



Hedberg, Nancy.

Women, Men, and the Trinity: What Does It Mean to Be Equal?

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

In *Women, Men, and the Trinity: What Does It Mean to Be Equal?* (hereafter *WMT*) Nancy Hedberg travels the now well-worn path of the relationship between the doctrine of the Trinity and the roles of men and women in the so-called gender debate. Although not stated in the book itself, *WMT* is a revised version of her 2008 Western Seminary doctoral dissertation “Essence and Function: An Evaluative Study of the Theological Premise that Women Are Equal to Men in Essence but Permanently Subordinate in Function,” which was written under the supervision of Dr. Gerry Breshears.

Over the course of 10 chapters Hedberg seeks to answer a number of questions about the doctrine of the Trinity, the role of women in the church and home, and how the two relate to each other if at all. This can be seen in her chapter titles which are all questions:

1. Introduction: What Is the Problem?
2. Theologians: What Are They Thinking?
3. Orthodoxy: Who Defines It?
4. Orthodoxy: Who Preserves it?
5. Women: What Are We Here For?
6. Bible: What Is the Message?
7. Bible: Who Interprets It?
8. Submission: Who Does It?

9. Authority: Who Has It?
10. Conclusion: What Is the Answer?

Hedberg identifies the problem to be addressed as the “permanent subordination of women” which is undergirded by the relatively recent doctrine of the “eternal functional subordination of the Son” to the Father argued most vocally by scholars such as Wayne Grudem, Bruce Ware, and George Knight III. In examining both Scripture and the writings of various theologians throughout the church’s history Hedberg concludes that this doctrine of eternal functional subordination is not supported because the tradition largely favors an understanding of the Son’s subordination to the Father in the Incarnation alone and not in eternity. This conclusion was reached by noticing the emphasis on the shared nature, will, power, and authority found in these writers’ understandings of God. Along with scholars like Kevin Giles (whom she relies on heavily throughout this volume) and Rebecca Groothuis (and more recently Tom McCall whose work she does not interact with), Hedberg argues that if the Son is eternally subordinate in function this is akin to his being subordinate ontologically while the same problem doesn’t result if the functional subordination is temporal.

When turning to her examination of women she’s able to show that Scripture’s message is often subversive to the prevailing social climates in which the various texts are set. This is nowhere more evident than in the NT where women are the first witnesses of the resurrected Lord, prophesy in the churches, and often play very important roles and serve important purposes that were not customary at the time. Those few texts that seem to imply that women are in fact inferior to men are fraught with interpretive difficulties (e.g., Paul’s “head” metaphor which Hedberg, following Sarah Sumner, takes as a metaphor of interdependence rather than authority) that require quite a bit of time and effort to work through. This is not the case when examining the church’s theologians, who throughout history have demoted women to second-class Christians by virtue of their simply being women. In the end Hedberg (rightly) concludes that women are just as capable and valuable as men and that they deserve equality in the home and church not only ontologically, but functionally as well. But most strikingly, Hedberg doesn’t argue in favor of women *demanding* what is deserved, but rather according to Philippians 2:5-11, for the attitude of humility exhibited in Christ’s becoming incarnate to suffer on our behalf. There’s a greater goal than personal entitlement.

WMT is a deeply personal book for Hedberg and this shows throughout. Her cause, i.e., supporting the full equality of women in the body of Christ, is a noble one (and it’s a cause that I fully support). When her focus is on the equality of women in the home and church she’s at her best. At one point she turns the idea that women are able to teach other women and children but not adult males on its head by noting that if women, by virtue of their being easily deceived, are not capable to teach adult males then it’s almost criminal to unleash them on other women and impressionable children! (see 102-04) What a wonderful and devastating observation!

Unfortunately, as is the case with other writers who connect the gender debate with the Trinity, she ends up caricaturing what her opponents believe and at certain points muddies up the Trinity in the process.

For example, there is repeated reference to the “permanent subordination” of women (3, 12, 21 [2x], 24, 118, 121) as the position held by complementarians, however, it’s not clear what exactly is meant by “permanent” and in surveying the various publications of complementarian writers on the subject I’ve not been able to find that they ever use the term “permanent subordination” with reference to women unless they’re quoting egalitarian writers like Kevin Giles and Rebecca Groothuis who use the term often. It would seem that the idea of permanence would go against standard evangelical views of the believer’s future glorification at the resurrection.

Also unhelpful is the equation of complementarians with those who see some sort of eternal functional subordination within the Trinity. Hedberg makes blanket statements throughout the book about complementarians that apply to my personal views about the Trinity, and I’m an egalitarian concerning the equality of men and women in the home and church! Craig Keener is a noted scholar in the same boat. But this leads into problems with the view of eternal functional subordination itself. Hedberg also generalizes the doctrine without noting that there are differing nuances in each individual author. She’s right to rail against the ideas of “rank” or “superiority/inferiority” within the Trinity since some writers do employ these concepts and language (e.g., Bruce Ware). But to only view the doctrine through the lenses of “rank” and “superiority/inferiority” is to ignore more balanced and nuanced views that have been published by scholars such as Robert Letham in dialogue with others such as Kevin Giles and Gilbert Bilezikian.

It’s also problematic to look to Scripture and church tradition and expect to find answers to questions and issues that simply weren’t being asked or addressed at the time. When we read of the shared authority and power between the persons of the Trinity in patristic writings we’re reading of God’s authority over creation. The fourth and fifth century debates didn’t broach the subject of eternal functional subordination because the concern was the Son’s relation to the Father as either a creature or as sharing the same substance. The functional concern was the salvation of the world and not intra-Trinitarian dynamics of authority and submission. When dealing with the intra-Trinitarian relationship there’s a nearly unanimous recognition of the Father’s monarchy throughout the Christian tradition and his logical priority of place in the Trinitarian *ταξις*. Hedberg takes note of this order saying, “*Difference* merely indicates otherness. At the same time, *order* indicates relationship. While people or things can be ordered in relationship to one another, it does not mean that the ordering must be hierarchical.” (5) But this is a distinction without difference. The “above” or “below” in hierarchal ordering doesn’t mean “better/superior” or “worse/inferior” any more than “first” or “second” means better/superior than “third” in a linear ordering of the Trinity. The fact is that order exists and it

seems to be the basis for why the Trinity operates as it does (i.e., in the Father begetting/spirating and not being begotten/spirated, and sending rather than being sent).

There's also little problems like wrongly defining "subordinationism" as "the view that there is a hierarchy within the Trinity and that the Son is eternally and ontologically subordinate to the Father." (26) In point of fact, subordinationism entails a denial of the Trinity wholesale, since any ontological subordination requires a denial of the Father and the Son sharing the "same substance," if the Son is not of the "same substance" as the Father then he's a creature, and if a creature then not eternal. I'd also quibble with Hedberg placing so much stock in Philippians 2:6-11 as a text that really speaks to this debate. Does it speak of the Son as both God and man? Absolutely! Does it speak of the Son's willing humiliation in the Incarnation? Absolutely! Does it speak of the Son's equality with God? Absolutely! But it does so in ontological terms and as a present reality. It has nothing to do with the way the Son relates to the Father *as Son*. In short, it just doesn't do what Hedberg would like it to do, but what it does do is give us a glorious example of humility that we are to follow, which Hedberg repeatedly acknowledges and is absolutely correct in so doing.

In the end I think this book suffers from the same shortcomings as the works of complementarians like Grudem, Ware, and Knight, as well as egalitarians like Giles and Groothuis, and that's quite simply that it attempts to compare apples to blue. God is wholly other and Father, Son, and Spirit relate in a way that human beings of any gender cannot. Paul may be saying something in 1Corinthians 11:3 that draws some kind of analogy between God and Christ and men and women but it's doubtful that it's the analogy that those engaged in the gender debate see. Those well read on this subject will find little in terms of new argument (if you've read Giles then you've read most of Hedberg's main points) but they will find a distinct voice within the crowd. For those looking to get their feet wet in the gender debate as it relates to the doctrine of the Trinity I'd recommend this book as a good introduction. It's short, well-written, and representative of the general (though as I stated earlier, not the only) egalitarian position on the subject. It employs footnotes throughout and has a bibliography that can lead the reader to further information. The tone is also pleasant unlike the more harsh and polemical works by Giles.