



The Trinity and Women

Description

The orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and the argument that the eternal subordination in authority of the Son is the ground for the permanent subordination of women in authority. Giles See Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: the Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate*, InterVarsity, 2002; *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Trinity*, Zondervan, 2006.

The debate

I am sure that most of you are aware that today one of the most commonly heard arguments in evangelical and charismatic circles for the permanent subordination of women is the Trinity argument. It goes like this: In the Trinity the Father has authority over the Son and this is a model for the man-woman relationship. Divine life in heaven prescribes how men and women should be ordered on earth. It is often put this way: in heaven the Father is head over the Son and on earth men are head over women, at least in the home and the church.

A more theologically weighty basis for the permanent subordination of women could be found. Women's subordination reflects and is grounded in the divine life. B

This argument was "invented" by an American Reformed theologian named by George Knight in 1977 and endorsed in Australia by Dr Broughton Knox, the then principal of Moore Theological College. Since then this argument has been popularised by Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware, and introduced into charismatic circles by Tom Smail. It is now what large numbers of evangelicals, charismatics and Pentecostals around the world believe and it is the synod endorsed doctrine of the Anglican diocese of Sydney.

This argument raises three critical questions.

1. First, does the Bible teach that the Father after the resurrection rules over the Son?
2. Second, is a hierarchical ordered Trinity what orthodoxy teaches?
3. And third, does the Trinity in fact prescribe human relations on earth? Can a threefold heavenly relationship be prescriptive for a twofold, male-female relationship in a fallen world?

The importance of the doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is the foundational Christian doctrine and thus the most important. It is "our" doctrine of God. Christians alone believe that God is triune. We do not just believe in God but in the God revealed in Jesus Christ and made present in power by the Holy Spirit.

Because the doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith if we get this doctrine wrong,

our other doctrinal teaching is bound to be flawed. This doctrine tells us that:

1. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are alike God without any caveats (Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:13, etc). In Jesus we see God because he is God (Jn 14:9). He and the Father are one. (Jn 10:30)
2. Because Jesus is declared to be God (Jn 1:1 etc), is confesses to be the Lord (the supreme ruler) more than 200 times and does the things only God can do (forgive, save, heal, raise the dead etc) we believe that Jesus like the Father is omnipotent God (all powerful). Because he is almighty God he can save and do anything he wills.
3. We rightly worship and pray to Jesus because he is God. We are not in worshipping Jesus as a second God, but rather the one God revealed in Jesus Christ and made present by the Holy Spirit.

The Knight-Grudem-Ware, Sydney Anglican doctrine of the Trinity.

Their case is as follows.

1. The Trinity is a model for human relationships on earth, especially the man-woman relationship. The Father has the commanding role in heaven and the Son the role of obeying. They are equal in being but not in authority. Likewise on earth the man has the commanding role and the woman the obeying role on earth, particularly in the church and the home. Men and women are spiritually equal but they do not have the same responsibilities.
2. What differentiates the Father and the Son and men and women is differing roles, which in this case means differing authority – who commands and who obeys. And in these two cases role allocation is eternal/permanent and can never change. It is what differentiates the Father and the Son and men and women at the most profound level. Note carefully: in dictionary usage and in social science literature a role refers to characteristic behavior/action that is not person defining and can change.
3. In every case where we find the obfuscating expression differing roles what is actually in focus is differing authority.
4. The argument is then made that if this role differentiation, meaning differing authority, is not upheld you have no solid basis for the Father-Son and male-female distinctions. (Since when did difference imply the subordination of one party?)
5. We know that the Father-Son relationship is one of differing authority and that the Father has primacy because on earth fathers are primary and rule over their sons. (This argument implies that human language used of God should be understood literally-univocally. For example if God is called Father, he must be like all human fathers.)
6. The eternal/permanent subordination in role/authority of the Son and of women does not imply or necessitate subordination in being, which in the case of the Son, it is agreed is a heresy. (However, if a role is permanent/eternal, and person defining it must speak of what is intrinsic, of the being of the persons involved)
7. This teaching on the Trinity is what the Bible reveals and orthodoxy prescribes. The Tradition (i.e., the creeds, the confessions, and the great theologians of the past) endorse this doctrine of a hierarchically ordered Trinity. Tradition is on our side.

First the Bible

In coming to the Bible to explore what it says on the Father-Son relationship we first must find a way of reading the Bible that makes sense of the seemingly contradictory teaching on Jesus. On the one hand he said to be God and the Lord and to do the things only God can do, and on the other he is depicted as a man who tires, hungers, prays to the Father and is obedient to the Father. Athanasius offered the answer. Taking Philippians 2:4-11 as the scriptural key, he argued that there is a double account of the Savior in Scripture. One as God in all power, majesty and might and one as God in the flesh, subordinated God. Statements about the Son as God and Lord etc. allude to him as eternal co-equal

God, those on his subordination refer solely to his earthly, temporal ministry. Orthodoxy has followed him on this.

On the Son's full divinity and absolute authority we note that in the NT:

- 1.Â Â Â The three divine persons are often spoken of in close proximity as if they are equals. Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor.13:13-in about fifty places. No one "order" in how the persons are mentioned is found in the NT. (I.e. in 2 Cor 13:13 Jesus is mentioned first.)
 - 2.Â Â Â Jesus is called God about 10 times and Lord over 200 times (the title for God in the LXX). Lordship implies absolute rule/authority (Jesus is Lord).
 - 3.Â The Jews were emphatic that only God could be worshipped yet from the earliest times the followers of Christ worshipped him as God. Matt 2:2, 11, 9:18, 14:33, 28:9, 17, Jn 9:38. Note also the doxologies addressed to Jesus (Rom 9:5, 2 Tim 4:18, 2 Peter 3:18, Rev 1:5-6). Prayer also addressed to Jesus (Acts 7:59-60, 1 Cor 16:22, 2 Cor 12:8-9).Â Â There is no suggestion that Christians thought of themselves as worshipping two Gods. In worshipping Jesus they believed they were worshipping the one God revealed and present in Christ.
 - 4.Â Â Â The title "Son" when used of Jesus in the NT is a messianic title, signifying that he is King David's successor. He has been sent to rule God's people.
 - 5.Â Â The language of "sending" in Jewish circles indicated that he who is sent bears the authority of the sender.
 - 6.Â Â Â The Father and the Son not only work as one, they have one will. The Son expresses the Father's will (Jn 4:34, 5:30, 6:38).
 - 7.Â Â Â Each divine person is nevertheless clearly identified and differentiated. Although they function as one, they each have distinctive work. E.g. the Father sends the Son, the Son "comes" and dies on the cross, the Spirit empowers the believer etc. What is more, they consistently work in an orderly pattern, not randomly.
 - 8.Â Â Â The Son gladly and freely chooses subordination for our salvation, but it is only in the incarnation (Phil. 2:4-11). It is a voluntary and temporal subordination. (Orthodoxy holds that the Son is eternally one with the Father in being and authority, yet he freely subordinated himself temporally in the incarnation)
 9. The comments in Paul and Hebrews about the Son's obedience (Rom 5:19, Heb 5:7-9) refer to his work on the cross as man – "in the days of his flesh". As the second Adam he is perfectly obedient and wins our salvation.
 10. In heaven the Son continues as God and man but his humanity is glorified and exalted (1 Cor 15:42-43). He reigns as God and man, one person, in all majesty and power.
 - 11.Â Â Â The Son reveals the Father. What we know of God the Father is seen in God the Son. Even the Son's subordination and suffering tells us something about the Father. Jesus said, "Those who have seen me have seen the Father" (Jn 14:9). The Father and the Son (and the Spirit) are to be distinguished as distinct divine persons but not divided or separated in any way.
 12. And the few difficult texts: good exegesis can explain (harmonise) comments, such as found in Jn 14:28, 1 Cor.11:3 and 1 Cor.15:24-28, so that they do not contradict the overall teaching of the Scriptures. (With every doctrine there are texts that seem to be in conflict with the overall teaching of the Scriptures. A key responsibility of the evangelical theologian is to find a meaning for these few texts so that the Bible speaks with one voice.)
- Put in one sentence: the primary Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord", says it all. Jesus is coequal God, omnipotent God, subordinated to no one.

Second what does orthodoxy teach on the Trinity?

The Bible clearly depicts God as one and three but does not explain how this might be so. The question of how God could be one and three was the challenge the early theologians had to answer.

This observation reminds us that doctrine does not spring immediately from the Bible: it is worked out almost always in conflict as differing answers emerge until in the end an answer wins the day and the church agrees in a creed or confession that this is what the Bible teaches read holistically. Evangelicals and charismatics generally have not been good at doing theology. Their slogan, "All we believe comes directly from the Bible" is the main problem. This conceals the true nature of theology/doctrine. It is the fruit of debate and conflict as to what is the primary teaching of the scriptures on any given matter.

When it comes to what is the agreed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is, that is what the whole church has agreed is what the Bible teaches, we have excellent evidence – the writings of Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin etc. and more importantly the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed and the Reformation and post Reformation Confessions of faith (Augsburg, 39 Articles, Helvetic, Westminster, etc).

In the second and third centuries, the early theologians (Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian and others) began working on a doctrine of the Trinity and made some good progress. However, it was only when Arius began teaching in about 318 that the Son was subordinate God that the theologians really needed to work hard.

In this critical hour, God raised up Athanasius (296-373), definitely one of the truly great theologians of all times. He argued that:

1. God is a triad or Trinity for all eternity.
2. Without the Son there could be no Father and vice versa. The two names are correlatives. You cannot be a father without a son and vice versa.
3. To read the Bible rightly, the Bible's own hermeneutical guideline given in Phil 2:4-11 needs to be followed. This disclosed a double account of the Son in Scripture, one as eternal God, one as God in the flesh. Much of his work in reply to Arius is exegetical following this rule.
4. Language used of God should not be understood literally. Thus he rejected Arius argument that the title "Son" indicated that he was less than the Father in being or power. Indeed turned the argument on him. Sons have the same being as their father.
5. For him oneness in being necessitated oneness in power or authority. For Arius because the Son was not one in being with the Father he was not one in power and authority with the Father. The basic premise Athanasius worked on was because the Father and the Son were one in being they were one in power and authority.
6. Also because the Father and the Son are one they work as one. Oneness in being implies oneness in work. They function as one

Athanasius excludes completely any suggestion that the divine persons are ordered hierarchically or that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father in being and/or authority.

This teaching spelt out in the creed of Nicea 325 which all orthodox Christians confess.

Augustine

Augustine (354-430) was also one of the truly great theologians of all time. He took it as an axiom that the creed of Nicea (325) and its reworked wording given at the council of Constantinople (381) defined orthodoxy. He thus set out to restate orthodoxy using his massive intellect. He begins De Trinitate with an examination of what the Scriptures teach. He too gave a rule of interpretation much the same as Athanasius', likewise based it on Phil 2:4-11. (In the form of God and in the form of man was his wording). For him the much-quoted "sending" language that the Arians made so much of is metaphorical. He argued repeatedly that we should not think the term "sent" implies subordination or obedience simply because it usually does in human speech.

In Augustine divine unity comes onto center stage. Because God is one there can be no subordination of the persons in any way at all. They are one in divinity, work, and power, without any caveats.

When divine unity is to the fore, the subordination of any of the three is impossible.

The Athanasian Creed.

The mistakenly called "Athanasian Creed" of late 5th century would better be called Augustine's Creed because it largely reflects his teaching. In this creed, the test of orthodoxy for nearly 1500 years for Western Christians, subordinationism is absolutely excluded. The emphasis falls on divine unity. The three divine persons are all "lord" and "almighty" (one in authority), none is "before or after, greater or lesser" (no subordination or hierarchical ordering), all are "co-equal". The persons are differentiated solely by the fact that the Father is "unbegotten", the Son is "begotten" and the Spirit proceeds. The case is summed up when this creed says, "Such as is the Father, such is the Son, such is the Spirit." It allows only that the Son is subordinated as man (i.e. in the incarnation).

The evidence is unambiguous. "The (theological) tradition," orthodoxy, categorically excludes the idea that the Son is eternally subordinated in being or authority.

Do divine relations in heaven prescribe human relations on earth, especially the man-woman relationship?

The answer is an emphatic, "no."

There is no basis in scripture for arguing that we should model human relations on earth on those of the triune God in heaven. In the NT we are called to imitate and follow Christ.

Why should a three person relationship in heaven be a model for a two person relationship on earth? Does this suggest threesomes rather than twosomes?

The divine Father-Son relationship is depicted as a male-male relationship. If this is the ideal, the highest form of relationship, what does that suggest?

Surely if the divine Father-Son relationship is a model for life on earth, it would be for the father-son or parent-child relationship?

How can the Father-Son relationship in heaven be a model or prescriptive of the relationship of the women to the man on earth when Scripture makes it plain that now Jesus reigns as Lord – the supreme ruler?

Where is the Spirit in all this?

I conclude that neither a co-equal Trinity nor even a supposedly hierarchical model of the Trinity can be the ground for defining the male-female relationship on earth. The Trinity should be left out of this debate.

To sum up.

We Christians, on the basis of scripture, confess, "Jesus is Lord" - the supreme ruler, subject to none.

Historic orthodoxy speaks of a "co-equal" Trinity, "where no one person is before or after, greater or lesser than another" and of the three divine persons who are one in being/substance and one in power/authority.

The Bible does not make divine relations in heaven a model for human relations on earth. Christ is our exemplar and he calls on men and women to subordinate themselves to one another (Eph. 5:21, Phil. 2:4-11).

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