

Kevin Giles on the eternal subordination of the Son and a reply to Peter Adam, published in the Australian journal, *St Mark's Review*, 198, 2005.

The Trinity and Subordinationism

Kevin Giles

In the later part of the twentieth century the doctrine of the Trinity captured the attention of theologians more than any other doctrine and this interest has not waned. At no time in history, since the theologically stormy days of the fourth century, has there been so much discussion on this topic. Books on the Trinity by Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox theologians continue to be published. No longer is it thought that the Trinity is an obtuse, secondary and impractical dogma. It is recognised today that it is nothing less than a summary of the Christian understanding of God given in revelation. The Trinity is the foundation on which all other doctrines are built. It is of immense theological and practical significance.

In contemporary discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity it is agreed that the God revealed in scripture is by nature trinitarian. He is one yet also three equal and differentiated 'persons' who eternally co-exist in the most intimate communion.¹ In this understanding of the Trinity any suggestion that the divine three are ordered hierarchically, or divided in being, work, or power is absolutely excluded. David Cunningham, in his 1998 book, *These Three are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*,² speaks of 'a radical, relational, co-equality' in modern trinitarian thinking. Similarly, Ted Peters in his 1993 book, *God as Trinity: Relationality and Temporality in Divine Life*,³ describes contemporary thinking about the Christian God as 'antibordinationist trinitarianism'. In my opinion the finest study on the Trinity in the last ten years is that by T.F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons*.⁴ Building on the work of Athanasius and the Cappadocians he makes the Trinity itself the

monarche of the divine persons and the Son the *monarche* of divine revelation. He too is totally opposed to subordinationism in any form.

In the light of this powerful reaffirmation of the ‘co-equal’ Trinity that excludes all hierarchical ordering, long ago given classic expression in the Athanasian Creed, it is of no surprise to find that some of the best contemporary expositions of the doctrine of the Trinity see the Trinity as a charter for human liberation.⁵ If no one is before or after, greater or lesser in the Godhead, this must suggest that all hierarchical ordering in this world is a human construct reflecting fallen existence, not God’s ideal. God would like to see every human being valued in the same way.

Paradoxically in this same period of time conservative evangelicals concerned to maintain the permanent subordination of women have taken the opposite path. They have been arguing that the Father is set over the Son in authority. The Trinity is to be understood as ‘ordered hierarchically’. The Father rules over the Son just like men are to rule over women in the church and the home. The most common form of this argument in conservative evangelical literature is that the Son is eternally *functionally* subordinated to the Father, apart from any subordination in *being*. However some American and Sydney evangelical theologians argue that while the Son is fully divine he is *differentiated* from the Father in ‘his very nature’, ‘person’, ‘essence’, or ‘being’.⁶

It is this second expression of this distinctive conservative evangelical doctrine of the Trinity that is spelt out in the 1999 Sydney Doctrine Commission Report, ‘The Doctrine of the Trinity and Its Bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women’ that was accepted by the whole synod. It is now the official statement of faith on the Trinity for Sydney Diocese. My critics have suggested that I have given a ‘hostile’ reading of this report but it is hard to deny that I simply quote what the report says. Robert Doyle, head of Systematic Theology at Moore College, in reply to my criticism of the 1999 Sydney Doctrine Commission’s use of ontological language to differentiate and subordinate the Son replied that one cannot conceive

of differentiated relations in the Trinity apart from using terms like ‘essence’, ‘being’, ‘and the very persons themselves in their eternal nature’.⁷ In other words he is saying that my reading of the 1999 Doctrine Report is not ‘hostile’ but spot on. The divine persons are to be differentiated ontologically. What is more in this article, Doyle argues that Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Augustine, Calvin, Barth and Rahner all teach the eternal subordination of the Son in authority. I am the one who has fallen into heresy by arguing for a ‘co-equal’ Trinity where each of the persons is ‘almighty’ and ‘Lord’.

What confuses things with the 1999 Sydney Doctrine Commission Report is that alongside these assertions, which are questionable, to say the least, stand affirmations that are pristine orthodoxy. The three persons of the Trinity are said to be one and equal, each is to be worshipped, each indwells the other and they work as one. In one classic paragraph (25) the Athanasian Creed is endorsed and the *homoousian* principle is denied. We are told the three divine persons are distinguished by ‘*differences of being*’. So what we have here is a hybrid—orthodoxy and classic subordinationism blended together. The Son is fully divine but eternally subordinated to the Father in his ‘very person’ and ‘being’. He is the Son who must eternally obey the Father like women must obey the men set over them.

The more popular form of subordinationism common in evangelical literature today is, however, a little more subtle. Here the argument is that the Son is eternally subordinated in role or function and thus authority but not in being/essence/nature.⁸ In speaking of an *eternal* subordination in *function* or *role* it is thought that ontological subordinationism can be avoided. It is not recognised that the moment the word ‘eternal’ is introduced ontological subordinationism cannot be avoided (as the Sydney theologians recognise). If the Son is *eternally* subordinated to the Father, and can never be otherwise, his subordination defines his person. He *is* the subordinated Son, he does not merely function subordinately. Orthodoxy in contrast always insists on a unity of being, work/function, and authority among the divine persons. Who the divine three are and what they do cannot be separated. The principle is,

what God does reveals who God is. Thus if Christ is not omnipotent in exactly the same way as the Father, he is not equal God. He is a lesser God.

Why has subordinationism captured the thinking of so many conservative evangelicals?

To understand how this doctrine of the Trinity, ambiguous at best, has emerged in the last thirty years and almost taken over the more conservative side of evangelicalism, one thing has to be recognised. The issue is not really the Trinity at all. What has generated this novel and dangerous doctrine of the Trinity is ‘a great cause’, the permanent subordination of women. For some evangelicals ‘the woman question’ is the apocalyptic battle of our age. They are convinced that the Bible gives ‘headship’ (leadership in plain speak) to men. If this principle were abandoned because of cultural change the authority of the Bible would be overthrown and the door would be opened to homosexual marriages, the ordination of practicing homosexuals, and believe it or not, the obliteration of sexual differentiation. To bolster support for this great cause the doctrine of the Trinity has been redefined and reworded to give the weightiest theological support possible for the permanent subordination of women. The case is this, just as God has given ‘headship’ to men in the home and the church, so the Father has a ‘headship’ over the Son and this can never change. The *eternal* subordination of the Son in authority has its counterpart in the *permanent* subordination of women. Every evangelical theologian who has written in support of the eternal subordination of the Son is committed to the permanent subordination of women in the church and the home. This agenda is what drives them to advocate the eternal subordination of the Son.

How the tail has wagged the dog

Until the twentieth century Christians universally spoke of the ‘superiority’ of men and the ‘inferiority’ of women. After the 1970s with the advent of ‘women’s lib’ all Christians had to abandon this language and most also abandoned the idea that women were subordinated to men. Conservative evangelicals without exception also gave up this language but some sought a

new way to uphold male hegemony with more genteel wording. They said men and women are equals, it is simply that God has given them different roles. This sounds fine but when unpacked it means women have the ‘role’ of obeying and men the role of leading—no other ‘role’ is in mind. What is more this ‘role’ is permanent because it is ascribed by God in creation. God established this social hierarchical order before the Fall and so it cannot be changed. It is the ideal. As this difference in ‘role’ (in plain speak, difference in authority) is the one essential difference between men and women, to deny the permanent subordination of women is to deny male-female differentiation as such. This novel case for women’s permanent ‘role’ subordination raises exactly the same problem as their novel case for the Son’s eternal ‘role’ subordination. If women are *permanently* subordinated in role and their subordinate role can never change then they are the subordinated sex. In some way they are less than men—they are inferior to men. Women do not merely function subordinately. In creation God set them under men in perpetuity.

Having worked out this novel theology predicated on obfuscating terminology to uphold male hegemony, these same theologians then reformulated the doctrine of the Trinity using the same terminology and ideas they had created to justify the leadership of men. They began teaching that the Father and the Son are equally divine: the Father and the Son simply have different roles or functions. And what are these differing roles? Surprise surprise, the Father has the ‘role of commanding, directing and sending’ and the Son has the ‘role of obeying, going as the Father sends and revealing God to us’.¹ Different roles again means different authority. The Father rules over the Son like men are to rule over the women set under them. If anyone denies that the Father and the Son are differentiated by their differing authority then they are accused of denying divine differentiation itself—of falling into the heresy of modalism. To cap off the case the claim is then made that this teaching is historic orthodoxy. This is what Athanasius, the Cappadocians, Augustine, Calvin, Barth and Rahner teach on the Trinity.

What has to be noted in all this is the circular nature of this reasoning.

1. A novel theology was first devised to theologically ground the *permanent* subordination of women based on the argument that men and women are equal yet differentiated by their God-given unchanging roles, and then
2. the wording and ideas used to develop this novel case for the permanent subordination of women were utilised to develop a novel doctrine of the Trinity that spoke of the Son as equal yet eternally subordinated in role or function, and then
3. this novel doctrine of the Trinity was quoted to theologically justify and explain the permanent role subordination of women.

If this is the case this means that the doctrine of the Trinity has been reformulated in terms of fallen male-female relationships to support what was already believed: women are permanently subordinated to men. Instead of correcting sinful human thinking, the doctrine of the Trinity has become a theological justification for such thinking. The doctrine of the Trinity rather than being seen as a charter for human liberation has become a charter for oppression.

Just as some have spoken of ‘Rahner’s rule’, ‘Pannenberg’s principle’, and of ‘LaCugna’s corollary’ I suggest a ‘Giles’ guideline’: ‘Whenever the Trinity is construed to support some prior belief then the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is inevitably corrupted and distorted.’

The problem

Over many years I warned my evangelical brothers in Sydney about appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity to support the permanent subordination of women. I have pointed out time and time again that this argument directly contradicted the catholic faith given in the Athanasian creed—all three divine persons are ‘almighty’ and ‘Lord’ (no subordination in authority); no divine person is ‘before or after another, none is greater or less than another’; all three are ‘co-equal’ (no hierarchical ordering and no eternal subordination)—but they would not listen and went on the attack. The subordination of women consumed them and fogged their minds. They insisted that the voluntary and temporal subordination of the Son seen in his incarnation

(cf. Phil. 2:4-11) be read back into the immanent Trinity.

In Sydney those in power often say that the ‘headship’ of men in the home and the church is a ‘Gospel issue’. The argument goes like this. If you deny the clear biblical teaching on male ‘headship’ you are denying biblical authority, and as the Bible is our sole source of information on the Gospel and its authenticating basis you thereby undermine the Gospel itself. On this basis the subordination of women is made a doctrinal issue of first order importance.

Evangelicals who oppose this theologically grounded demeaning of women do not concede that what is being taught has any solid biblical support. They would insist that it is simply a cleverly constructed theology attempting to justify male hegemony, totally unknown before 1970. It is a novel construct and convinces no one but the already convinced. It is not what the Bible says, but an *interpretation* of the Bible, and a very doubtful one at that. It is less convincing to those whose eyes have been opened than the ‘biblical case’ for apartheid developed by South African Reformed theologians in the mid twentieth century and the ‘Biblical case’ for slavery put by ‘the best Reformed theologians’ in the nineteenth century in America. In all three cases it is nothing more than an appeal to the Bible by those in power to maintain their privileged status.

In contrast to my Sydney friends I would want to make upholding the doctrine of a co-equal Trinity the first order theological and ‘Gospel issue’. On my side are Athanasius and the so-called Athanasian Creed. Athanasius clearly saw that if Christ was not one with the Father then we did not meet God in Christ, and if Christ is not one with the Father then we are not saved because only God can save. For me you cannot break with the Nicene Creed’s definition of Christ as *one in being with the Father*, or the Athanasian Creed’s definition of him as one in substance, one in authority and co-equal and still be preaching the Gospel faithfully. If you

deny what these creeds teach then you are preaching another Christ than the one the best of theologians from the past have concluded is revealed in scripture.

To preach a Christ who is different from the Father, eternally subordinated in function, authority and possibly in being, is not to preach Christ who reveals the Father, or the true God who became incarnate for our salvation. To preach another Christ than the creeds proclaim is to break with the catholic faith at the most basic and important point. What is more in this case, the ‘Gospel’ predicated on an eternally subordinated Christ, instead of setting people free, becomes a message of social control and oppression. In particular, it becomes a means of justifying and legitimising the permanent subordination of women. I want to say to my friends in Sydney, upholding the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is of first importance because it determines more than anything else the Gospel we preach.

If the great strengths of Sydney Anglicans are to be preserved then this teaching on the Trinity has to be repudiated. We must say clearly and loudly to our Sydney friends, ‘Go back, you are going the wrong way.’

My reply to Peter Adam

Peter Adam spoke very sharply and critically of both Archbishop Carnley and me when it was his turn to speak at the Melbourne seminar on the Trinity organised by the Primate. I bear him absolutely no ill will. In making a reply to him I hope I speak graciously but I do not intend to gloss over our doctrinal differences. What is in contention is the primary doctrine of the Christian faith. Peter Adam needs to be able to justify and defend what he said and come clean on what he actually believes himself.

There are at least two important points Peter makes in his paper that I totally endorse. I am in complete agreement with him that the doctrine of the Trinity is of huge importance. It is nothing less than the Christian doctrine of God. I thus am amazed that we are not of one mind

in seeing the importance of maintaining faithfulness to creedal definitions of this doctrine. I am also in complete agreement with him that this debate has deep political overtones. The evangelicals I am debating with want us to believe they are the custodians of revealed truth. For someone like the Primate, whom they consider to be a 'liberal', and someone like me who claims to be an 'evangelical', to say 'you have got it dead wrong', is to challenge the very basis of their power base. Only one response is possible: total opposition. Peter Adam's excessive rhetoric must be understood in this light.

Peter Adam makes three specific charges against me. First he claims that I have begun with a theory and then read the evidence to support what I already believe. This is an easy accusation to evaluate. We need go no further than the Athanasian Creed. Does it not speak of the Father, Son and Spirit as 'almighty' and 'Lord'? (no subordination in authority). Does it not say in this Trinity, none is before or after, none is greater or less than another (no sub-ordering), all are 'co-equal'? Quoting isolated comments from Athanasius and Aquinas that could be read to teach other than what the Athanasian Creed teaches proves nothing. Less likely supporters of subordination could not be found.

Following attacks made on me in publications by Robert Doyle and Mark Baddeley, two Moore College lecturers, who for some strange reason have made my claim that Barth is opposed to the eternal subordination of the Son proof that I am wrong at all points.² Why Barth is singled out escapes me since I make my main historical authorities for the tradition Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine and Calvin and the Creeds and Reformation confessions. To make their case that I am dead wrong these two Moore College lecturers quote a couple of passages from Barth's Church Dogmatics, 4.1 where he speaks of a subordination and obedience in 'God'. Peter Adam on this basis accuses me of habitually 'misquoting and misreading' Barth. He says, 'You have misunderstood Barth. You believe that Barth represents your own views and repudiated the views of your opponents. In fact Barth supports the very view you want to marginalise.'³

I remain convinced that Barth is not on the side of my debating opponents. He does not eternally subordinate the Son in authority simpliciter. He does speak of the subordination and obedience of the Son as God but it is in reference to the Son of God identified with man. Barth never sets the Father and Son in opposition with the former ruling over the latter. What these evangelicals completely miss is that the subordinate, obedient and suffering Son is man elected to be God. He is not Christ as the electing sovereign God who eternally rules in all majesty and power. Barth has a bipolar Christology. The Son is always both Lord and servant. My evangelical friends completely miss this dialectic.

*His second charge against me is that I have ‘the habit of misquoting and misreading my sources.’⁴ The examples he gives, all from Barth, seem to me to be very petty. In one case he notes that in quoting Barth I use a ‘he’ instead of the archaic divine pronoun ‘He’. In another case he says I give a reference as p.215 instead of p.214. When I looked this up I found the quote has one line on each page! Nevertheless, I am always pleased to have minor or major errors corrected. I take no offence. However when he says I quote Barth as saying ‘the Being who prescribes and dictates and determines Jesus is God, when Barth’s point is of Jesus’ submission to Judas’,⁵ I could only smile. I presumed this was a joke at my expense. On this page in Barth, Judas is not even mentioned (cf. Dogmatics, 3.2, pp.214–15). After pressing him a number of times to substantiate this claim Peter admitted he had misread and misquoted Barth badly. As a result he omitted these words from the later published version of this paper in *The Churchman* (i.e. in the form that it appears below). In reflecting on this second charge it has to be said that to find one or more errors in detail does not in any way negate my central thesis: to eternally subordinate the Son in function and authority is to imply the ontological subordination of the Son.*

Thirdly, he accuses me of slanting the evidence to make it seem my opponents hold a marginal viewpoint.⁶ He says I try to give the impression that the eternal subordination of the Son in

authority is an idea 'found only among a small conservative evangelical minority'.⁷ I am still convinced the factual evidence supports my thesis. I put the challenge to Peter to find one theologian outside of the conservative evangelical fraternity that endorses the eternal subordination of the Son in authority. The creeds definitely do not teach this, nor do any of the Reformation confessions, nor do any mainline Catholic or Protestant theologians today. In fact with one voice they oppose this idea. Barth is not an exception. He in fact speaks of the one God in 'threefold repetition'. His emphasis is on the unity of the one God and the co-equality of the differentiated 'persons', or as he calls them 'modes of being'.

To sum up his case, Peter Adam says that in contrast to me he and his conservative evangelical friends in Sydney 'assert equality and asymmetry' in divine relations.⁸ I asked him publicly at the seminar and in two subsequent emails to clarify what he meant by this because it makes no sense to me. He has refused my requests. I am not sure in saying this whether he is trying to confuse the issues or is confused himself. I accept that there is equality and asymmetry in the Trinity, as I would think all orthodox theologians do. The only thing that could possibly divide us is the force of the word 'asymmetry'. In orthodoxy the word 'asymmetry' refers to the fact that the persons of the Trinity cannot be transposed because they are eternally distinguished as Father, Son and Spirit and because, although they work inseparably, their work is not identical. The Father sends, the Son is sent, the Son is the one who is incarnated and dies on the cross, not the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost, not the Father or the Son. Furthermore, they have differing relations that cannot be reversed. The Father is the Father of the Son, and the Son is the Son of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father (or the Father and the Son).

In conservative evangelical literature supporting the eternal subordination of the Son the word 'asymmetrical' has another meaning. It is a deliberately obfuscating way of saying the Trinity is hierarchically ordered. The Father rules over the Son. They are differentiated in authority. Orthodoxy, as every student of the historic tradition and the creeds knows, never differentiates

the divine persons on the basis of differing authority. This was an Arian error. So my question to Peter Adam is, what do you mean when you say that what distinguishes Sydney's doctrine of the Trinity and yours from mine is that you believe in 'equality and asymmetry'? To baldly make this claim and refuse to clarify what you mean does not further the cause of truth.

It is to be noted that in his paper Peter Adam never interacts at all with my primary accusations: to eternally subordinate the Son in function and authority is contrary to historic orthodoxy and what is more it inevitably implies ontological subordinationism. His paper is a debating exercise that denigrates the Primate and me but never addresses the central issues in contention. What I want to know is: what does Peter Adam himself believe on the issues actually in contention in this debate? In making this appeal to Peter Adam to openly spell out in plain speak his own position I think it is only fair that I do the same. I put my position succinctly and explicitly asking Peter Adam or anyone else to come forward and tell me where they think my position differs from historic orthodoxy.

The key affirmations as I see them

The Father, Son, and Spirit are one in being/substance/essence/nature. If they are one in being in unity then they are one in being as Father, Son, and Spirit. The divine three cannot be differentiated on the basis of differing being. To suggest otherwise is to deny the *homoousian* principle, enshrined in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds.

The Father, Son and Spirit work/operate/function *inseparably*. In every divine action all three divine persons work in harmony and cooperatively. They are never divided or separated. The doctrine of inseparable operations does not infer identical operations. It is agreed that the Father sends the Son, Christ is incarnate God and dies on the cross, and the Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost. These and other things are indelibly associated with one or another of the divine persons. However to divide and separate the work of Father, Son and Spirit is to undermine the unity and simplicity of the one God.

The Father, Son and Spirit are *indivisible in power and authority*. Because each divine person is fully God each is omnipotent without any caveats. If the divine persons are one in being, equal God, they must be one in power and authority. If not, they are not one in being and divinity and the Son is subordinated God. Furthermore the idea that the Son must eternally obey the Father implies that the Father and the Son each have their own will. The Son must submit his will to the will of the Father. If the divine three each have their own will, divine unity is eclipsed and tritheism follows.

The Father, Son and Spirit are *eternally differentiated*. They are one in being, work and authority and yet never to be identified. Their distinctiveness is grounded in the tradition principally on three things, individual identity (the Father is the Father and not the Son, etc.), differing origination (the Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds), and differing relations (the Father is the Father of the Son, the Son is the Son of the Father, the Spirit proceeds from the Father, or the Father and the Son). The differences between the persons are never to be predicated on differing being or differing authority. If they are this leads to classic subordinationism and tritheism.

The way the divine persons are revealed, how they relate to one another, and how they work is never random or arbitrary. It is ordered. There is a pattern and consistency in the divine life that is unchanging. To argue that this order is a sub-ordering in being or authority is to deny that the divine three are 'co-equal'.

In sum, it is my case that the Bible implicitly, and the historically developed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity explicitly, affirms unity of being among the divine three, inseparable operations, indivisible authority, eternal personal distinctions, and order.

The Revd Dr Kevin Giles is Incumbent of St Michael's Anglican Church, North

Carlton, in Melbourne, Australia. His book *The Trinity and Subordinationism. The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2002) kicked off the debate which led to this colloquium. This article is an edited, extended version of the paper he read at the Melbourne symposium, replying in more detail to Dr Adam's criticism of Dr Giles' work, and adding a concluding summary of what Dr Giles considers to be orthodoxy on the issues in contention.