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## IS THE SON ETERNALLY SUBMISSIVE TO THE FATHER? AN EGALITARIAN/COMPLEMENTARIAN DEBATE

by Robert Letham and Kevin Giles

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### SYNOPSIS

Is the Son Eternally Submissive to the Father? The biblical doctrine of the Trinity is God's self-revelation about His nature. Both the Old and New Testaments reveal God as a unity of three persons; because of this unity, we can enjoy the benefits of a relationship with Him. The Trinity makes possible the incarnation of God as man, and it is only through the incarnation that we can be saved from our sins, since God alone can be our savior. Believers, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, accept these truths by faith. Understanding precisely how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to one another remains a topic of debate, however, and this debate recently has been reinvigorated due to its implications for the egalitarian-complementarian debate about how male and female Christians should relate to one another in marriage and the church.

In the discussion that follows, Kevin Giles, Vicar of St. Michael's Church, North Carlton, Australia, and Robert Letham, professor of Systematic and Historical Theology at Wales Evangelical School of Theology, Bryntirion, Wales, debate whether Jesus Christ is eternally submissive to the Father. They further discuss the applications of their respective positions to the egalitarian-complementarian debate.

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# DOES THE SON SUBMIT TO THE FATHER IN THE INDIVISIBLE UNITY OF THE TRINITY?

by Robert Letham

The fourth century Trinitarian controversy established the elements of Trinitarian doctrine, which are entailed in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed (381): (1) God is one indivisible being in three persons; (2) each of the three persons is the whole God, one in being, equal in power and glory; (3) the persons mutually indwell one another;<sup>1</sup> (4) while any act of God is particularly attributable to one Trinitarian person, all three work together indivisibly in all God's works, and, since will is a predicate of nature (thus Christ has two wills, a divine and a human), God has one indivisible will; and (5) there is an irreversible order between the persons—the Father sends the Son, the Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit; this order in relation to creation reflects an eternal order—the Father generates the Son and spirates (or breathes out) the Holy Spirit in the Son. Giles and I are in agreement on these cardinal points.

Four further ecumenical councils (Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451), Constantinople II (553), and Constantinople III (680–681)) followed the resolution of the fourth-century crisis. Each recognized that the Son, sent by the Father, assumed into personal union a human nature, conceived by the Holy Spirit, that has no existence independently of this *hypostatic* union (i.e., the union of the divine and human natures in one Person). This personal union continues forever but does not exhaust who the Son eternally is, for He is and remains beyond the bounds of the assumed humanity.

## THE POINT UNDER DISCUSSION

The prime question is whether the obedience rendered by the incarnate Christ reflects eternal realities in God. Giles denies it; I affirm it. Such an affirmation, however, needs careful qualification.

Giles denies a connection between the eternal Son and the obedience of Christ as *second Adam* on the following grounds. He maintains that the Son is eternally equal to the Father in power and authority, possessing the one identical divine will; that the obedience of Christ was as the second Adam, *as man*, for our salvation; and that once His saving work was done, He was exalted to the full exercise of omnipotence.

Others argue in varying ways that there is a connection—a congruity, as I prefer to call it—between the incarnate Son's obedience and the eternal Son's relation to the Father. I avoid talk of "subordination" since this conveys the heretical notion of gradations of deity. Since the Son is the whole God, and the will of God is indivisible, He is all that the Father is except for being the Father. Whatever the connection between His incarnate obedience and His eternal deity, I argue that His omnipotence is in no way abbreviated. The question at issue is the way He exercises His omnipotence; it concerns the relations between the persons.

Elsewhere I argue, following the orthodox *pro-Nicenes*, that the irreversible order of the persons in which the Father begets and sends the Son is not hierarchical but relational. As such, this order of persons does *not* refer to a difference of *rank*, *status*, or *being*, since all three persons are one identical being, equal in power and glory, but to "a fitting and suitable *disposition*"<sup>2</sup> between them. The Father's sending of the Son, who is the full transcript of deity (John 10:30), reflects their eternal relations in the indivisible unity of the trinity; God's self-revelation is utterly reliable. As English theologian John Owen (1616–1683) put it, "The Son receives all from the Father, and the Father nothing from the Son."<sup>3</sup>

Giles and I agree that to argue from human experience to God is wrong; the Arians claimed that since human sons begin to be when conceived, so the Son began to be. In contrast, to argue from God to human experience in this area is correct; the archetype is the relation between the Father and the Son. Since the fall, all human relationships are sullied by sin, human power tending toward oppression and corruption. This is not so with God.

## A FURTHER SERIES OF QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS

Is obedience to God and dependence on Him something that defines humanity *qua* or as humanity? If so, would Christ not continue in His exaltation in a relation of dependence *qua* (in the capacity of) His assumed and glorified humanity?

On the other hand, is dependence and obedience required of humanity only from the fall to the eschaton (end of time)? If this were so, Christ's human obedience ended at the cross, and Adam would have been under no constraint to obey God before the fall, nor would we after our resurrection. Biblical evidence refutes this.

We conclude, then, that faithful dependence on God is a distinctive feature of what it means to be human. Lack of obedience dehumanized us after the fall. The obedient incarnate Christ was perfectly human. So shall we be in heaven—fully obedient, perfect in humanity. It follows that Christ's human obedience cannot be restricted to the time from conception to crucifixion. This requires compatibility and congruence between the eternal Son and His continuing humanity.

### The Three and the One

Giles argues elsewhere that “the best of theologians” consistently have focused on the unity of God; undue attention to the personal relations is a departure from orthodox trinitarianism.

The unity and simplicity of God is, of course, axiomatic in both East and West. Giles, however, neglects the East, apart from a few who have recently interacted with the West, and downplays differences between the two. This is unfortunate, since Eastern doctrine is found in the seamless web of tradition—the Bible, the writings of the fathers, and especially the liturgy. Byzantine or Eastern Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff points out that, in contrast to the West's dominant focus on the one divine essence, the East's Trinitarianism has been shaped by the three persons, with the Father as the source of the personal subsistence of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In the classic Latin Trinitarian doctrine, “God is essentially one, except in the divine *Persons*, who are defined in terms of *relations*.”<sup>4</sup> In Byzantine thought, however—to use an expression from Maximus the Confessor—“God is identically monad and triad, and there is probably a tendency in both worship and philosophical formulations...to give a certain pre-eminence to personal diversity.’ We meet the incarnate Logos and the Holy Spirit first as divine agents of salvation, and only then do we discover there to be essentially one God.”<sup>5</sup>

Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky acknowledges that “‘to confess the unity of the nature is to recognize the Father as unique Source of the persons who receive from Him this same nature’ and that ‘in insisting upon the monarchy of the Father...the eastern theologians were defending a conception of the Trinity which they considered to be more concrete, more personal, than that against which they contended.’”<sup>6</sup> Lossky strongly defends this emphasis from the charge of subordination, citing Gregory Nazianzen and Maximus the Confessor. There is no place in the East for a theology of the divine essence, he says.<sup>7</sup> That God is identically monad and triad saturates the liturgy, which is rooted in the fourth century.

In Reformed theology, John Owen also strongly emphasizes the three persons, most notably in *On Communion with God*,<sup>8</sup> expounding our communion with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit respectively. So strongly does Owen focus on the three persons consecutively that he recognizes the danger of tritheism and assuages it. Reformed theologian B. B. Warfield noted the trend in Western Trinitarianism, in the works of John Calvin especially, to equalization of the persons.<sup>9</sup> Equalization is vital; homogenization is false.

### Reformed Theology and the Covenant of Redemption

Since Reformed theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669) propounded the idea of the *covenant of redemption*, much Reformed theology has argued that Christ's incarnate obedience reflects eternal relations. This idea holds that salvation rests on an intra-Trinitarian covenant, the Father stipulating that

the Son should take human nature, make atonement for sin, and promising rewards for the faithful discharge of these duties, and the Son accepting the covenantal terms. Of this covenant, both Owen and Francis Turretin (1623–1687), for example, were notable exponents.

With others, I have some reservations concerning this proposed covenant of redemption. It has not received confessional status; in Eastern terms, it is a *theologoumenon*—a theological opinion. It pictures the Trinity as a divine committee meeting that borders on tritheism: the Father leading, the Son simply responding to the Father, and the Holy Spirit absent. Certainly our salvation rests on the eternal intra-Trinitarian counsel; to describe it as a covenant, the three persons entering into judicial relations with one another, however, comes close to breaking the indivisible union. Despite the problems that such a description poses, it is difficult to make sense of the atonement without it. Those who claim that talk of the Son's submission to the Father in eternity has erupted as a reaction to feminism show a lack of historical awareness.

In my estimation, the best exponent of the covenant of redemption is Owen. The Father and the Son were distinct persons and their relations were federal (covenantal). Owen, on John 14:28 where Jesus said "My Father is greater than I," argues that "our Saviour speaks with respect unto the covenant engagement that was between the Father and himself as to the work which he had to do."<sup>10</sup> No more is intended than that the person of the Son is *of* the person of the Father.

"The will of the Father and the will of the Son concurred, seen in the authority of the Father in issuing commands to the Son as incarnate for the discharge of his work."<sup>11</sup> The will of the Son was distinct.<sup>12</sup> So the Father loved us and gave His Son to die for us; while the Son loved us and gave Himself for us, and washed us in His own blood. "And whatever is expressed in the Scripture concerning the will of the human nature of Christ, as it was engaged in and bent upon its work, it is but a representation of the will of the Son of God when he engaged into this work from eternity" (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup>

Owen recognizes the Trinitarian problem this creates. The will of God is one; how can the will of the Father and the will of the Son concur distinctly? Owen's answer is that the persons act reciprocally towards each other—they know and mutually love each other<sup>14</sup> and they act and will distinctly by virtue of their mutual in-being.<sup>15</sup> "The will of God as to the peculiar actings of the Father in this matter is the will of the Father, and the will of God with regard to the peculiar actings of the Son is the will of the Son; not by a distinction of sundry wills, but by the distinct application of the same will unto its *distinct acts* in the persons of the Father and the Son."<sup>16</sup> In this the covenant differs from a pure decree. The claim that Christ's human obedience is connected to, and congruous with, the eternal relations is no novelty.

### **The Christological Question: Who Is Jesus Christ?**

The questions raised by the relation between the incarnate Christ and the eternal Son are clearly Christological as well as Trinitarian. The ecumenical councils Chalcedon, Constantinople II, and Constantinople III established that Jesus Christ is the eternal Logos, who has assumed and personalized a human nature. Two natures did not join together to form a composite person; rather, the Son added humanity permanently. Constantinople II recognized the dogma of *enhypostasia*, entailing no separate, independent existence for the assumed humanity; rather, the Son personalized it. The humanity of Christ is the humanity of the Logos. The famous Cyrilline phrase, "One of the trinity suffered according to the flesh" expresses it well. The Jesus Christ of the gospels is thus *personally* identical to the eternal Son and the post-resurrection Son. In effect, the Christology of the early church father Cyril of Alexandria (ca. 376–444), seen especially in his *Quod unus sint Christus*, was canonized.<sup>17</sup> Every act of Christ's mediation is the act of the whole person.<sup>18</sup>

From this, I argue that the assumption of humanity was appropriate *to the Son*. If this were not so, a radical *Nestorian* chasm would exist between the person of the Son (for whom submission to the Father was alien) and the assumed humanity (in which obedience to God was rendered). If obedient assumed humanity is congruent with the Son Himself, it would seem that there is something about the Son that makes this congruence possible.

## Philippians 2:5–11

Giles's suggestions require the following Christological pattern. First, the Son is eternal God. Second, He became the obedient servant, set under the Father from conception to resurrection. Giles affirms Christ's continuing deity, but his distancing of the incarnate obedience from the eternal Son seems to require one of two things: either a strong element of *kenosis* (emptying) so that the eternal Son in key respects is not what once He was or, alternatively, Christ's humanity (and the obedience that goes with it) is held at arm's length, so that some sort of Nestorian separation between deity and humanity exists. Third, at the resurrection Christ returns to glory with dependence and obedience no longer relevant to His humanity. This appears to require an equally strong *kenosis* of humanity. There is a further possible explanation—that God decreed for redemptive purposes that the Son appear in a way different than He eternally is. That, however, would prove too much; it would cast a huge question over the reality of our knowledge of God.

I have suggested elsewhere that the passage contemplates the refusal of the Son to exploit His deity for His own advantage, not only in His incarnate lowliness, but in His determination to become incarnate in the first place. It reaches back into eternity to show us a glimpse of what God is like.

### MY SUGGESTION

Instead of Giles's paradigm, I suggest the following. The Son is eternally God—yesterday, today and forever—and remains so. In the incarnation, He chose to lower Himself, adding human nature, in which He was obedient to the Father while simultaneously ruling the universe. From his resurrection, He was exalted to the right hand of the Father. As Christopher Wordsworth, Bishop of Lincoln (1807-1885), put it, "man with God is on the throne,"<sup>19</sup> while the distinction of deity and humanity is still preserved, and will be so forever.

This is the way the Son exercises His Lordship—not with the oppressive power of fallen man, but as a servant; He did not come to be served, but to serve (see Matt. 20:20–28). He acts freely, not under compulsion. This tells us something vital about the Son and about God Himself.

As the Son became incarnate and the Spirit came at Pentecost, the Father sending, so the indivisible omnipotence of God comes to expression in distinct ways. No better summary can be found than that of Giles: "It is godlike to gladly subordinate oneself for the good of another."<sup>20</sup>

### GLOSSARY

**Arian:** The claim that the Son was created and so was not co-eternal or of the identical being with the Father.

**disposition:** An arrangement of some kind.

**federal:** From the Latin *foedus* (covenant), referring to an arrangement in the form of a covenant between two or more distinct parties.

**hypostatic union:** A term describing the result of the Son of God assuming into union a human nature conceived by the Holy Spirit.

**hypostatic:** Descriptive of something with a concrete existence, used in the doctrine of the trinity and Christology to refer to what are called "persons."

**kenosis:** The teaching that in the incarnation the Son divested Himself of some or all attributes of Deity.

**Nestorian:** The claim that the two natures of Christ were conjoined, rather like two pieces of plywood, rather than united in one person. If this were so there would have been no incarnation, only an indwelling.

**perichoresis:** The mutual indwelling of the persons of the trinity in the one being of God.

**pro-Nicenes:** Those who supported the Trinitarian settlement begun at Nicaea (325) and developed at Constantinople (381).

**second Adam:** The NT teaching that the incarnate Christ took our place as man as head of his people. Adam had been the head of the human race and by his disobedience to God plunged the race into sin, death, and condemnation. Christ was made the head of a new humanity, lived in obedience to God, and suffered the penalty incurred by the sin of the first Adam. In doing so, He brings righteousness and life to all He represents.

## NOTES

1. The term *perichoresis* (Greek, meaning “permeation without confusion”) was applied to this idea by John of Damascus (675–749), but the idea itself was proposed as early as the time of Athanasius, Bishop and patriarch of Alexandria (295–373).
2. G. W. H. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 1372–1373.
3. W. H. Goold, ed., *The Works of John Owen* (London: Johnstone and Hunter, 1850–55), 1:71.
4. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1979), 180–84.
5. *Ibid.*, 184.
6. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: James Clarke and Co. Ltd, 1957), 59–65.
7. *Ibid.*, 59–65.
8. Gould, 2:8–9.
9. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, repr., 1952), 52–59.
10. Owen, 19:84–5.
11. *Ibid.*, 19:86.
12. Cf., Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 4:20:27; PL 42:862–63.
13. Owen, *Works*, 19:87.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 19:88.
16. *Ibid.* The Christian church, in both east and west, maintains that God has one indivisible will, and—according to Constantinople III—that Christ has two wills (since if he did not have a human will he could not be said to have a full humanity).
17. J. A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: On the Unity of Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1995); J. A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004); T. G. Weinandy, O.F.M., Cap, “Cyril and the Mystery of the Incarnation,” *The Theology of St. Cyril of Alexandria: A Critical Appreciation* (T. G. Weinandy; London: T. and T. Clark, 2003), 23–54.
18. Owen, *Works*, 1:234.
19. In his hymn, “See the Conqueror Mounts in Triumph.”
20. Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 31.

# THE SON OF GOD IS NOT ETERNALLY INFERIOR, SUBORDINATE, OR SUBMISSIVE

by Kevin Giles

From the time of Bishop Athanasius, early in the fourth century, Philippians 2:4–11 has been recognized as the interpretative key to understanding the person of Christ. This text gives a “double account” of Jesus Christ, one as equal to God when in heaven and one as subordinated to God while on earth. Paul tells us that the Son of God, who had “equality” with the Father, gladly stepped down from heaven, took the form of a servant, and went to the cross for our salvation (Phil. 2:6–8). In reciprocal response the Father exalted Him in the resurrection to reign as Lord (Phil. 2:9–11)—equal God in all power and majesty. In taking human flesh the Son freely chose to be subordinated and humiliated.

Many texts, especially in the *synoptic* Gospels, indicate what this involved. The New Testament nevertheless makes it plain that Jesus was forever God in all power and majesty. Jesus thus is called God (John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:8, etc.) and confessed more than two-hundred times as “Lord,” Yahweh’s own name.

On this basis, orthodoxy consistently has taught the *temporal* and *voluntary* subordination of the Son in the incarnation and completely has rejected the *eternal* subordination of the Son in nature and/or authority—the heresy of “subordinationism.” The Athanasian Creed, the standard for Trinitarian orthodoxy for Western Christians for fifteen-hundred years, thus insists that the Son of God, like the Father, is “almighty” and “Lord,” the three “persons” are “coequal,” and “none is before or after, greater or lesser.” Virtually all of the Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant confessions speak similarly of the Son as *one in being* and *one in power* with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

It is thus surprising to find many of the most widely respected conservative evangelical theologians today arguing adamantly that the Son of God is *eternally* subordinated to the Father in function and authority, and sometimes admitting openly that this has *ontological* implications, as it clearly does. Let me explain. If the Son’s subordination in function and authority defines His nature, that is, what intrinsically differentiates Him from the Father, and if this subordination is eternal, then it speaks of who He is: His unchanging *being*.

## THE “CHAIN OF SUBORDINATION”

The originator of the contemporary expression of *subordinationism* that has now engulfed the conservative evangelical world like a raging fire is George Knight, III. In his highly influential book *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women*,<sup>1</sup> he developed the novel argument that just as women are *permanently* subordinated in role to the authority of their husbands in the home and to that of male leaders in the church, so the Son of God is *eternally* subordinated in role to the authority of the Father. He thus speaks of a “chain of subordination”<sup>2</sup> in the Trinity, adding that the Son’s subordination in role has “certain ontological aspects.”<sup>3</sup> Before this time, to my knowledge, no one had ever spoken of subordination in role for women or for the Son of God, and no one had developed the idea that somehow the doctrine of the Trinity justified and explained the subordination of women.

This new teaching on the Trinity came to full fruition in 1994 with the publication of Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.<sup>4</sup> The impact of this book on evangelicals cannot be overestimated. It is one of the most widely used theology texts in evangelical seminaries. He is emphatic that the *eternal subordination* of the Son in authority stands at the heart of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. For Grudem, 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.”<sup>5</sup> For him differing *authority* is what distinguishes the Father from the Son. He writes, “Authority and submission between the Father

and the Son...and the Holy Spirit, *is the fundamental difference* between the persons of the Trinity.”<sup>6</sup> “If we did not have such differences *in authority* in the relationships among the members of the Trinity, then we would not know of any differences at all.”<sup>7</sup>

Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* is the first systematic theology text to advocate the eternal subordination of the Son. Bruce Ware’s book, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit*,<sup>8</sup> is the first full-length study on the Trinity to develop this doctrine. He argues that the eternal subordination of the Son in authority to the Father “marks the *very nature* of the eternal *Being* of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three Persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority...the Son submits to the Father”<sup>9</sup> (emphasis added). Ware thus concludes that a “hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead.”<sup>10</sup>

## LETHAM’S CONTRIBUTION

I could go on giving examples of this distinctive and novel doctrine of the Trinity, which are found only in post 1970s conservative evangelical and Reformed literature, but length restrictions for this essay do not permit. I instead want to move directly to the 551-page book by Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*,<sup>11</sup> in which he paradoxically both denies and affirms this doctrine. Letham stands out from all others who have written in support of this doctrine. He has read and mastered Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, Calvin, Barth, and Eastern Orthodox theologians such as Bulgakov and Lossky, among others. I found very little that I would want to differ with him in his chapters dealing with these important theologians. He often warmly endorses contributions that exclude subordinationism,<sup>12</sup> and more than once warns against the tendency in Eastern Orthodoxy to slip into subordinationism.<sup>13</sup>

### “The Vital Parameters”

To conclude his book Letham has a final section entitled “Critical Issues.” Here he gives firstly what he believes are “the vital parameters” of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. The three persons are one and yet eternally differentiated as Father, Son, and Spirit; they are one in being—“there are no gradations of deity”; they interpenetrate one another and work inseparably, and “there is an order among the persons,” understood as an “appropriate disposition.”<sup>14</sup> What is missing is the affirmation that the three divine persons are indivisible in power and authority, a fundamental element in the historic doctrine of the Trinity, mentioned in every important Reformation and post-Reformation confession; because the divine three are one in being, they are one in power.

### On the Subordering of the Son

Having noted this glaring omission in Letham’s summary of the key elements in the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, we are prepared for what is to follow. In pages 389–404, in direct opposition to what he has argued previously, he introduces the novel contemporary evangelical doctrine of the subordering of the Son in authority. Letham agrees with me that to speak of “the eternal subordination of the Son is outside the boundaries of the tradition.”<sup>15</sup> He tells us, instead, that he teaches “the submission of the Son eternally.”<sup>16</sup> How this differs from “the eternal subordination of the Son” completely escapes me. If the Son *is*, and cannot be other than, the eternally submissive Son, surely He *is* the eternally subordinated Son. His person is defined by His unchanging and unchangeable subordering under the Father. If this is the case, then does it not imply ontological subordinationism?

We must ask, furthermore, is it legitimate to take the biblical Greek word *hypotasso*, which, according to the lexicons, means to stand under or be subordinate, and conveniently translate it as “subordinate” when used of women, but as “submissive” when used of the Son?

To argue for a coequal Trinity as others and I do, Letham holds, leads to “a thoroughgoing homogenization of the [divine] persons in fully mutual relations.”<sup>17</sup> This then becomes a way “ontologically” to underpin “complete reciprocity between male and female in human society.”<sup>18</sup> I take it



Letham believes the reverse is also true. An argument for the eternal subordination of the Son gives an “ontological” basis for men ruling over women in perpetuity. This is his agenda. His claim that *egalitarians* deny or undermine male/female differentiation is simply rhetorical polemic. Absolutely no one, as far as I can see, denies male/female differentiation, and definitely no evangelical or reformed Christian does this.

What evangelical egalitarians deny is that the Bible makes the God-given ideal the permanent subordination of women. We evangelical egalitarians affirm gladly and boldly that God has made us men and women and that the sexes complement one another. *Vive la différence.*

Letham is aware that he is treading on dangerous ground in advocating *the eternal submission of the Son* and so he “emphatically” asserts that he is not speaking “of ‘command structures,’ ‘hierarchy,’ and ‘boss-servant relationships,’”<sup>19</sup> and that he is definitely not suggesting that the Son is “inferior” to the Father.<sup>20</sup> Having said these things, however, he then goes on to argue dogmatically for “the submission of the Son eternally.”<sup>21</sup> He says that “the Son submits in eternity to the Father,”<sup>22</sup> that “being God he serves the Father,”<sup>23</sup> that the obedience the Son renders to the Father is “unconditional obedience,”<sup>24</sup> and that “his human obedience reflects his divine submission.”<sup>25</sup> On this last matter he adds, “It is impossible to separate the human obedience of Christ from who he is.”<sup>26</sup> I take this to mean that it is impossible to separate His obedience from “His being,” and that we are to believe that the Son is not just temporally obedient and submissive to the Father as the incarnate Christ, as the doctrinal tradition Letham previously has outlined teaches. Christ *is* the eternally submissive and obedient Son who is forever set under the Father’s authority. His submission and obedience define His nature. If this is the case, then surely this implies ontological subordination and inviolable hierarchical ordering. Letham offers four arguments in support of his doctrine of the “the submission of the Son *eternally*,” which I will now examine.

### **On Barth’s Christology**

First, Letham appeals to the great Swiss theologian Karl Barth. It is true that Barth speaks of the eternal submission and obedience of the Son, but always dialectically and always when he is speaking of the Son as God identified with man for all eternity. The Son of God for Barth is eternally at one and the same time *both* the sovereign electing God and the elect man called to obedience, *both* Lord and servant. This dialectic, foundational to Barth’s Christology, Letham misses completely.

What is more, in Barth’s theology, while the Father is not the Son and vice versa, the Son is not other than the Father. The humiliation of the Son is part of the revelation of the Father. In the Son we see that the Father gladly stoops to save. The Father and the Son are never divided or separated. What is most worrying is that Letham’s appeal to Barth to support the eternal submission of the Son without qualification contradicts his own extended exposition of Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity given earlier in his book.<sup>27</sup> Here Letham notes that Barth stresses divine unity, a stress that excludes absolutely dividing the Father and the Son in authority, or in any other way.

### **On Christ’s Nature**

Second, Letham argues that the human nature of Christ demands His eternal submission. He reasons that if Christ was subordinated in taking flesh to become man, as all agree, He must be subordinated eternally because He continues in a hypostatic union to be God and man. In this argument Letham fails to make the theologically important distinction between the subordinate, suffering, and humiliated incarnate Son on earth and the exalted, glorified, and triumphant Son now reigning as Lord. This contrast between the two epochs in the ministry of the one Christ is a fundamental of orthodox Christology, possibly most helpfully developed in the Reformed distinction between Christ’s “state of humiliation” in the incarnation on earth and “His state of exaltation” in heaven as the reigning Lord of the universe.

What this distinction makes clear is that in returning to heaven as God and man, the Son’s divine nature was not subordinated in any way because of His human nature; rather His human nature was exalted so that as God and man the Son could rule as omnipotent God. The united voice of the New Testament states that after His resurrection and exaltation, the Son is no longer the “submissive Son,” the second

Adam, who obeys the Father to win our salvation, but the Lord and head of the universe. Letham seems to miss this idea completely in this unfortunate digression in his book.

### On Eastern Orthodox Theology

Third, Letham appeals to Eastern Orthodox theologians in support of his doctrine of the “the submission of the Son *eternally*.”<sup>28</sup> This is a surprising move because Letham repeatedly warns of the subordinationistic tendency in Eastern trinitarianism.<sup>29</sup> His appeal to Bulgakov at this point is most surprising. It seems to contradict his warnings about Bulgakov’s theology. Letham says that Bulgakov builds his doctrine of the Trinity on “human experience,” embraces “panentheism,” and has been censured by his own church for “infusing masculine and feminine elements into the members of the Trinity.”<sup>30</sup>

### On Scriptural Support

Fourth, Letham asks whether there is anything in Scripture that would support his novel doctrine of “the submission of the Son eternally,” and honestly admits, “there is very little.”<sup>31</sup> The only two texts he quotes in support, Philippians 2:5ff and Hebrews 5:4–5, count against his thesis. These texts indicate that the Son is subordinated, or *submissive*, to the Father only in His incarnate existence: “in the days of his flesh” (Heb. 4:7), as the second Adam who wins our salvation by His obedience (c.f. Rom. 5:12–21). What Scripture actually teaches and emphasizes is the present Lordship of Christ. He reigns in all power, majesty, and glory.

How what Letham teaches in these few pages significantly differs from what Grudem and other conservative evangelicals are teaching completely escapes me. Letham avoids the confusing and confused use of the words “function” and “role” but he still eternally suborders the Son to the Father in authority. What he first repeatedly denies in his coverage of the Bible and the historical sources, namely the eternal subordering of the Son, he then unambiguously affirms in the final section of his book. The Son is *eternally* set under the Father’s authority as women are *permanently* set under the authority of men in the church and the home. Women’s subordination, he would have us believe, is grounded “ontologically” in a hierarchically ordered Trinity where the Father eternally rules and the Son eternally obeys.

### On the Permanent Subordination of Women

This observation leads me lastly to point out that what is common to all those who advocate the eternal subordination or submission of the Son is a commitment to the permanent subordination of women. The doctrine of an eternally subordinated Son is introduced to give the weightiest foundation possible for the permanent subordering of women.

As no one in the contemporary scene other than conservative evangelical and Reformed Christians who are committed to the permanent subordination of women teach this novel doctrine, we must ask, is the tail wagging the dog? Scripture teaches the unqualified Lordship of Christ and the coequality of the Trinity (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 13:13), but has the “women question” led theologians and politically conservative Protestants to deny the unqualified Lordship of Christ and thus undermine the doctrine of coequality in the Trinity?

## GLOSSARY

**Cappadocian Fathers:** This title refers to three learned supporters of the Nicene creed who lived in Cappadocia—central Turkey today: Basil (330–97), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (d. 394), and their friend, Gregory of Nazianzus (329–90).

**egalitarian:** Someone who believes in the equal dignity, worth and leadership potential of both sexes while not denying that God made us men and women.

**modalism:** The error of denying that the Father, Son and Spirit are eternally and indelibly differentiated yet one in being. Modalism teaches that there is one God who reveals himself in three modes.

**Neo-Arian:** This title refers to the Cappadocian fathers opponents who eternally subordinated the Son in being and authority. On this basic matter they agree with Arius who died in 336 but their theology was more developed and differed from Arius on other important matters. They may be described as the second generation radical Arians, or teachers of subordinationism.

**ontological:** This word transliterates the Greek word for “being.” The being of something or someone is what makes something or someone what they are.

**panentheism:** The view that while God and his creation are not to be identified, God is in creation and creation is in God.

**subordering:** The word “order” alludes to the relationship between things or people. It can be horizontal, vertical, circular, temporal, etc. To sub-order means to place under.

**subordinationism:** The teaching that the Son of God is *eternally* subordinated to the Father in being, function, or authority.

**synoptic:** “Seen together.” A term to designate the first three Gospels.

## NOTES

1. George Knight, III, *New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).
2. *Ibid.*, 33.
3. *Ibid.*, 56.
4. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).
5. *Ibid.*, 250.
6. Wayne Grudem, ed., *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 31.
7. Wayne Grudem, *Evangelical Feminism and Biblical Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004), 433.
8. Bruce Ware, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 21.
9. *Ibid.*, 21. The terms “very nature” and “Being” speak of ontology, the Son’s being, essence, and/or nature.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R, 2004).
12. Letham, cf. 176–77, 199, 370.
13. *Ibid.*, 3, 377.
14. *Ibid.*, 382–83.
15. *Ibid.*, 490, 399.
16. *Ibid.*, 398.
17. *Ibid.*, 392.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, 398.
20. *Ibid.*, 399.
21. *Ibid.*, 398.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 402.
24. *Ibid.*, 401.
25. *Ibid.*, 403.
26. *Ibid.*, 396.
27. *Ibid.*, 271–90.
28. Letham, 396 (appeal to Bulgakov), 400–01 (appeal to Bobrinskoy), and 251 (appeal to Meyendorff).
29. Letham, 3, 377.
30. *Ibid.*, 338.
31. *Ibid.*, 403.

## THREE AREAS OF CONCERN: A Response to Kevin Giles

I have three areas of concern with Giles's position. These involve misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and a misapplication of terms.

**First Concern: For a Co-Equal Trinity.** Giles misunderstands what I wrote in my book. He suggests that what is missing "is the affirmation that the divine three are indivisible in power and authority." He alleges that because these precise words are not there in that section, I therefore maintain the opposite and teach that the Son is a member of a hierarchy, less God than the Father. The logic behind this simply does not follow.

What Giles ignores is that on these same pages I state, "Each person [of the Trinity] is the whole God. The three together are not more God than any one by himself...no one person is of higher or lesser status than any other. There are no gradations of deity. Thus, all three together are worshiped." Moreover, earlier I present extensive and overwhelming biblical evidence for the full and absolute deity of Christ, the Son. This entails omnipotence—as it does omniscience and omnipresence. Giles asserts that he and others "argue for a co-equal Trinity," implying that I do not. He should read more carefully.

**Second Concern: Unwarranted Inferences.** This concern is, in my view, more serious. It involves a series of misrepresentations. Giles states that I introduce "the novel contemporary evangelical doctrine of the sub-ordering of the Son in authority." Nowhere have I written of "sub-ordering."

Giles claims that an argument for the eternal subordination of the Son gives an "ontological" basis for men ruling over women in perpetuity. I do not argue for "the eternal subordination of the Son"; note my caveat when citing the covenant of redemption.

Again, Giles says that my "claim that egalitarians deny or undermine male/female differentiation is simply rhetorical polemic. Absolutely no one, as far as I can see, denies male/female differentiation." This might sound plausible were it not for the fact that I did *not* say that egalitarians do this! What I said was that a homogenization of the persons of the Trinity has been used to underpin complete reciprocity between male and female in society. Reciprocity is not the same as elimination of difference; the *Oxford English Dictionary* makes that clear.

Giles continues, "Women's subordination, he would have us believe, is grounded 'ontologically' in a hierarchically ordered Trinity where the Father eternally ruled and the Son eternally obeys." I have reread the book—I wrote it myself but maybe I missed something—and am at a loss to see where I refer to women's *subordination* or to "a hierarchically ordered Trinity."

In my letter to the editor accepting this assignment, I wrote, "I am uneasy about the phrase 'eternal subordination of the Son,' as I mention in my book. The Son is all that the Father is, except for being the Father. He is 'light of light, very God of very God.' There is a distinction; the Son is sent by the Father, and this is never reversed...It follows that I do not like to be categorized as belonging to one side."

Giles repeatedly makes unwarranted inferences, creating caricatures of what his opponents may say in order to shoot them down. It accomplishes little.

**Third Concern: Submission as Synonymous with Inferiority?** The title of Giles's essay is telling: submission is presented as synonymous with inferiority. For Giles, exaltation and submission are incompatible. This is obviously so in a fallen human world, twisted by self-interest, exploitation, and oppression. Being godlike, however, entails serving others (e.g., Matt. 20:20–28, Phil. 2:1ff). Christ is both Lord and Servant—no, I didn't miss this in Barth, and I recognize that it is a biblical paradigm, too. The Father advances His kingdom through His Son. The Spirit glorifies not Himself, but the Son. The Son brings glory to the Father. In the unity of the indivisible Trinity each seeks the glory of the other.

Giles asks, “Has the ‘women question’ led theologically and politically conservative Protestants to deny the unqualified Lordship of Christ and thus undermine the doctrine of co-equality in the Trinity?” This astounding comment leaves me wondering whether to laugh or cry. As I have consistently preached, taught, and written, Christ is Lord totally, absolutely, unequivocally. The problem seems to be that Giles’s understanding of who God is, and what Lordship is, differs from mine; for him these seem to be predicated preeminently on power. In reality, however, God exercises His sovereign omnipotence in love, in Bonaventure’s terms, in “self-diffusive goodness.”

**This God Is Love.** In Islam, Allah is sheer power—his devotees submit. In glorious contrast, the holy Trinity is an indivisible union of three Persons, in eternal love and goodness. The triune God, in His determination to create, His sovereign providence, and His immeasurable grace, has planned that we humans, united to Christ our head, will share in the administration of the renewed and completed cosmos. This purpose He implements omnipotently, but in omnipotence expressive of His overflowing, self-diffusive goodness and love. This God is personal. This God is love; the three seek the interests of one another in indivisible union.

For our part, the Father is transforming us by the Spirit into the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29); this entails our seeking the good of others, submitting to one another in Christ. It mirrors what God is like and particularly the Son’s attitude in eternity in determining to embark on His mediatorial task (Phil. 2:5–7, Heb. 5:1ff). This is far from inferiority or subordination. The Son’s loving fulfillment of the Father’s will, His outpouring of self in coming not to be served, but to serve, is not a temporary act that tells us nothing of eternal realities; rather, it expresses who the Son is eternally.

—Robert Letham

## ONE MATTER OF DISAGREEMENT: A Response to Robert Letham

Letham generously accepts that on five cardinal points in the doctrine of the Trinity we are in complete agreement. We disagree absolutely on only one matter—the one that has divided the Church over the centuries more than any other—whether or not the Son is in some way eternally set under the Father.<sup>1</sup> In the past thirty years a large number of conservative evangelicals have endorsed this idea, arguing for “the eternal subordination of the Son.” Letham also sets the Son under the Father but prefers to speak of the “submission of the Son eternally” and of the eternal obedience of the Son. True, a difference in wording can be seen, but a difference in content escapes me. Those who teach explicitly the “eternal subordination of the Son” quote Letham as a supporter of their position.

I reject the idea that the Son of God must always obey the Father, primarily because I find no biblical support in favor and much in opposition of it. I note that in his essay Letham not once appeals to Scripture to substantiate this teaching. I have outlined in the positive presentation of my position the biblical teaching that the Son is subordinate, submissive, and obedient to the Father by His own choice *temporally* in the incarnation, and yet coequal with the Father in majesty, power, and authority *eternally* as God. Nowhere is the biblical teaching more explicit than in the confession that “Jesus is Lord.” If the Father and the Son (and the Spirit) are each “the Lord,” then one does not always obey another.

I also reject this teaching, no matter how it is worded, because I find not one line in support in any of the creeds or confessions—and Letham, it is to be noted, does not quote them in support. He cannot because they speak against it. What is more, not one word can be found to support this doctrine in Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, or T. F. Torrance, possibly the most important orthodox theologians on the Trinity. With one voice they oppose any suggestion that the Son is set under the Father in being or authority, or eternally obedient to Him.

My assertion is falsifiable. Letham simply has to come forward with a passage from one of these great theologians speaking of the eternal submission and obedience of the Son to prove me wrong. If John Owen taught the eternal submission and obedience of the Son, this does not prove that it is orthodoxy: it indicates that in this bleak time for the doctrine of the Trinity, Owen got it wrong.

**Arian Controversy.** In his section on Reformed theology and the covenant of redemption, Letham states, “Those who claim that talk of the Son’s submission to the Father in eternity mainly has erupted as a reaction to feminism show a lack of historical awareness.” On this he is half right and half wrong. An awareness of history shows that the way conservative evangelicals have formulated and worded their post-1970s doctrine of the eternal subordination/submission of the Son is entirely novel, and so is their claim that women must obey the men set over them because the Son always must obey the Father. An awareness of history, however, also shows that the idea that the Son is eternally subordinated, and/or submissive, and/or obedient to the Father has a very long history. Here I agree with Letham. In almost every century one or more theologians have promulgated this idea. It is called Arianism, or more generally, subordinationism.

That Arius ontologically subordinated the Son to the Father is well known. What is less well known and less adequately recognized is that he and all the other so-called fourth century Arians also set Him eternally under the Father’s authority, depicting Him as *obedient* to the Father. Richard Hanson, in his monumental study of Arianism, says that the Arians consistently taught that the Son “does the Father’s will and exhibits *obedience and subordination* to the Father, and adores and praises the Father, *not only in his earthly ministry but in Heaven*”<sup>2</sup> (emphasis added). In their important study, *Early Arianism*, historical theology scholars Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh actually make the eternal submission and obedience of the Son *the primary element* in Arian theology; the Son’s ontological subordination, they argue, was simply a necessary logical outcome.<sup>3</sup> They assert, “At the center of Arian theology was a redeemer *obedient* to his Father’s will”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added).

**Obedience Center Stage.** When we come to Eunomius, the Cappadocians' arch neo-Arian opponent, the obedience of the Son comes onto center stage. In his *Confession of Faith*, he professes,

We believe in the one and only true God...he has no sharer of his Godhead or participator of his glory, nor joint possessor of his authority.

And we believe in the Son of God...He is *obedient* in creating and giving being to things that exist, *obedient* in all his administration, not having received his being Son or God because of his *obedience*, but from his being Son and being generated as only-begotten God, being obedient in words, *obedient* in acts<sup>5</sup> (emphasis added).

Athanasius and the Cappadocians vehemently opposed this teaching. They would not concede in any way that the Son was eternally obedient to the Father. With the Father and the Spirit, the Son reigned as Lord.

**Godlike Submission.** Finally, I thank Letham for endorsing my point that "it is godlike to gladly subordinate oneself for the good of another." I simply add that in revealing this truth in word and deed Jesus tells us that this is what the Father is like. He said, "If you have seen me you have seen the Father." If it is godlike for humans to subordinate themselves gladly, then it is godlike for men *and* women, who both happen to be human, to do so!

—Kevin Giles

## NOTES

1. That we disagree on the importance of twentieth century Orthodox contributions is a small point. We are completely agreed on the importance of the Athanasius and the Cappadocians.
2. R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 103.
3. Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).
4. *Ibid*, x.
5. The reconstituted text in full is given in Hanson, *The Search*, 619–21.