



Giles, Kevin.

The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology

Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012. Pp. 270. Paper. \$24.00. ISBN 9780830839650.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Kevin Giles has spent the better part of the last decade publishing on the doctrine of the Trinity. Most of his work has been in dialogue/debate with evangelical theologians over the issue of the Son's subordination to the Father. Giles believes in the Son's functional subordination but he limits its duration to the Incarnation. Those on the other side of the issue believe the Son to be functionally subordinate to the Father eternally. Many of the theologians involved in this debate have connected this issue with the so-called gender debate, i.e., the respective roles of men and women in the home and church. Many involved from both sides see the Trinity as a model for male-female relationships; similar to the way in which many Social Trinitarians see the Trinity as a model for society. Others, to include myself, have suggested that the Trinity has nothing to do with gender roles.

My personal history with Giles' work is somewhat checkered. In February 2008 I reviewed his monograph *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God & the Contemporary Gender Debate* and appreciated his arguments for egalitarianism but was critical of his handling of the doctrine of the Trinity. The following July I scathingly reviewed his follow up *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* and was even more critical of his Trinitarian theology as well as the way he framed the debate and characterized his opponents. In addition to Giles' books I've read every article of his that I could get my hands on and have kept

up with and commented on his debates with detractors such as Matt Paulson (who at the time went by a pseudonym Phantaz Sunlyk); Robert Letham; and most recently Michael Bird and Robert Shillaker.

I've said all this to say that for the past few years I've read Giles' work carefully and critically. In all of it I've appreciated Giles' fervency for the Trinity. To my mind there is nothing more important than God, and the Christian God is Trinity, so Giles has his priorities in order in that respect. He sees himself as a defender of Trinitarian orthodoxy and that is certainly a noble cause; I certainly can't fault him on those grounds. His latest volume, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (hereafter *EGS*), is a yet another defense of the Christian doctrine of God by way of answering critics of the doctrine of eternal generation. Again, I applaud Giles' intentions here, and it is my sincere prayer that his tribe increases.

If there's one thing that my reading of Giles' work has taught me, it's that somewhere in the background (or foreground!) is always going to be his obsession with connecting the Trinity to the gender debate. Now to be fair, he denies that he's the one who does this, preferring rather to attribute this phenomenon to his complementarian counterparts. I'll let the individual reader make his or her own assessment. All one has to do in *EGS* is look at the table of contents in order to realize that he'll address this in chapter 8 but in truth Giles prepares the way for this discussion in all the chapters that precede it and he continues it in the chapters that follow. More on this in a moment; for now let's turn to a summary of the book's contents.

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the debate by naming the contemporary evangelical scholars who have denied the doctrine of eternal generation and their reasons for doing so. Chapter 2 addresses interpretive method; Giles believes that Scripture is to be interpreted within the community of faith, which means paying attention to what those who have gone before us have said. He's not against exegesis but it's not the only thing that concerns evangelicals in doing theology. Chapter 3 highlights some patristic exegesis and the Biblical warrant the fathers saw for the doctrine. Chapters 4-7 detail the belief in eternal generation from the third-century apologists through the post-Reformation Protestant theologians. Catholic theologians after Aquinas don't receive mention but this is understandable since Giles is countering the claims of certain evangelicals who descend from the protesting stream of Western Christianity.

Throughout these chapters Giles makes sure to keep repeating the point that for all of these theologians the eternal generation of the Son is a way to safeguard eternal personal distinctions within God while at the same time affirming their shared divine being *and power*. Giles

constantly adds “and power” after “being” which is something affirmed by the pro-Nicenes (44, 102, 117, 122, 129, 130, 134, 183, 185, 244) and denied by the Arians (72, 92n3, 103, 131, 134, 212). But Giles’ reason for harping on the issue of shared power is easily discerned, especially to the reader familiar with his work; *power* for Giles is equivalent to *authority*. If the three persons share one divine power then they share one divine authority and there can be no subordination of any kind conceived of within the eternal intra-Trinitarian relationship.

Giles turns his attention to this in chapters 8 & 9 drawing heavily from his previous publications on the subject. Giles makes another conflation in addition to his view on power/authority; he also conflates the doctrine of eternal functional subordination, which is held by many contemporary evangelical theologians, with ontological subordinationism of the Arian variety (212, 235). This is where Giles’ polemic is at its strongest. He charges those who hold to eternal functional subordination as demonstrating “complete” or “profound ignorance” of historical theology and a “profound misunderstanding of what theology is and how all theological language works” (214). He also describes their view as “profoundly perverse” (212). According to Giles, if one adds eternality to the Son’s subordination to the Father, then they’re committing the chief error of the Arians (92n3, 103, 131, 211, 212).

Giles errs in his charge that the Arians believed in the *eternal* functional subordination of the Son (and error he’s been repeating for years). It’s almost unfathomable that he (or an editor) hasn’t caught his inconsistency on this issue. On the one hand he says that the “Arians argued that he was created in time” and then a few sentences later says, “Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh argue that the eternal subordination of the Son in authority and power was the *primary* element in Arian theology” (103). So which is it? Did the Arians believe the Son to be created in time (46, 67, 82, 103, 104, 110, 126, 131, 142, 169, 177, 211) or eternally subordinate (212)? Giles can’t have it both ways. And for the record, Gregg and Groh argue no such thing; the very quotation Giles provides has them saying that the Son’s life “modeled perfect *creaturehood*” (emphasis mine)! They’re also very clear to point out repeatedly that in Arian theology the Son was “posterior, secondary to God... having a beginning” (*Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*, 82).

This isn’t Giles’ only inconsistency though. His argument against eternal functional subordination hinges on connecting eternality with *being*. He says, “If the Son is *necessarily and eternally* subordinated, his subordination defines his *being* as the Son” (212 cf. 231-35). On this basis Giles charges believers in eternal functional subordination with tritheism (233, 35). This makes sense, of course, since he likens eternal functional subordination to Arianism and Arians were polytheists. But the problem isn’t solved with an egalitarian view of the Trinity or by merely

reciting the Latin phrase *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*. Giles' purpose in this book is to argue for an *eternal* and *necessary* distinction within God, namely generation (and procession), and he never hints that he believes these roles (for lack of a better term) can be reversed or changed (if they could be then Modalism results). On Giles' argument this does as much violence to the divine being as any functional subordination could; the terms are merely switched.

But Giles seems as confused here on the necessary distinction between *person* and *being* as he did in his last book on the subject. He takes something about the way the divine *Persons* relate and says that this defines their *being*. He later goes on to argue that unchanging roles are "person-defining" (228). Well which is it: being-defining or person-defining? To equate the two is to fall into the heresy at the other end of the spectrum, namely Modalism, and I have discerned the tendency in Giles' previous works to lean in exactly that direction. The inconsistency doesn't stop here though. Giles also argues that "we can rightly say that the immanent triunity of God is revealed in the economy, and the economy reflects what is true in eternity" (74) and that "the historic missions of the Son and the Spirit reveal what is true in eternity" (224 cf. 235) while spending the lion's share of the book informing us that any type of authority/submission or command/obedience relationship *cannot be eternal* even if this is what we see in the economy.

It also strikes me as odd that Giles would be so adamantly opposed to subordination language being used of the intra-Trinitarian relationship. He affirms, with Aquinas, that theological language is analogical (22). We speak about God in human terms but not with human definitions. This is how we're able to say that the Son is "begotten not made." Why can't he allow subordination language the same analogical leeway? Is it unfathomable to think that authority & submission in God is unique and unlike the authority and submission we see among creatures? If not, why not? Is it simply because certain theologians have co-opted eternal functional subordination for their gender related purposes? What about those of us who agree with Giles on gender but with his opponents on the Trinity? Can we have no consistent way of explaining our position? Getting back to analogical language, Giles notes that using "eternal" to qualify begetting or generation makes an "infinite difference between human begetting and divine begetting" (23), so why not between human authority/submission and divine authority/submission?

Much more could be said of the myriad inconsistencies that litter these pages, or the selective (and at times misleading) use of sources, or Giles' unwillingness to allow his opponents to speak for themselves by telling us what they really mean or which analogies they should have used to argue their points, but I still have two more chapters to summarize, so I'll cease and desist for a moment. Chapter 10 turns to a brief and piecemeal sketch of contemporary works on the Trinity

from historical and systematic theologians. The historical books cover the issue of eternal generation well, the theological books don't give it much attention if any, and a few contemporary theologians have tried to come up with a better way to ground divine self-differentiation. Giles briefly surveys the work of Robert Jenson, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Thomas Weinandy, and David Coffey while noting what he believes are shortcomings in each. Ultimately, he finds that God's freedom is compromised in some way by all of the respective proposals. Chapter 11 is a summary and defense of eternal generation.

In the end Giles gets a few things right such as the importance of eternal generation; it's a necessary doctrine if we want to ground eternal personal distinctions within God. He's also right to insist that the economic Trinity does not constitute the immanent Trinity. Those who argue such are left with a god that is dependent upon its creation for existence. He's right to challenge contemporary theologians who deny the doctrine of the eternal generation by pointing out the weaknesses in their arguments. Unfortunately, his constructive proposal isn't as solid as it could have been. When it's all said and done Giles' major contention is supported by appeals to tradition and authority. Detractors are well aware of what the great theologians of yesteryear have said, and they know that the church at large has held to this doctrine, and yet they claim it's not biblical or doesn't make sense anyway.

So how do we respond? We respond like the fathers of the church responded when faced with the heresies of their day: with exegesis! What good is it to say what the fathers said if we're not going to do what they did? And *EGS*, for all of its wonderful literature survey, is light on the exegetical theology. Combine this with Giles' continued emphasis on the Trinity in relation to the gender debate; his mining sources for material dealing with a subject that the original authors would have never thought of; the repeated mischaracterization of modern complementarians as Arians as well as the historically inaccurate portrayal of Arian theology as having to do with *eternal* functional subordination; and we're left with a book that becomes difficult to recommend. When it's all said and done I appreciate what Giles has attempted to do; I'm just not convinced that he's done it as well as he could have.

My old pastor used to tell us to eat the meat and spit out the bones. In other words, take what's good from something and discard what's not. The interested reader will find good literature surveys in chapter 4-7 and an accurate accounting of the denial of the doctrine by some contemporary evangelicals. Past that I say *caveat lector!*