

*The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* by Kevin Giles. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002. Pp. 282. Price unknown.

Kevin Giles, Vicar of St. Michaels Church (Anglican) in North Carlton, Australia, has long written on the gender debate in advocacy of women's equality and ordination. This latest installment takes on those conservative evangelicals, largely of Reformed inclination, who wish to root the "role subordination" of women in the weightiest ontological way: in the eternal life of the Triune God. Giles is principally motivated by a debate in his own backyard, encapsulated in the 1999 Sydney Anglican Diocesan Doctrine Commission report, "The Doctrine of Trinity and Its Bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women" (hereafter, the SADD Report), which he includes as an appendix. Prompted by the ordination issue in the Australian Anglican Church, this report argues that just as the Son of God, though equal in essence to God the Father, is eternally subordinate to the Father in function or role, so also women are permanently subordinate to men in church and home. In

other words, the ontological hierarchy in the Trinity grounds the headship of men. Giles' rebuttal of this position comes formally in three movements.

In part 1, *The Trinity Tradition*, he contests the claim of the SADD Report that the *eternal* functional subordination of the Son (or Spirit) to the Father is the position of historic orthodoxy, especially that of Calvin and the Calvinists. By sampling major statements both east and west and ancient to modern in the lengthy history of trinitarianism, Giles establishes that apart from the clear example of Charles Hodge and some lesser Calvinists, the orthodox trinitarian tradition repudiated such a subordination. Of course this tradition did affirm the *voluntary and temporary* functional subordination of the Son in the Incarnation and the Humiliation. This temporal subordination in the so-called economic Trinity was not read back by the tradition into the eternal, immanent Trinity as the SADD theologians do. Rather, in the latter, the ontological equality of the divine persons was emphasized. While the subordinationism SADD theologians advocate is no Arianism that makes the Son or Spirit inferior in being to the Father; and while one can, to be sure, cite many examples of equal persons in super-and-subordinate functional relations (as in the economic Trinity), Giles rightly observes that when such role subordination is applied to a whole race or class of persons (women *qua* women), the ontology of equality is compromised.

Giles also highlights here something of a personal discovery: As a New Testament scholar and pastor working through the historic trinitarian materials, especially those on the Arian controversy, he was struck by how exegesis must be more broadly theological. One cannot simply amass particular texts to punctuate one's line of argument, because, on that basis alone, Arius had a loud case for the inferior status of Christ. Such proof-texting on a number of issues can only lead to a "text-jam." Rather, like Athanasius, and Augustine after him, one must argue from the scope of Scripture—its theological center and overall drift.

Riding this insight, Giles addresses *The Woman Tradition* in part 2. Here again, theologians, biblical or systematic, who are sympathetic with the SADD position claim to be in lock step with the historic exegetical tradition. Giles' principal foils are the volumes of essays, *Women in the Church: A Fresh Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9-15*, edited by Köstenberger, Schreiner, and Baldwin, and *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, edited by Piper and Grudem, as well as Grudem's *Systematic Theology*. Giles deftly shows how their basic position is a significant modification of the historic tradition and therefore itself a novel interpretation. Whereas the Christian tradition up to the 1960s, as Giles documents, held rather uniformly that women (because they were made second and not equally in the image of God), were inferior to men; were more prone to sin and deception and therefore excluded from leadership in home, church, and world; and were exhorted to silence in public, SADD sympathizers argue in contrast that women are equal to men, fully made in the image of God, no more prone to sin, who may speak in public, but, and

this is the big *but*, they may not exercise authority over men in the church or home—it is simply not their proper role to do so. Hence, women are equal in essence or nature to men but subordinate in function or role to men’s authority in church and home. Giles graciously calls those who hold this position hierarchical—complementarians in contrast to his own position and ilk, egalitarian-complementarians—those who argue for full equality, partnership, and equal vocational access.

Having shown in part 1 how this hybrid position cannot be rooted in the historic understanding of the Trinity, Giles confronts the other props to which role subordinationists appeal: their notion of role (a modern concept), the idea that this role arrangement is rooted in a creational order, and their contention that without role differentiation there remains no difference between men and women. Giles’ major tack in this section is to counter the role subordinationists claim with the egalitarian scope of Scripture (duality of *imago Dei*, Jesus’ actions, Paul’s initiatives, the eschatological vision), a center and drift that trumps a few particular and debatable verses. This vision of equality has finally caught up with the church as a whole (since it is now pervasive in democratic society), as witnessed even in the role subordinationists who distance themselves from tradition by positing an equality of the sexes (at least on the one hand, Tevye). Giles considers their attempt to maintain men’s superordination in home and church the last gasp of a dying tradition.

Part 3 puts the icing on the cake. Giles takes up The Slavery Tradition and argues for the legitimacy of the parallel with the women’s issue (note, for example, the imperatives of the household codes). Until modern times, the Bible was overwhelmingly read to not only regulate but also to legitimate slavery *qua* institution. A “biblical theology of slavery” was especially propounded by certain evangelicals with much particular exegetical support in the run-up to the Civil War. Now, if it is the case that that position is now considered utterly mistaken (ideological, diabolical), trumped in exegetical particulars by the humane scope of Scripture-principles, vectors, moral imperatives of equality and love of neighbor—then why not also the case of the class subordination of women?

*The Trinity and Subordinationism* overall is informative and cogently argued. While one reads at times a note of vindication in respect to Giles’ personal battles over the years on this front, the tone is not vindictive. If not overly irenic, his treatment of hierarchical-complementarians is fair and straightforward. Let me note, however, three limitations of *The Trinity and Subordinationism* in an otherwise solid and helpful book. First, its major limitation is in the audience it addresses; it reflects a specific intraevangelical debate that comes to ecclesiastical head in the issue of women’s ordination. For evangelicals who are still struggling with this equity issue, or should be, Giles’ book should be read *in toto*, as it clearly and invitingly argues the egalitarian-complementarian perspective. For such an audience, a reversal of sectional order might prove more strategic: (A) the case of slavery—*what were we thinking?* (part 3); (B) if the issue of gen-

der equity is a parallel case, *then what?* (part 2); (C) but see how certain evangelicals are now attempting to root women's role subordination in the eternal ontology of the Trinity—*wrong move* (part 1). Second, as it stands, the book's title, along with its subtitle, *The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*, has really only to do with part 1, which constitutes but half the book. The Trinity or the doctrine of God hardly figure into parts 2 and 3. Giles indicates that he initially only wanted to write an article on the Trinity materials. That he did in part 1; parts 2 and 3 seem to constitute his seasoned presentation on the women's issue vis-à-vis the slavery parallel and can virtually stand apart from part 1, with which they have but tenuous ties. Third, for those enticed by the trinitarian title, the rigor of trinitarian analysis might prove disappointing. Giles certainly performs a service here in demonstrating how the venture of SADD theologians departs from the orthodox trinitarian tradition in their attempt to ground the subordination of women after the model of the Son's eternal subordination to the Father. That tradition, he documents, overwhelmingly affirms the radical equality of trinitarian persons in their eternal ontological nature. Giles treats that tradition, ancient to modern and east or west, quite monolithically with little indication of the problems and complexities that riddle trinitarianism. For example, endorsing recent twentieth-century trends that utilize the Trinity as a model for human relations, Giles states: "In the Trinity we see the three differentiated divine persons honoring each other, loving each other, giving of themselves to the others and working together in perfect cooperation. This is a paradigm for human relations, especially those between woman and man" (91). However, there is no recognition that the historic Western trinitarianism he also supports, as stamped largely by Augustine and Aquinas, cannot deliver such an exemplary communion because the "persons" in their construct really reduce to sheer relations. Indeed, Giles seems comfortable with the strict *indivisa* of trinitarian works as well as the simplicity doctrine that grounds this contention. Certainly subordinationism is no danger when the oneness of God's being and work trumps and even erases the differentiation of discrete divine persons. His commendation of Barth's trinitarianism for gender equity, for another example, fails to take into consideration that Barth made a particular application of his Trinity to underscore the superordination of men and subordination of women (*CD III/4*). Finally, his discussion of trinitarian subordinationism lacks clarity at times. Especially in his discussion of derivative subordinationism, it is not always clear whether the subordination in view is ontological (à la Arianism) or the eternally functional type endorsed by his SADD opponents.

These and other technical considerations notwithstanding, Giles *Trinity and Subordinationism* makes an important contribution to a lingering debate in certain—contracting or expanding?—evangelical circles.

—Thomas R. Thompson