

Review Article

THE TRINITY AND SUBORDINATIONISM: THE DOCTRINE OF GOD AND THE CONTEMPORARY GENDER DEBATE

Kevin Giles

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Kevin Giles is the vicar of St. Michael's Church in North Carlton, Australia, and can best be described as a rebel against the kind of Reformed theology currently prevailing in the Diocese of Sydney. He trained at Moore College back in the 1960s, but since then has moved towards what would now be called an 'open' evangelical position. In this book he takes on the subject of women in the church, and in the process launches a broadside attack on all those conservative Evangelicals who have advocated the subordination of women to men on the basis of what they regard as the parallel subordination of the Son to the Father in the Trinity.

His claim is that these Evangelicals, some of whom are noted theologians, have been so concerned to justify female subordination to males in this life that they have found themselves subscribing to a Trinitarian heresy reminiscent of Arianism. Claiming to be the great defenders of Christian tradition, they have in fact abandoned it in pursuit of this goal, and have ended up structuring their anti-feminist arguments along thoroughly modern (and therefore untraditional) lines. Finally, they have argued for a position which is remarkably similar to that found among conservative Evangelical defenders of slavery in the early nineteenth century. Today, everyone would agree that those Evangelicals were mistaken, and it seems to Giles that the case against the complete equality of women to men must eventually collapse for similar reasons.

According to Giles, theology is not simply a matter of reading biblical texts and comparing them with one another; it is (more importantly) a hermeneutic based partly on the 'general drift' of Scriptural teaching and partly on the contemporary cultural context. Applying this to the issue of female subordination, he says in his conclusion (p. 268): 'All [biblical] texts that imply the equality of the sexes speak of God's ultimate eschatological ideal; all texts that speak of the subordination of women are culturally limited, time bound, practical advice to women living in a culture that took for granted the subordination of women. They do not apply in our age.'

Giles is certainly a brave advocate for his cause, and he has assembled an impressive array of sources to defend the positions he takes. The first part of the book, which is dedicated to an examination of the historic doctrine of the Trinity, makes a convincing case for saying that since the Arian crisis of the early fourth century, no orthodox Christian theologian has accepted the belief—previously widely-held—that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father within the Godhead. Giles admits that this is true of modern conservative Evangelicals as well, at least in theory, but goes on to claim that in their desire to subordinate women to men, some have fallen into the trap of saying that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father inside the Trinity.

It must be admitted that Giles makes a telling case, and one can only wince at the way in which some Evangelicals have allowed themselves to be caught in the way he describes. The Son is in no way subordinate to the Father, and any suggestion that he might be is unhelpful, to say the least. It is quite true, of course, that the word ‘subordination’ can mean many different things, and there is a sense in which it can have a perfectly orthodox meaning. But we have to admit that over the centuries the word has come to imply ‘inferiority’, and no amount of contrary argument, however logical it might be, will alter this perception now. The word must be retired from theological discourse and replaced with something more adequate to express the subtlety involved. Probably the best word for this nowadays is ‘submission’, although Giles nowhere seems to consider it as a possibility. ‘Submission’ implies that the servant relationship of the Son to the Father is voluntary on his part, not coerced or built in to their relationship, as ‘subordination’ unfortunately suggests. Thus far we must agree with him, but when he goes on to say that this submission is temporal, we must object, because the relationship between the Father and the Son is eternal. It is manifested in the incarnation, but it cannot have been altered by it, because the work of the Son on behalf of our salvation is rooted in eternity.

Whether the Father–Son relationship inside the Trinity has anything significant to say about male–female relations in the church today is harder to assess. Both Giles and his conservative opponents seem to assume that it does, but in doing so they are ignoring the very important differences between the two situations. The male–female relationship is different from the father–son one, and what can be said about the latter is not necessarily directly applicable to the former.

Perhaps even more important, inner-Trinitarian relations are eternal in the Godhead, whereas male–female ones are part of the created order and conditioned by it. In God, the Father and the Son are mutually indwelling, but this is not true of human beings, who must live with one another in discrete plurality. The Father and the Son have formulated their eternal relationship by mutual agreement, and each is fully present in the actions of the other. Human beings, on the other hand, have a number of different relationships, all of which are temporal, but only some of which are regulated by Scripture.

In general, it can be said that sexual relations are governed by principles which are set out as part of the creation order, whereas social and economic structures are not so closely defined. It is true that some Christian theologians have tried to make out a case for saying that particular systems of government, as well as certain social and economic theories, are based on the biblical doctrine of creation, but these are almost always based on a misreading of the text. Slavery, for example, can be found in Scripture, and the biblical writers do not attack the institution as such, but to claim (as Giles does) that the Bible ‘endorses’ it is going too far. Israelites were not allowed to enslave one another, and the Christian church took over this principle. The realities of life made it very difficult for the early church to abolish slavery outright, but it did at least try to make the enslavement of Christians illegal, and this remained the ideal until the sixteenth century at least. Modern slavery in Christian societies was always an exclusively colonial phenomenon, and those originally enslaved were assumed to be non-Christians. Many of them were later converted, and by rights should have been set free, but by then economic self-interest was too great to be so easily dislodged. That any theologian should have defended slavery is scandalous, but it cannot be said that those who did so were in line with Christian tradition, as Giles claims. If they had known what the Christian tradition really was, they would have been forced to change their tune, at least as far as Christian slaves were concerned.

Male–female relations belong in a different category altogether, and Giles is being less than scrupulous when he draws superficial parallels between them and slavery. The most fundamental difference is that they are not determined by economic considerations, but by factors inherent in the created order. At their most basic, they are intimately connected to the needs of human reproduction, though they have never been limited to that. It is clear from

Genesis 1 that the interaction between men and women is fundamental to any form of social order, if only because it is fundamental to the ongoing existence of the human race. To argue, as Giles does, that because the Bible does not determine what economic or political order should prevail in any given society, it does not follow that it is equally flexible with respect to male–female relations. The Bible says that men and women are both created in the image and likeness of God, but the New Testament makes it clear how this is to be understood. The male is created in God’s image directly, whereas the female is created in the image of the male, and hence of God—but indirectly. This does not make her ‘inferior’ to the male, but suggests an order in creation which is nowadays referred to as ‘male headship’, which must be respected.

No amount of special pleading can alter the fact that this headship is determined by the pattern of creation and reinforced by the tragedy of the fall. Of course, it is always possible to object that this situation is not ‘ideal’, but this objection does not get us very far, because in a fallen world, nothing is ideal. Giles falls into the usual liberal trap of assuming that it is possible to establish a social order which ignores (or overcomes) the effects of sin. In a sinless world, male–female relations would pose no problem, and we could probably rely on a spirit of mutual sacrifice and dependence to produce the desired social harmony.

Unfortunately, we do not live in such a world, and so certain safeguards are necessary. We do not need to accept the ‘traditional’ view that women are somehow ‘inferior’ to men to see that the Bible accords a certain priority to the male—for the protection of both sexes. Any man who relies on this to bolster his ego (as Giles suggests most of his conservative opponents do) has totally misunderstood the purpose of the headship given to him, which is only valid when it is used for the benefit of women, and not for their oppression.

What sexual egalitarians do not recognize is that if male and female are treated as absolutely equal (and therefore interchangeable) in every respect, the incentive to establish enduring heterosexual relationships is greatly diminished. Why should a male take responsibility for a female, when she is just as independent as he is? Abandoned single mothers know only too well what the effects of such an attitude can be, and the huge divorce rate (not to mention the widespread sexual immorality) which has accompanied so-called women’s

'liberation' shows very clearly how quickly societies can disintegrate when the order of creation is tampered with. The notion that everyone should be 'free from oppression' is a peculiarly modern heresy, which is superficially attractive until people realise the havoc which the resulting indiscipline creates. The real problem of our time is not that women are 'oppressed' but that men have no sense of responsibility. An irrational fear of 'power', 'authority' and 'domination' has produced a situation in which masculinity has been divested of its content and society has been destabilised.

The argument that many women are far more gifted than many men is certainly true, as far as it goes, but this has always been recognised. In Old Testament times, God occasionally raised up women like Deborah and Jael to do the work of men who were cowardly or unavailable, but these exceptional cases did not overturn the basic principle of male headship. In the priesthood, women never played any role, and the same must be said of the presbyteral and/or episcopal ministry in the early church. As far as the unsuitability of many males is concerned, no-one has ever suggested that these offices should be open to any male, without distinction, and in Titus there are clear guidelines as to who may (and may not) be admitted to them. It is therefore quite wrong to suggest that the traditional approach creates a situation in which competent females are discriminated against by incompetent males, even if the latter have all too often crept into the ministry.

To sum up Giles' book, he makes some good points, particularly with respect to the tendency of modern conservative Evangelicals to distort the doctrine of the Trinity, but his overall argument is so obviously governed by his own particular agenda that many of his statements are tendentious to the point of unreliability. He finds fault with what he sees as the inadequate efforts of his opponents to make their case in contemporary language, but does not recognise his own limitations, and he dismisses biblical texts which do not fit his thesis by saying that they are untypical, culturally conditioned, obsolete or whatever dismissive adjective comes to mind at the time.

By the end of the book the reader can predict what is coming, and fair-minded people will be turned off by the all-too-transparent bias which his approach reveals. This is a pity, because he does make some valid points which ought to be heeded by those whom he criticises, and who are liable to ignore what he

says because of his unbalanced attacks on them. Before revisiting this issue, Giles would do well to read Francis Martin's *The Feminist Question* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) which makes a judicious case for the other side without falling into the traps which he so clearly sees in certain conservative evangelical writings on the subject.

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