



Giles, Kevin.

The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

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The Trinity & Subordinationism is an interesting book to say the least. I have to say that I had mixed emotions when reading it because I actually come out on both sides of the debates presented in this work. With regard to the gender debate I am an egalitarian, believing that men and women are partners in the home and co-workers in God's various ministries. With regard to the Trinity I recognize an eternal functional subordination deriving from the taxis (order) of the Trinity (to state things simply). I base both of these beliefs on my reading of Scripture.

I have to first commend Giles on his breadth of research. He did well to consult various writers from patristic, reformation, and modern eras in developing his thesis, but one wonders how well he actually read all of the sources he cites. Giles is also to be commended on his style of writing. For an academic study of the Trinity and modern gender debate this was surprisingly a page turner, comparable to any novel that I've ever read. He writes with clarity even if the arguments he sets forth aren't as clear as the style he writes with.

Giles begins the book by stating that Scripture isn't enough to settle these issues. He notes that both sides have their proof texts but to come to any firm conclusions we must recognize (*à la* Athanasius' understanding) the 'scope' of Scripture (3-4). To recognize this scope one must move past the Scriptures themselves and take into account the Church's interpretation of the Scriptures throughout history. His position basically states that Scripture as interpreted through Tradition is the best (and seemingly only valid) way to settle these debates. To this assertion I take no issue, but I recognize that tradition is only good in as much as it is faithful to the text.

But it is Giles' recounting of history that leaves something to be desired. In arguing that the Church has never held any conception of an eternal functional subordination he summarily dismisses Origen, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian saying: "*The ante-Nicene Fathers did their best to explain how the one God could be a Trinity of*

three persons. It was the way they approached this dilemma that caused insoluble problems and led them into subordinationism." (62) Apparently, for Giles, history doesn't really begin until Athanasius and the Arian controversy of the 4th century. And even then his survey focuses only on Athanasius (33-41), the Cappadocians (41-43), and Augustine (46-49), and then jumps forward to Calvin (52-58)! There's a thousand-year gap that needs to be accounted for in his survey of the development of doctrine.

Giles does well to adamantly reject any form of ontological subordination that would make the Son or Spirit lesser in being/nature, and I think that much of what he says in response to the Arian position is helpful, but his tendency to equate function and ontology is pervasive throughout the book. Giles argues that if temporal, then functional subordination is valid, but once permanency is introduced it becomes ontological subordination. (17, 85, 181) So according to Giles all the interpreters throughout history who recognized the Son's subordination to the Father in the Incarnation are justified in their belief but those who recognize an eternal subordination are not. But in his assertion he never presents a reasoned argument of why this is so. He simply says:

If the Son must *always* obey the Father, then he must be in some way less than the Father. He lacks something possessed solely by the Father. His role is determined by his being. Historic orthodoxy has long seen this conclusion and has argued in the opposite direction. Because the Father and the Son are one in being, they act as one. It is thus impossible to avoid the conclusion that the *eternal* role subordination of the Son implies the ontological subordination of the Son despite any protestations to the contrary. (85)

But this is clearly a non sequitur. If the Son must in "some way" be less than the Father because of a "role subordination" it does not follow that this way "must be" ontological. It is hardly "impossible to avoid [Giles'] conclusion."

Also disappointing was Giles' assertion that: "*This innovative form of subordinationism arises entirely in connection with attempts to preserve what to them [evangelicals in the latter part of the 20th century, i.e. complementarians] is a fundamental truth: namely, male 'headship.'*" (109) But as an egalitarian I take issue with this assertion because I have come to exactly the same conclusion without any desire to preserve male headship. In fact, it is on this point that I would assert both parties err. Giles is as guilty of reading egalitarianism into his doctrine of the Trinity as he asserts complementarians are of reading complementarianism into theirs. In my judgment, the doctrine of the Trinity is not a model for male-female relationships and to say that it is, is a gross mixing of metaphors.

Space prohibits me from commenting on Giles' (and Western Christianity in general) tendency towards modalism in his conception of the Trinity, but for those who will read this book it should be evident on nearly every page.

In the second part of the book Giles' talks about what he knows, and that's the gender debate. For the last 30 + years he has been engaged in this ongoing discussion and he unabashedly affirms an egalitarian position on the issue. In this section of the book he focuses on two books in particular, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1991) and *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1995).

He argues that complementarians have not only come up with a novel understanding of the Trinity to support their view on the gender debate, but they've also come up with a novel understanding of women's role in church history. But he admits that his understanding is equally as novel. I found his repeated claim that: "[c]ultural change has generated into new interpretations of the relevant biblical material" (143) and "[a] change in cultural context often leads to a change in the interpretation of the Bible" (145) to be inconsistent with his earlier insistence that we keep with tradition. It seems nothing more than a case of Giles wanting to have his cake and eat it too.

On the one hand when he thinks that tradition upholds his view on the Trinity we need to allow it to inform our understanding of the "scope" of Scripture. But on the other hand when tradition contradicts his view on male-female relations we need to allow the change in culture to give way to new interpretations of Scripture. Couple this with a later complaint against eisegesis (ch. 8) when he has already deemed exegesis nearly irrelevant *in and of itself*, and we have a strange mishmash of special pleading.

But even with these problems I found many of his arguments for the egalitarian position to be extremely well reasoned and persuasive, but these were the arguments that didn't rely on his interpretation of Trinitarian theology, these were the arguments that relied on his interpretation of the pertinent Scriptures. For example, when he says regarding Ephesians 5:21ff: "*What he [Paul] actually teaches is that headship of the husband involves costly self-sacrifice and self-giving agape love*" (190) I found myself nearly shouting AMEN!

I also found his distinction between complementarians refreshing and helpful. He says:

They [the editors of *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*] chose the term complementarian to take the high ground. The trouble with this term is that egalitarians have used this word for thirty years as part of their case. The truth is that both sides are complementarians, believing that God has made us distinctively women and men--the two sexes being intended to complement each other. On one side are hierarchical-complementarians who believe the Bible sets men over women in the church and the home, and on the other side are egalitarian-complementarians who believe the Bible makes the ideal women and men standing side by side, equal in dignity and authority in the world, the church and the home. (157)

At one point in his presentation he notes a glaring inconsistency with hierarchical-complementarians, and that is the way they leave the state and academy off of their list of places where men should exert authority over women. He says:

To be consistent with their own theology, they should oppose women holding high office in the state, where they are set over men. As education opens the door to women gaining such positions of authority in the political, legal and commercial world, hierarchical-complementarians should also give themselves to opposing women's having access to higher education. (176)

The force of this argument is great in that if women can govern alongside men in the state or teach alongside men in the academy then what valid reason is there to say that they cannot lead among men in the home and in the ministry?

With regard to the third section of the book on slavery, I found it out of place. Giles say that his intention was to show how for centuries the Bible was interpreted to justify slavery much in the same manner it was interpreted to justify oppressing women, but I didn't see this section as being as relevant as Giles would have liked it to have been. It honestly seemed a way to cause an emotional reaction and garner support for egalitarianism with guilt by association type of an argument.

I think that Giles' handling of the development of Trinitarian doctrine was off in many respects. He appears to take the Fathers out of context (e.g. in his assertion that Athanasius denied the monarchy of the Father) and his demanding that the creeds (Niceno-Constantinopolitan & Athanasian) can only be read in a way that comports with functional equality is misguided. His recounting of the various interpretations of women's roles in church history while appalling didn't really provide enough context to determine how accurate his retelling of history here really was. I have to suspend judgment on this particular topic until further study. What I did appreciate were Giles' arguments when they pertained to the gender debate separate from the Trinity. It is here that he shines and can be said to have made his case.

On a more peripheral note, this book does not contain a bibliography which seems to me to be a necessity in an academic work such as this. The footnotes certainly provide us with all of the bibliographic information we need, but to arrange them in a manner that makes it easier on the reader should have been something that the editor/publisher insisted upon.

Coming in at 273 pages of main text this book was surprisingly a quick read. I finished it in three days. I attribute this to Giles' smooth and seemingly effortless writing style. I can recommend this work without hesitation to anyone engaged in the gender debate, in my mind it seems to be necessary reading. But for those interested in Trinitarian doctrine/theology, I can only recommend this as an example of how not to engage it. Giles' egalitarianism clouds his Trinitarianism and makes for a tortured picture of the Trinity throughout the pages of this book.