The Great Subordination Debate Continues


Let us suppose that the theologians who have written in defence of the 1999 Sydney Doctrine Commission Report on the Trinity mean exactly what they say: that they believe there to be a proper subordination in function or role of the Son to the Father in the eternal Trinity, and that therefore women should properly be subordinate in function or role to men in the church and home. In other words, that they sincerely believe certain gender roles involving subordination find their ontological foundation and justification in an eternal subordination within the Godhead. Now I happen not to agree with this position, which I hope I have represented accurately. For reasons outlined in an earlier issue of St Mark's Review, I disagree with them both with regard to the question of gender roles, and with regard to the methodologically prior question of relationships in the eternal Godhead. However, if this is what the defenders and advo-

cates of the 1999 Report say they believe, then I accept that this is what they actually do believe.

In his new book, Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity, Kevin Giles returns to a debate centred on the words we use for speaking about what many Christians consider to be that most obscure of doctrines, the Trinity. It is an extended and considered response to criticisms of his earlier The Trinity and Subordination, in which Giles had attacked the 1999 Report and its implications. While acknowledging that the Son was subordinate and obedient during his incarnation, he argued there that the Report separates the Sydney Diocese from historic orthodoxy, which emphasises the consubstantiality, and therefore equality, of the three Trinitarian persons in eternity. Giles was careful not to accuse the Sydney theologians of heresy, let alone any particular identifiable heresy, a point not taken by all subsequent participants in the debate. This book was followed by a flurry of reviews, both supporting and attacking it, and now Giles has responded to his critics.

In some ways the debate seems to have reached a stalemate. Each side is committed to its position with a passion which indicates that a great deal more, practically speaking, hangs on the outcome than might otherwise seem to be the case. Both sides are absolutely convinced they are right, neither willing to concede. The question at the centre of the debate is whether God the Son may be said to stand in an eternal relationship of 'functional subordination' to God the Father. Further, the Report adds that this putative eternal functional subordination is voluntary. The central question remains: In saying this, have the authors of the Report separated themselves from historic Trinitarian orthodoxy? If for the Report's authors the Trinitarian Godhead involves an eternal subordination, are they talking about (or perhaps better, praying to) the same God as the rest of us? This was Giles' question in his first book, and it is still his question. Upon the answer to this question depends, according to the 1999 Report, a practical consequence for gender roles.

There is also a methodological question here: Which comes first, Trinitarian theology or anthropology? What is not in question is what should come first: theology must have priority over anthropology to the same degree that God takes priority over the creation. But is this actually the methodology of the Report? Giles argues that the Report articulates a particular view of Trinitarian doctrine in order to under gird and validate a prior belief, namely that women should be functionally subordinate to men in the church and the home. For this reason Giles proposes a guideline for Trinitarian theology, analogous to other regulative axioms that govern theological statements: 'Whenever the Trinity is construed to support a prior belief, then the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is invariably corrupted and distorted.' Because the Trinity is one of the foundational hallmarks of Christian faith, Giles' guideline can be taken as axiomatic; other positions taken by Christians need to be assessed with reference to the Trinitarian doctrine, not vice versa. Now it seems that the 1999 Report arose historically out of the Sydney debate about 'male and female roles in ministry and marriage'
and a desire for clarification as to the status of any proposed Trinitarian underpinnings of such roles. However I have also said that I am prepared to take Giles’ criticisms at their word on this matter, and accept that they really do believe the Son to be eternally functionally subordinate to the Father. In other words I accept that they are working in accordance with Giles’ guideline. My problem is how to understand some of the terminology used in the Report.

For example, what is it with the juxtaposition of the terms ‘eternal’ and ‘functional’? I understand the works (or ‘functions’ or ‘roles’) of the divine person as pertaining only to the economy of salvation, that is to God’s actions within the constraints of ordinary time. These works ad extra are to be distinguished from the eternal being of God. So to me it is incoherent to combine ‘eternal’ and ‘functional’ as theological terms. The difficulty is increased if ‘voluntary’ is added, for two reasons. First, in the Augustinian psychological model of the Trinity, voluntas carries a particular association with the third person of the Trinity, the Spirit. More importantly, to suggest one Trinitarian person wholly subjects himself to the will of another seems to suggest there are two divine wills. This idea, which the 1999 Sydney Report certainly attempts to avoid, is one the early church implicitly rejected in the monothelite controversy, the debate as to whether in the incarnate Jesus Christ there was one unified will or a tension between two wills—a human desire to escape the crucifixion, for example, and a single divine purpose that impelled him irrevocably towards it. The divine will, that is the will of the one eternal Trinity, was assumed to be one. How the defenders of the 1999 Report reconcile this unity of divine will, which all participants in this debate want to endorse, with the notion of a willful submission within the Trinity is still unclear to me.

But let us also suppose that eternal functional subordination can somehow be a coherent formulation. Is the debate about Arianism (the position declared a heresy in the early church—that Jesus Christ is created by God the Father rather than ‘eternally begotten’, an admittedly clumsy term that was intended to assert the Son’s derived co- eternity with the Father)? If the Son were created, then Christ would logically be subordinate to God the Father. Arianism does not deny that Christ is there before this creation of which we are part, but asserts that because Christ is to be considered a creature, it is ultimately impossible for God to be Trinitarian: God is, in this view, alone in eternity. Christ is something more like a Homeric god or hero, or perhaps in more contemporary imagination—an archetypal figure of the human collective unconscious: there from before we humans came onto the scene, and in principle accessible as a figure of the unconscious to all of us, but not sharing in the eternity, or equality, of God. Now Giles does not actually accuse the Sydney theologians of being Arians, and they naturally would deny any such charge. Again I think we can take the Sydney theologians at their word here; they have no intention of endorsing an Ariant theology, of denying Christ’s objective reality as the eternal Logos through which, or through whom, God created the heavens and the earth.

Are Giles’ opponents fabricating a particular view of the Trinity to support their ‘prior belief’ that women are created to be, in some respects, subordinate? Again, I think we must assume that these theologians really mean what they say when they argue that the eternal Christ is obedient, submissive to the Father, in eternity. The obvious basis for this is that the inner being of God corresponds to God’s actions in the revealed economy of salvation, a point that Giles accepts. This is a reflection of the faithfulness of God. If Jesus is obedient to the Father in the time of his incarnation, which he clearly is, then a corollary—if we follow Rahner’s ground axiom11—arguously, and in a way that Rahner himself may never have intended—is that he will also be obedient in eternity. This eternal obedience of the Son corresponds to an emphasis on the importance of our human obedience to God as a mark of the Christian life and the corresponding tendency to describe sin in terms of disobedience, or rebellion against God. I personally find this way of speaking about sin unhelpful12 but I also acknowledge that to see sin in terms of disobedience may be just as valid as more existentialist alternatives. This understanding certainly seems to be central to the prevailing theology of salvation in the Sydney Anglican Diocese, so it comes as no surprise to see the same obedience-disobedience antithesis playing a role in the doctrine of the Trinity in the 1999 Report. Nor is it surprising, given the strong position on the roles of women in the home and church taken by many Sydney Anglican theologians, to see a logical correspondence with a Trinitarian model that simply transfers the temporal obedience of Christ into his eternal relationship with the Father.

As a theologian standing within the mainstream tradition, Kevin Giles objects to any suggestion of an inequality within the inner being of God, even if such inequality does not go as far as the Arian contention that the Son be ontologically less than divine. Much of his book is a detailed response to the claims of his detractors, quoting biblical materials and the theological authorities they themselves cite. This makes the book to some degree repetitive, but this detailed attention to sources is essential if Giles is to answer his critics adequately.

Particularly important in this regard is the close reading Giles gives to Karl Barth, whose dialectic of Christ’s lordship and servant-hood and Barth’s supposed subordinationism, both with regard to Christ and to women, is undoubtedly the strongest of all the arguments Giles’ critics have been able to bring to bear against the earlier book, and it is appropriate that Giles’ final chapter in Jesus and the Father addresses these criticisms in minute detail. There are several elements to Giles’ argument. First, because Barth wrote his Dogmatics over a period of decades, his thinking changes and develops as he goes.13 Barth’s views can never be pinned down in a few isolated quotes. Further, Barth’s doctrine of appropriation, for Giles, ‘quite specifically excludes operational or functional subordination. All the acts of Father, Son and Spirit are ultimately the acts of the one God’. A third point is the radicalism with which Barth rethink all Christian doctrine:
Whereas all theologians prior to Barth have thought of God becoming man in a point in history ... Barth telescopes the two together. In eternity God decides to become man, and the incarnation is simply the 'actualization' of what has forever been true in eternity.\textsuperscript{51}

In other words, Barth does not (simply) read statements about the incarnation back into the eternal Godhead, but much more reads the eternal decree of the trine God 'forward' into the incarnation. Above all, to read Barth as endorsing 'the eternal subordination and obedience of the Son simpliciter'\textsuperscript{52} is to miss Barth's dialectical method in which 'God is both high and humble, and Jesus Christ reveals this astounding fact.'\textsuperscript{xii} Jesus Christ is both 'the sovereign and electing God' and 'man elected to be God.'\textsuperscript{xxv} To say one of these things without the other is to mislead. For Barth, 'Jesus Christ the Son is both the One who commands and the One who obeys ... both Lord and servant.'\textsuperscript{xxv} This, as Giles points out, is the fundamental dialectic of Barth's Christology, and he draws the by now obvious conclusion that 'if women by analogy are both lords and servants, then they are not unilaterally subordinated to men in the home and the church.'\textsuperscript{xxv} Giles develops these various counter-arguments to his critics in far more detail than this. What I have given is nothing more than a sample, a reading in which Giles is able to draw on and demonstrate a considerable weight of support from reputable Barth scholarship. For my money, I am persuaded that Giles has indeed answered his critics. As an evangelical advocate of gender equality, he also draws the obvious conclusion of asserting equality in human relationships.

For the most part, Christians—if they think about these weighty questions at all—have been content to follow Athanasius in affirming that God's 'fatherhood' is like God's 'sonship,' a derived relationship. The Father is Father because he has a Son—his fatherhood is dependent on there being a son. God's fatherhood is every bit as much a received condition as any human parenthood—it is received by virtue of having a child. Derivation can be mutual, and in any case does not have to mean subordination. The great theological tradition going back to the early Christian centuries seems to me to deny any subordination in the Godhead. Further, the gospels affirm that God the Father made his own lordship—if we are to speak in these terms—dependant on the faithfulness of the earthly Jesus, such that God's lordship—that of the Father as well as the Son—comes under threat in the temptations of Jesus, in his desperate prayer on the night of his arrest, and on the cross.

In late antiquity, Trinitarian thinking heralded a great cultural shift in how human relationships were perceived, and lived. Friendship, understood classically as an ideal that unites those who are similar and therefore natural equals, was transformed into a relationship that creates a new type of equality, one that bridges and includes natural difference. Contemporary Trinitarian theology, especially at its most creative, has rediscovered and highlighted the social radicalism of this uniquely Christian perspective. Miroslav Volf is talking about human relationships when he writes 'between lovers there is no first and last, no greater and smaller. Lovers give because they delight and adore.'\textsuperscript{xxvi} But he does this in an essay on the Trinity. Nancy Elizabeth Bedford proposes a mutuality of friendship that is 'premised on a Trinitarian dynamic, pointing out there is nothing new in this move from Trinitarian presuppositions to anthropological consequences.'\textsuperscript{xviii} Both exemplify the revitalized Trinitarian thinking that has emerged in the past two or three decades, building on the great tradition of Christian worship that invokes God's true trine name. It is a way of thinking and speaking that militantly contest any hint of subordination.\textsuperscript{six}

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ii. In this earlier article, 'Trinity and Personhood,' St Mark's Review, 2006 (1), no.165, pp.29-31, I argue that the modern understanding of personhood and all that goes with it (human rights, etc.) can be traced ultimately to the egalitarian notion of person developed in patristic Trinitarian theology, and that the significance of Trinitarian theology for the emergence of a notion of the equality of human persons cannot be overstated.

iii. Giles, Jesus and the Father, op. cit.


v. Giles, Jesus and the Father, op. cit., p.44.

vi. The Doctrine of Trinity ... Report, op. cit., par.1.

vii. 'The Economic Trinity is the "Immanent" Trinity and the "Immanent" Trinity is the "Economic" Trinity,' cited by Giles in Jesus and the Father, op. cit., p.251.


ix. Giles, Jesus and the Father, op. cit., p.279.

x. ibid., p.284.

xi. ibid., p.291.

xii. ibid., p.300.

xiii. ibid., p.286.

xiv. ibid., p.292.

xv. ibid., p.300.

xvi. ibid., p.302.


xix. I am grateful to Revd Catherine Laufer who kindly read this review article in draft form and offered very helpful critical comments. Any errors of judgment or fact are of course my own.