theologians [e.g., Michael Harper; Tom Smail; Wayne Grudem; Peter Adam; the Sydney Doctrine Commission; et al.] say that they affirm unequivocally the divinity of Christ and the oneness in being of Father and Son in the immanent Trinity, and they reject "Arianism" (a very imprecise term, as we will show), their position implies the eternal ontological subordination of the Son. (30)

So according to Giles, it is not enough to repudiate Arianism while affirming the very thing that Arianism denies to be free and clear of the charge of Arianism. Giles bases his charges on his flawed (and modalistic) argument that *function* defines *person* which equals *being*. He describes *any* doctrine of the Trinity that affirms *any* kind of eternal subordination to be: "*heretical [in] nature*" (32); "*old heresy in a new form*" (32); "*dangerous doctrine*" (33); "*new form of an old heresy*" (39); "*idolatry*" (44); and "*tritheism*" (62). In the first footnote of the preface he says of "Arianism":

This is a very broad category covering people and theological groupings with differing views on many things, united only by their common conviction that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father in being,

work/function, and authority. We will come back to this matter many times in what follows. (9, n. 1)

But it is precisely the Arian understanding of the Son as being inferior in BEING that makes Arianism heretical! And it is precisely Giles' inability to differentiate *function* from *person* from *being* that makes his argument untenable. He notes a number of books written by a number of evangelicals that "*all consider subordinationism to be a dangerous error*" (41), and rightly so when subordinationism is properly defined, but then he says that:

These authors speak in opposition to subordinationism, which they think is an old heresy, no longer a pressing threat to the modern church. No warning is given to the fact that to eternally subordinate the Son in his work, functions, or roles implies by necessity ontological subordinationism. [p. 41]

But there's a reason that they don't identify subordinationism as Giles does, and that's because his argument simply does not follow! He says: "*my own brief definition of the theological heresy called subordinationism is this: to explicitly or implicitly teach that the Son and/or the Spirit are eternally subordinate to the Father in being, function, or authority.*" (61) For Giles if the subordination is temporal then there is no heresy (see e.g., 39), but if it is eternal then those who believe it are Arians, plain and simple. But as I just pointed out above as well as in my review of his last book, this is a *non sequitur*. Giles never takes the necessary steps to prove his argument, he simply asserts and then charges any who disagree with heresy.

But if Giles is content to speak of his opponents as Arians then I am content to speak of Giles as a modalist. On more than one occasion he makes statements that have no interpretation other than a modalistic one. For example:

Hodge speaks of the eternal subordination of the Son in his "mode of subsistence *and* operations," in his person as the Son and in what he does as the Son. He teaches an eternal subordination in being *and* function. (37)

Giles' critique of Hodge demonstrates Giles' tendency to equate *person* with *being*. Hodge specifies a subordination in the "mode of subsistence" which is a common way of speaking of how the persons of the Trinity relate as *persons*. Giles acknowledges this but then goes on to represent Hodge's position as a subordination in *being*. In outlining his argument Giles says:

I argue that to teach that that the divine persons are *eternally* differentiated on the basis of differing "nature," "being," "essence," or "subsistence," ontologically divides the one Godhead, opening the door to subordinationism... (60)

But classically, Trinitarians have always differentiated the persons in their manner of subsistence. To do such does not “*ontologically divide the one Godhead*” as Giles suggests. Anyone who has debated with Oneness Pentecostals has more likely than not encountered this exact argument (i.e., three persons = three gods). But if these statements aren’t enough to arouse suspicion in Giles’ equation of *person* and *being* then take these explicit statements:

If the divine Son is *eternally* subordinated in role or function, he is a subordinated divine person. His subordination as it is eternal defines his person. In other words, he is subordinated in *being*. (46)

The divine persons cannot be differentiated by who they are—their being—and if they are one in being, they must be one in work/function and authority. What the one God is as being-in-unity, the divine persons are as being-in-relation. (53-54)

Once the word *eternal* is used, it indicates that the subordination ascribed defines the person. If the Son of God is eternally subordinated in function, and cannot be otherwise, then in his *being/essence/nature/substance* he is in some way less than the Father. (57)

[W]hatever words are used to permanently set the Son under the Father in work divides who God is (his being) from what God does (his works). (58)

The word *eternal* indicates that the Son does not merely function subordinately in the incarnation; he *is* eternally subordinated to the Father. His subordination defines his person. As the Son he is subordinated to the Father—subordinated in his person or *being*. (59)

For them the Son’s subordination in authority prescribes who he is—his *being*. This is what differentiates him from the Father. He *is* the eternally subordinated Son and cannot be otherwise. If this is not ontological subordinationism I don’t know what is. (59)

And this last statement accurately states the main problem of Giles’ work, namely that he doesn’t know what ontological subordinationism is! In all of these examples he speaks of the ‘who’ as the ‘what’ and the ‘person’ as the ‘being’ thus ignoring the necessary distinctions that Trinitarians must make to avoid the heresy of modalism. Time, space, and patience limit me from going through this entire book pointing out the deficiencies within (e.g., his handling of Patristic sources, his reading of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan & Athanasian Creeds, as well as the place of importance he gives to the latter), but I think that I’ve identified the root of Giles’ problem, namely the faulty logic that equates the *persons* with the *being* of God.

As I said in my introductory remarks, he’s guilty of the thing he accuses his opponents of, which is allowing his view on gender relations to determine his doctrine of the Trinity —

and this was my criticism of his former work. Nothing in terms of argument has fundamentally changed from his first book, but in this work we are treated to much more polemic, suspicion (or more appropriately paranoia), and lack of charity. If you've read his previous work then this will be more of the same. But even if you haven't read his first book I cannot in good conscience recommend this one. The only person I see enjoying this title is the person who has a vested interest in the gender debate and doesn't care for accuracy in Trinitarian theology. This is truly one of the worst books I have ever read and I'm sad to say that I will probably refrain from reading Giles on the Trinity ever again.