

Review Article

Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Trinity

Kevin Giles

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Kevin Giles' latest book represents an attempt to demonstrate that modern evangelicals are out of step with historic Christianity with respect to the Trinity. Giles is concerned with theology that posits that Jesus is subordinate in role and authority to his Father, and that this subordination is eternal. Giles regards such teaching as essentially Arian, and therefore out of step with historic, orthodox Christianity. While those he has in mind deny the charge of Arianism, and assert that subordination in function and authority does not imply ontological inferiority, nor the heresy of Subordinationism, Giles argues that such claims are mistaken. A number of conservative evangelicals (to use his terminology) are unwittingly Arian in their understanding of the Trinity.

Giles' wider concern is to demonstrate that evangelicals are misguided when they appeal to the Trinity in their desire to subordinate women to men. They appeal, so Giles argues, to the relationships within the Godhead as an example of how two persons may be equal in nature and dignity, even while one party is permanently subordinated to the other. This position is untenable, since it relies upon an understanding of the Trinity that is incorrect.

Giles' approach is to survey the teaching of key theologians who have shaped Trinitarian orthodoxy. His task is then to demonstrate that modern evangelicals are out of step with these stalwarts of the faith. It is a straightforward approach, and quite powerful in its force and implications. If Giles' argument were to be proven correct, it would entail devastating consequences for the evangelical position. It is my opinion, however, that Giles' argument is deeply flawed.

In this extended review of Giles' book, it is not my intention to critique the minutiae of his argument, nor his handling of various historical texts. Rather, the aim is quite simple: to examine what is arguably the key presupposition that undergirds the entire book. I endeavour to demonstrate that the influence of this particular presupposition may be detected in every major section of the

book, and thus permeates the entire argument. We must then question the validity of this presupposition, and the effect that it has on the overall veracity of Giles' position.

The particular presupposition in question here will be delineated briefly, after which will follow extended extracts from the book. The influence of this presupposition should be self-evident within these citations, but some comment will be made in order to sharpen such observations.

The Presupposition

It is my contention that Giles' key presupposition is that *authority inevitably implies superiority and subordination inevitably implies inferiority*. One has authority over another because they are superior, and the one who is subordinate is therefore inferior. Such a presupposition does not sound odd to modern ears; it is a presupposition that is generally shared by western culture and society, and is implied by any number of hierarchical and institutional settings.

Modern egalitarians assume the same presupposition when arguing that there can be no authority of men over women. Since men and women are equal, one should not have authority over the other. If authority suggests superiority, then there should be no hierarchy between the sexes, since we know that men and women are equal.

This presupposition is immediately evident in Giles' work as he explains what he means by the terms 'subordinate' and 'inferior'. I have emphasised a key segment here, as in all citations to follow.

In everyday speech the words *inferior* and *subordinate* mean much the same thing. In almost every dictionary we are told a subordinate is an inferior and an inferior is a subordinate. In contrast, in contemporary evangelical literature we are frequently told that the word *subordination* does not mean 'inferior.' Those with whom I am debating repeatedly say we reject that women are inferior to men, or the divine Son is inferior to the Father, which would be Arianism. It is true that someone holding an inferior or subordinate position is not necessarily in their person (ontologically) inferior. They may well be in the subordinate or inferior

position because they lack the gifts, training, or experience needed for the superior position. They would only be personally inferior if they could never hold the superior position whatever their gifts, training, or experience might be. **Thus the private in the army, while inferior in role, is not in his person an inferior because he can become an officer, and the officer who is superior in role is not in his person superior to the private, because he can be demoted.** But in the case of women and the divine Son in evangelical theological texts supporting the permanent subordination of women and the eternal subordination of the Son, the subordinate status is irrevocable and intrinsic: it can never change. It defines the person. If women are *permanently* subordinated to men and the Son is *eternally* subordinated to the Father, they are in some way less than the one who is always over them. To emphatically deny that teaching the *eternal* subordination of the Son in function and authority and in some cases being as well does not indicate the Son is ‘inferior’ to the Father is an assertion without substance. The Son is either superior to the Father (and both sides reject this suggestion), or equal with the Father (as I would argue), or inferior to the Father. There are no other options. If the Son is eternally set under the Father in function and authority, he is less in some way than the Father. In plain English, he is inferior to the Father. In this usage the words *subordinate* and *inferior* are synonyms (p. 48).

We see in this citation that Giles boldly throws his hat in with secular society, which sees no basic difference between subordination and inferiority; someone who is subordinate to another is inferior. While Giles acknowledges that ‘someone holding an inferior or subordinate position is not necessarily in their person (ontologically) inferior’, he then goes on to say that such a person actually is inferior ‘if they could never hold the superior position’. For Giles, the person who is found in a *permanent* inferior position is essentially inferior in their person and ontology.

This equation—that a permanent inferior position implies personal inferiority—is applied to the intra-Trinitarian relations within the Godhead. Giles argues that to say that Jesus is eternally subordinate to the Father in position or role implies that he is ontologically inferior to the Father. Thus, he can claim that any who believe in the permanent subordination of the Son to the Father are theological disciples of Arius. Such reasoning is evident at

various points throughout the book, as these extended citations demonstrate.

...I argue that to teach that the Son must always obey the Father, that he is eternally subordinated in authority to the Father, also implies his ontological subordination. If the Son must always obey the Father, he is not the Father's equal in power. What makes God God is his omnipotence—his absolute power. If Jesus is not omnipotent in exactly the same way as the Father because he is eternally set under the Father's authority, then he is not fully God (p. 59).

Most evangelicals who argue for the eternal subordination of the Son want to limit this to an eternal subordination in function and authority. They say they embrace ontological equality. I have pointed out repeatedly in reply that this argument is untenable. If the Son is *eternally* set under the Father in function and authority, if this is what differentiates the two, then they are not equals in any substantive way. The Son does not simply function subordinately; he is the subordinated Son. His subordination defines his person (p. 210).

What these evangelicals are arguing perfectly matches how the fourth-century Arians argued. Catherine LaCugna says, 'Arius concluded that the subordination of Christ to God according to the economy (*kat' oikonomian*) implied subordination at the level of God's being (*kata theologian*). In this respect at least Arius assumed a strict correspondence between *oikonomia* and *theologia* (p. 245).

Their case is that the eternal subordination and obedience of the Son defines who he is. The Father is defined by his commanding role, the Son by his subordinate and obedient role. The ontological implications cannot be missed. The Son does not simply function subordinately; he is in his person subordinated, and this can never change. Subordination prescribes his being (p. 273).

For the fourth-century Arians, subordination in being, work, and authority were inextricably linked. One implied the other two. The dominant evangelical view is that it is possible to have *eternal* subordination in function and authority without implying subordination in being. It is my case that this is not possible. If my argument is

compelling, then by implication all evangelicals who endorse subordination of the Son in function and authority embrace—without realizing it, and even often denying it—the subordination of the Son in being (pp. 306–307).

This last example is particularly interesting. Giles points out that in Arian thought, subordination in authority implies subordination in being. Then he says that evangelicals differ from this by believing that it is possible to have subordination in authority without subordination in being. Then Giles unwittingly sides with the Arian position against the evangelical position—subordination in authority must imply subordination in being. It would seem here that Giles' presupposition does indeed have an antecedent within church history, but it is probably not one that he would want to concede.

The key method that Giles employs is to trace the teaching of the church in relation to this issue. As we survey the material here, there is a subtle trend to be observed. While he may handle the original sources well, it is the implications that Giles draws from these historic statements that warrant our attention.

Athanasius

In recognizing that in being and work the Father and the Son are one, Athanasius yet again demonstrates his profound grasp of biblical thought. He clearly saw that in the Bible what God does reveals who God is, and in particular that the works of the Son are the works of the Father and vice versa [...]. In enunciating this principle Athanasius captures biblical thinking. This unity of being and action between the Father, Son, Spirit, first spelled out by Athanasius, is a constant theme from this point on in the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. **On this basis it is held that to *eternally* subordinate the Son or the Spirit in work/operation/function by necessity implies their ontological subordination. If the Son (and the Spirit) on the basis of his personal identity alone must always take the subordinate role and always be obedient to the Father, then he must be a subordinated person, less than his superior in some way** (p. 142).

Notice here that the section in bold is Giles' extrapolation based on the principle that Athanasius establishes. Whether or not this is a legitimate

extrapolation is not the issue for the moment; rather, we simply note the implication that Giles draws from Athanasius' teaching.

The Nicene Creed

In affirming that the Son is 'God from God, Light from Light, true God of truth', who is 'consubstantial with the Father', the bishops at Nicea endorse both divine differentiation and divine unity. What the Father is so too is the Son. In affirming that the Son 'for us men [meaning men and women] and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became man [meaning human] and suffered...', the temporal subordination of the Son is also endorsed. In juxtaposing these two truths—the Son is 'true God' and he 'became man and suffered'—the bishops at Nicea agreed that the temporal subordination of the Son to the Father within the economy of salvation did not entail the subordination of the Son in the eternal or immanent Trinity. [...] Thus the Father and the Son are both associated with the work and creation in this creed. **If the Father and the Son are one in being and act, then the idea that the Son is eternally set under the Father, ontologically or functionally, is categorically excluded. When two people are true equals, the permanent and necessary subordination of one party to the other in being, function, or authority is excluded on principle** (pp. 150–51).

In this example, we see Giles upholding the teaching of the Nicene Creed, and then drawing out implications from it. The last sentence also demonstrates a fairly explicit importation of the presupposition that undergirds Giles' argument.

John Calvin

In his commentary on John he says, 'We must therefore believe that there is unity between the Father and the Son so that they have nothing separate from each other.' For this reason, in contrast to many modern-day conservative evangelicals, Calvin never depicts the Father as being at the top of a chain of command as if in eternity he directs and the Son obeys. Such an idea would be totally alien to everything he believed about the Trinity.

Nevertheless, like Athanasius and the Cappadocians, Calvin accepts there

is an ‘order’ or structuring in how the three persons operate and relate to each other, **but nothing that he says on this matter suggests that he thought this operational order implied hierarchical ordering in the eternal or immanent Trinity**, and much would suggest he wanted to exclude this idea (pp. 163–64).

It would seem that Giles finds little in Calvin from which he may draw appropriate implications for the purpose of his argument. Rather, he claims that the order within the Godhead that Calvin expounds does not imply hierarchy, and therefore does not support the arguments of Giles’ opponents.

Karl Barth

What I found by reading Barth is that while he does break with the tradition by speaking of Christ as subordinate, obedient, and suffering as God, he never lets go of the belief that Christ is also at the same time Lord. For him the Son is never the subordinated, suffering, obedient Son simpliciter. He is always both Lord and servant. He is at one and the same time the sovereign electing God, eternally one in power and authority with the Father and the Spirit, and the subordinated, obedient, suffering Son, God identified with man for all eternity. **Evangelicals who appeal to Barth in support for their doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son in authority miss this dialectic in Barth’s christological trinitarianism** (p. 201).

It is not that he sees in the historical incarnate Christ subordination, obedience, and suffering and reads these things back into the eternal Trinity, as subordinationists with one accord do. Rather he begins with God in eternity who freely chooses subordination, obedience, and suffering so that he can be God for us and our salvation. At no point does Barth allow or suggest that in freely electing to be man Jesus Christ is less in any way than the Father or the Spirit. He insists that Christ is eternally sovereign God, he who elects. He is self-determining God. The humiliated, subordinated, suffering Jesus Christ is God who has elected to be man (humankind) in grace and reprobation.

This means that right at the heart of Barth’s doctrine of God is a dialectical understanding of the Son. He is always at one and the same time the sovereign God and God identified with man in humiliation. He is, as he

says many times, always ‘both Lord and servant.’ All appeals by evangelicals to Barth in support of their doctrine of the eternal subordination in authority of the Son miss this dialectical tension in Barth’s doctrine of God. They rightly see him speaking of the Son of God as subordinate and obedient: what they fail to see is that for Barth Christ is always both the sovereign electing God who rules in all majesty and authority, equal with the Father and the Spirit, and God identified with man in obedience, subordination, and suffering (p. 293).

In seeking to grasp what Barth is saying in this section, we must note yet again that Barth’s Christology is characterised by a dialectical understanding of Jesus Christ as the eternally sovereign electing God and the eternally elect man: as both Lord and servant. Christ is never the subordinated obedient Son simpliciter. Some contemporary conservative evangelicals may appeal to Barth for support of their distinctive doctrine of the eternal subordination or submission of the Son in function and authority, but in their zeal to find an ally in Barth they have failed to see one half of Barth’s distinctive Christology. **With delight they see him speaking of the eternally subordinated, obedient, and suffering Son, but they fail completely to see him speaking of the Son at the same time as the sovereign, omnipotent, and electing God** (p. 298).

Throughout these citations we observe that Giles correctly handles the Barthian dialectic. What Giles subtly introduces here, however, is a redefinition of the position of his opponents. To claim that conservative evangelicals do not fully uphold the sovereignty, omnipotence, and power of Jesus Christ, while at the same time acknowledging his role as the subordinate Son, is quite frankly gravely mistaken. In fact, by expounding the Barthian dialectic, I would suggest that Giles has unwittingly expounded the position of those theologians whom he seeks to critique. To then claim otherwise simply reveals that he has not understood the position he opposes. For want of a less derogatory description, Giles opposes a straw man.

Giles’ Conclusion

To admit that the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity gives no support at all—if anything it challenges the belief that women are permanently subordinated to men—is not a possibility [for Giles’ opponents]. **To give**

way on this point would be to weaken their whole case for the permanent subordination of women, which for them is the most important Christian truth to be upheld in this age. This response demands special pleading, like arguments for a flat earth or a world created about 7000 years ago (pp. 311–12).

This last citation is included simply to present the manner in which Giles rounds out his argument. While the claim that the ‘permanent subordination of women’ is, for his opponents, ‘the most important Christian truth to be upheld in this age’ seems utterly bizarre to this reviewer, it underlines again the fact that Giles does not seem to know or understand those with whom he disagrees.

Reflections

As we have seen, Giles’ key presupposition is that authority implies superiority, and permanent submission implies inferiority. The obvious question that must be addressed is: is this right? My reading of the biblical witness leads me to reject categorically the validity of this presupposition. One of the strands of the Biblical worldview that stands out as being strongly countercultural is the affirmation of equality and order. We see this inherent to creation, inherent to the way relationships are to be conducted, and, indeed, inherent to the intra-Trinitarian relationships within the Godhead. Within the Biblical worldview, authority and submission are simply not necessarily indicative of ontological superiority and inferiority.

When one begins, however, with a presupposition as powerful as that with which Giles begins, it is difficult not to read everything in light of it. As Giles surveys the history of Christian doctrine, this is demonstrably apparent. While our great theological forebears all affirm the full deity of Christ, Giles thereby concludes that Christ cannot be permanently subordinate to the Father. Athanasius, the Nicene Creed, and John Calvin all appear to support Giles’ case, because they affirm Christ’s equality with the Father. According to Giles, they can’t also affirm the eternal subordination of the Son—that would contradict the former affirmation. Such is a necessary and consistent outcome if Giles’ presupposition is accepted. Thankfully, however, orthodox Christian theology does not, and never has, adopted such an unbiblical presupposition. Perhaps most serious is the fact that the presupposition that Giles adopts is

identical to the one that undergirds Arianism. As Giles correctly points out, Arius believed that subordination implies inferiority. Arius saw in the Bible that Jesus was clearly subordinate to the Father, and his presupposition inevitably lead him to conclude that Jesus, therefore, cannot be equal to God. The most devastating flaw in Giles' work is that he adopts the very same presupposition that Arius used, but applies it in reverse. Subordination implies inferiority. But instead of using this premise to argue that the Son is subordinate, and therefore inferior, to the Father, he argues that Christ is equal to the Father, and therefore *cannot be subordinate* to him.

Finally, it seems that Giles' whole project is questionable from the beginning. He claims that conservative evangelicals require Jesus' *eternal* subordination to the Father in order to justify the subordinate role of women. While Giles affirms that Jesus was subordinate to the Father during his earthly life and ministry (p. 311), it is his eternal subordination that is at issue. Frankly, I fail to see how the *eternal* aspect of Jesus' subordination is in any way relevant to the wider issue that concerns Giles. Even if Christ was only subordinate to his Father during his earthly ministry, does he not nevertheless provide a model of godly submission that is to be imitated by all who find themselves in such roles in this life? Is it not our earthly ministries that are at issue here? Would any theologian seriously advocate the subordination of women *for eternity*? Wives are to submit to their husbands, to be sure, but we know that there is no marriage in heaven, apart from that between Christ and his bride, the Church. Since we are only talking about relationships within marriage in this earthly life, one is left wondering—what is the point of Giles' argument anyway?

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