

# The New Evangelical Subordinationism: Reading Inequality Into the Trinity

PHILLIP CARY

I still wonder how it could have happened. During the twenty years that *Priscilla Papers* has been publishing, opponents of biblical equality have become so enamored with the idea of subordination that they want to make it part of God. I would not have believed it until I encountered the work of Kevin Giles, an Australian Anglican priest who is the most articulate critic of this strange development. In his new book, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Zondervan, 2006), Giles shows how a whole generation of conservative evangelicals has embraced a new-fangled version of the ancient Trinitarian heresy of subordinationism. They do not hide their motives. They are determined to see in God what they wish to see in humanity: a subordination of role or function that does not compromise (they insist) an essential equality of being. Therefore, they teach that just as woman is created equal to man but has a subordinate role at home and in church, so the Son of God is coequal with the Father in being or essence but has a subordinate role in the work of salvation and in all eternity. They even think—quite mistakenly, as Giles shows—that this is what the Bible and Christian orthodoxy have always taught.

So it is clear enough *why* we have this new version of ancient heresy, but it is still astonishing. It is especially startling to someone like me who has returned to the evangelical orbit after studies among conservative ecumenical theologians, the kind of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant scholars who call themselves “evangelical Catholics” (which in circles attuned to European theology has the ring of paradox or maybe a mixed marriage, since *evangelische* is just German for “Protestant”). In these circles, theologians have found time and again that the way to discern our underlying unity in Christ is to rediscover the ancient orthodox (Nicene) doctrine of the Trinity as the basis for all Christian life and thought. It is dismaying to think that so many evangelicals are separating themselves from this common basis of Nicene orthodoxy, with its thorough rejection of any teaching of subordination in the Trinity, in order to ride their hobby horse about the subordination of women.

However, it also affords egalitarian evangelicals an opportunity that is worth pondering: when it comes to the nature of God, egalitarians are the traditionalists, in the sense of adhering to the Great Tradition held in common by Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians going back to antiquity. Their disagreements with the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic tradition about such matters as the ordination of women are minor—and will be recognized as such by Orthodox and Catholic theologians—compared to conservative evangelicals’ abandonment of the Great Tradition on the doctrine of the Trinity. Perhaps a new kind of conversation becomes possible at this point.

That all depends, of course, on what kind of interest egalitarian evangelicals take in the doctrine of the Trinity. The problem is that many of us were raised in churches that treated this doctrine

as irrelevant to our Christian lives, as if it were merely some kind of mysterious puzzle about how three can be one. Of course, the doctrine of the Trinity is actually nothing less than the Christian teaching about God, and therefore ought to be of interest to any Christians who want to have a relationship with God. What the evangelical Catholics discovered is that the doctrine of the Trinity looks irrelevant only to the extent that the church’s life and worship is not Trinitarian, i.e., not fully Christian. It is still rather common for evangelicals to pray “in the name of God,” for instance, without mentioning Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. This makes it increasingly common for the younger generation of evangelicals—my students—to talk of a “personal relationship with God” without mentioning Jesus Christ. A non-Trinitarian experience of personal relationship with God, in other words, is abstract and generic and not quite Christian. To recover an interest in the doctrine of the Trinity is to recover an interest in Jesus Christ and therefore in the heart of Christian faith.

To see what is at issue between Kevin Giles and his opponents, we must start there. What, after all, does the doctrine of the Trinity actually teach? If you are like me, you were never taught this in the evangelical church in which you were raised. So we need to begin with the basics.

## The Nicene doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity grows out of the most fundamental practice of Christian faith, the act of calling upon the name of Jesus Christ as Lord. When we pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, we acknowledge that to him belongs “the name which is above every name” (Phil. 2:9). Quite simply, we are worshipping him as God. The central aim of the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity is to affirm that he is just as truly God as God the Father, even though he is different from the Father—even though, in addition, there is only one God. Everything else follows from this astounding claim about the divinity of Christ built into the very heart of Christian faith and worship.

Nicene orthodoxy takes its name from the council of Nicaea held in A.D. 325, which established key elements of the creed that is still recited every Sunday in many Christian churches around the world: that Jesus Christ is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.” The Nicene council resolved to reject a virulent form



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of subordinationism which came to be called “Arianism” after its earliest advocate, an Egyptian priest named Arius. But in affirming that Christ is “of one being” (*homo-ousion*) with the Father, Nicaea went further and actually ruled out every form of subordination in Trinitarian doctrine. Seeing why that is so—and why it is necessary—will bring us to the heart of Giles’ dispute with evangelical subordinationists.

### *The Nicene teaching on Christ’s divinity*

One of the many lies told in the best-selling novel *The Da Vinci Code* is that in the council of Nicaea the divinity of Christ won by a narrow vote. Quite the contrary: without exception, everyone at the council, including the heretics, believed that Christ was divine. The question was all about what kind of divinity this is—which is to say, the question was what the Christian view of God really is. What everybody at the council agreed on was that Christ as God is pre-existent: he was the divine Word that was with God in the beginning (John 1:1) long before Jesus was born.

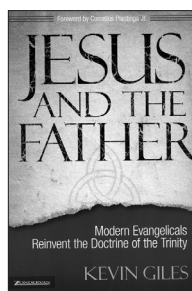
This tells us something important about the focus of the doctrine of the Trinity: it concerns the divine being of Jesus, not his humanity. In his humanity he is not pre-existent but born of woman just like the rest of us, and subordinate to God just like every other human being. Confusing what the Bible says about Christ’s human obedience with what must be said about his divine being is therefore the easiest route to subordinationism. So for instance when Christ says “The Father is greater than I” (John 14:28), the Nicene tradition unanimously rejects subordinationist attempts to see this as a statement about Christ’s divinity. It is only as a human being that Christ is less than the Father; as God, what he says about himself is “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Only someone who is at once truly human and truly God can say both. But the doctrine of the Trinity, we must bear in mind, is focused on only one side of this two-sided Christology: it is about what it means to say he is truly God.

There is another route to subordinationism, however, which is more direct and philosophical. The people who were out-voted at Nicaea were subordinationists because they thought that Christ’s divine being was by its very nature an intermediary between God the Father and created beings like us. (By contrast, the Nicene tradition has always insisted with Scripture that “the one mediator between God and human beings” is “the *human* Jesus Christ” [1 Tim. 2:5]. Only in his humanity can he stand *between* God and humanity—not because he is a lesser divinity than the Father and therefore closer to us, but because he is *both* fully God and fully human.) By insisting that the Son is less than the Father, the subordinationists thought they could make him a kind of cosmic intermediary between the Creator and the creation—not as fully divine as the Father who created all things, but closer to us mere creatures because he too is a product of the Father. Arius took this kind of subordinationism a step further by frankly adding that the Son too, since he originated from the Father, must be regarded as a creation. Arius proposed that the Son was the highest and first being God made, which means that he does not really deserve exactly the same level of worship as God the Father.

We don’t want our reverence for Christ to turn into idolatry, now do we? That was the ultimate challenge faced by the council of Nicaea. Could it really be that we should give to Jesus Christ a worship equal to the Father? The majority at Nicaea answered a resounding yes. In response to Arius’ argument that the Son must be a creation, the Nicene creed formulated a key distinction: he is “begotten not made.” One could equally well translate: “generated but not created.” This proved to be the concept that was hardest for the opponents of Nicaea to grasp: that even though the Son

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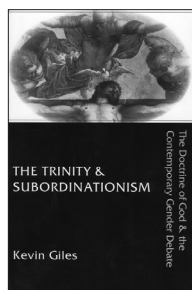
### NEW—Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity



“Kevin Giles points out serious problems in the teaching that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father and argues effectively for the full eternal equality within the Trinity. This book should be read by all who wrestle with the complex but crucial doctrine of the Trinity.” — Millard J. Erickson, Distinguished Professor of Theology, George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University

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was begotten or generated by the Father, he was not a creation of the Father and therefore not less than the Father.

To cement this point, the Nicene creed uses the famous term *homo-ousion*, saying the Son is of the same being or essence (*ousia*) with the Father. Though the Greek word *ousia* is a piece of philosophical vocabulary with many shades of meaning, its use at Nicaea made one thing unmistakably clear: the divine being of Jesus Christ is no different at all from the divine being of the Father. (His humanity is different, of course—but we must keep in mind that the doctrine of the Trinity is not about Christ's humanity.) As God, Christ is no different and therefore no less than the Father.

### *One God with one will*

Not everybody knows that for about fifty years after the Council of Nicaea, the church was in a kind of civil war over the doctrine of the Trinity. The subordinationists did not just go away; among other things, they asked tough questions. One of them was how Nicene Trinitarians could say there was only one God when they also said that Christ is God and the Holy Spirit is God. Unlike the subordinationists, for whom “one true God” in the highest sense means only the Father, Nicene Trinitarians have a serious problem here.

The Nicene solution to this problem is what puts modern evangelical subordinationism outside the pale of Trinitarian orthodoxy. The ancient Nicene theologians argued that everything the Trinity does is done by the Father, Son, and Spirit working together with one will. The three persons of the Trinity always work inseparably, for their work is always the work of the one God. There is no act of the Father in the world which is not an act of the Son and the Holy Spirit as well. This does not mean there is no difference between the three. We could even use a modern term and call it a difference in roles, though the ancient theologians called it a difference in order. For there is an order in the work of the three persons which reflects the order of their origination: every work of the Trinity originates with the Father, is carried out by the Son, and is completed by the Holy Spirit. For instance, the work of salvation is initiated by the Father sending the Son, who becomes incarnate, lives and dies and rises again for our redemption, so that the Holy Spirit also may be sent to sanctify and perfect the church, the body of Christ, for eternal life.

But here is the crucial point: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not just three persons who decide to cooperate, like Peter, Paul, and Mary agreeing to do something together. Their agreement is essential and necessary, part of their very being, or else they would actually be three Gods just as Peter, Paul, and Mary are three humans. Hence the difference in roles in the Trinity cannot mean anything like a relationship of command and obedience, where one person's will is subjected to another's. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are always necessarily of one will, because there is only one God *and therefore only one divine will*. And where there is but one will there cannot be the authority of command and obedience, for that requires one person's will to be subordinate to a will other than his or her own.

Now we can see why modern evangelical subordinationists cannot be consistently Nicene, despite their best intentions. They

affirm the Nicene creed, and with it the equality of Father, Son, and Spirit in divine being or essence. But they also insist that there is a distinctive kind of role differentiation in the Trinity, a subordination in role though not in being, so that the Father has the role of giving commands and the Son has the role of obeying them. The problem is that this is only conceivable if the Son's will is at least conceivably different from the Father's. But Nicene orthodoxy says it is not. There is only one will in God. The Son's will *cannot* be different from the Father's, because it *is* the Father's. They have but one will as they have but one being. Otherwise they would not be one God. Such are the logical consequences of Nicaea, which orthodox Trinitarians understand but evangelical subordinationists do not. If there were relations of command and obedience between the Father and the Son, there would be no Trinity at all but rather three Gods.

### **The new role subordinationism**

How did evangelical theology ever get to this point? Here Giles' historically informative book is particularly helpful. In addition to extensive documentation of what Nicene theology actually teaches, with numerous quotations from Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine, and Calvin, a little from Aquinas—and then whole chapters devoted to two great figures of the twentieth century revival of Trinitarian theology, Karl Barth and Karl Rahner—Giles also traces the very recent origins of evangelical subordinationism.

Far from being ancient orthodoxy, it is younger than most of us are. In 1977, George W. Knight III responded to the growing evangelical ferment about the equality of women by affirming that women were created equal, but adding that they must always be subordinate to men. In his book, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Baker, 1977), Knight argued that women were not subordinate to men in being, nature, or essence, but rather in role, function, and authority. So the new idea here is usefully dubbed “role subordination.” Rejecting the out-and-out denial of human equality that was widespread in Christian antiquity, the middle ages, and the Reformation (a denial that was “traditional” not in the sense of belonging to the Great Tradition of Christian thought, but in that it was a cultural assumption that people just took for granted) Knight affirmed the biblical teaching that women and men were both created in the image of God and therefore stood together as equals in their humanity. But picking up the very modern notion of “role,” he went on to argue that the Scriptures taught a permanent subordination of role along with this essential equality of nature. And then he took the fateful step of suggesting that we could see the same thing in the Trinity: the Son of God is equal to the Father in nature but eternally subordinate in role.

The idea caught on like wildfire. Within a decade or two evangelical theologians were talking as if every good Christian since the apostles had believed in role subordination in the Trinity. Perhaps most influentially, Wayne Grudem made it a centerpiece of his *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), which soon became a widely used systematic theology text in evangelical seminaries in the English-speaking world. Both Knight and Grudem make quite clear what

contemporary reality lies behind this historical error: for them, affirming subordination in the Trinity is essential to holding the line against egalitarianism in the church, the home, and the world.

The new evangelical subordinationism, in other words, belongs to an overarching strategy to keep women subordinate to men who can no longer use the old weapons of thoughtless prejudice. After a frank admission that women and men are created equally in God's image, what recourse is there for keeping women under men? The solution is: distinguish their roles, make women's role subordinate to men's, and make the subordination permanent. And then, for good measure, anchor this permanent subordination of women in an eternal subordination of roles within God himself.


Now that the idea has caught on so well, it looks too late to take it back. When Giles pointed out the problem in his earlier book, *Trinity and Subordinationism* (InterVarsity Press, 2002), his opponents responded with scathing criticisms coupled with emphatic affirmations that role subordinationism is historic orthodoxy. I still wonder how such sheer historical ignorance is possible. I can only think of sociological explanations: there must be a wing of evangelicalism with its own seminaries and academic life almost totally cut off from mainstream scholarship and the life of the larger church. If so, then the current struggle between subordinationists and egalitarians in evangelical churches is creating a new kind of fundamentalist/evangelical split, where "fundamentalist" stands for a separatist strand of conservative Protestantism that thinks it can go it alone without cultural engagement or even theological literacy.

## Conclusion

Giles' new work, *Jesus and the Father*, has the strengths and weaknesses of a book that meets an urgent need. It will catch you up

on where evangelicals stand on this, the most important theological issue of all; it documents the claims of both sides as well as the witness of Scripture and tradition; it hammers home the same fundamental points repeatedly. Even the repetitiveness is of value, insofar as it should impress younger evangelicals—or those who have not yet made up their minds—with the weight of the traditional witness against any kind of subordination in the Trinity. Hearing so much from Athanasius, Augustine, Calvin, and the rest has got to help. (Those who don't need so much convincing might prefer Giles' earlier book, which covers the same topic within the space of Part I.) Most fundamentally, Giles' work is an appeal to evangelicals to rejoin the Great Tradition. The appeal is important and worth the weight of documentation. For if evangelicals go off again in a fundamentalist separatism while clinging to an unorthodox doctrine of the Trinity, their separation from the rest of the body of Christ could prove irreparable, like the invention of a new sect in the characteristically American mode of Mormonism or Jehovah's Witnesses.

One of the striking things about the original Nicene theologians, in fact, is that by being faithful to the purpose of clarifying the divinity of Christ, they ended up undermining the ancient commitment to a metaphysical hierarchy of being. The ancient church fathers were hierarchicalists to a man. They believed in hierarchical subordination throughout the universe: women subordinate to men, servants to masters, subjects to rulers, inanimate to animate, animals to humans. But despite themselves, what they found at the utmost height of the chain of being was equality in the very essence of God. And the reason was Christ: the biblical witness did not allow them to make Jesus Christ less deserving of worship and adoration than God the Father. We too can expect countercultural results if we give up the willful reading of our own social agendas into the doctrine of the Trinity and submit ourselves to biblical teaching.



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