

In gender debate, Jesus is 'subordinate' Evangelicals tinker with trinitarian doctrine: Evangelicals tinker with trinitarian doctrine

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For centuries, the equality of the persons of the Holy Trinity has been standard Christian teaching. And for decades, evangelical Christians have argued over proper roles for men and women. Lately, however, some evangelicals who favor greater authority for males are tinkering with trinitarian doctrine.

Drawing on their interpretations of the Bible, these evangelicals link their belief that women should be submissive to men with the analogous belief that Jesus is forever subordinate to God the Father.

Proponents call it a crystal-clear “scriptural revelation.” Critics call it “bad theology” and “extremely disturbing.”

The relatively private and esoteric theological discussion went public at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Washington, D.C. In a gathering where papers typically are politely delivered and received, the late November session on “The Trinity and Gender” prompted outright debate.

“There is a relationship of authority and submission in the very Godhead on the basis of which the other authority-submission relationships of Christ and man, and man and woman, depend,” argued Bruce Ware, professor of theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky.

The title of Ware’s paper, “Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles,” signaled his view that the Bible’s use of father-son terminology demonstrates an “eternal relationship” rather than an “ad hoc arrangement.” He continued: “We have scriptural revelation that clearly says that the Son came down out of heaven to do the will of his Father.”

Kevin Giles, an Australian who wrote a 2006 book disputing the idea of Jesus' eternal subordination to God, countered Ware's views. "The Father and the Son do not relate to one another in exactly the same way as a man and a woman might do, and to suggest so is bad theology," he wrote.

Giles argued that the suggestion that Jesus is eternally subordinate in authority denies that he has the same power and essence as God and the Holy Spirit. ETS past president Millard Erickson of Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor also challenged Ware's views as having biblical, practical and theological problems.

Beyond the scholarly meeting, the debate continues between two groups that have differed on gender matters. The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood believes that men should have the leadership roles in the church and the home. On the other side, Christians for Biblical Equality promotes "gift-based," rather than gender-based, ministry and favors having women serve at various levels in the church and in the home.

Mimi Haddad, president of the Minnesota-based equality organization, is co-leader of ETS's Gender and Evangelicals Study Group, which brought the scholars together for the recent seminar. "The reformulation of the Trinity by gender hierarchalists is utterly astounding and clearly [unorthodox] theologically," she said. "We find it extremely disturbing."

Wayne Grudem, a founder of the opposing council and a professor at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona, says the debate pits what are often called complementarians—those supporting different roles for men and women—against egalitarians, or those affirming equal roles.

"The fundamental bedrock . . . principle of egalitarianism is 'You can't be both equal and different. You can't be equal in value and different in roles,'" he said. "That's their deep-seated conviction, and I'm saying, 'Yes, you can. The Trinity proves it.'"

One Bible verse that comes up in the debate is 1 Corinthians 11:3, which reads (in the New King James Version): "But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."

Giles calls the argument that God the Father is forever authoritative over God the Son "unconvincing." But Southern Baptist Ware believes that the verse demonstrates a "relationship between the Father and the Son that reflects an

eternal verity.” They also disagree on what the verse says about gender roles; Giles says it does not represent a hierarchical order and Ware says it does.

Critics of Grudem and Ware link their argument to Arianism, a fourth-century teaching that denied the full divinity of Christ. Arianism was ultimately rejected as heresy. Such linkage is “preposterous,” said Grudem, who insists that Jesus is not inferior to God, only subject to him.

But Haddad says there are “striking similarities” between Arianism and the position on the Trinity of some modern-day supporters of separate roles for women and men. Giles, calling the idea of Jesus’ eternal subordination to God the Father an “Arian heresy,” also believes that the viewpoint contradicts the ETS doctrinal statement, which says that the members of the Trinity are “one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

Where does this leave the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit? “The Holy Spirit is equally God, but he submits to both the Father and the Son,” Grudem said.

Haddad disagrees, calling Grudem’s stand “one of the most heterodox statements I’ve ever heard. . . . Members of the Trinity are coequal in power, authority, majesty and dominion.”

(Some observers said the Trinity debate marks an ironical twist on the “open theism” controversy that raged in the ETS a few years ago. Some members argued, using scriptural references, that God does not know all future events and appears to change his mind through biblical history. Theological conservatives, who sought to rid the ETS of outspoken open theists, took the position that God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator.)

Francis Beckwith, current ETS president, said that there is a “pretty vigorous debate” over the Trinity, but he thinks that no one’s membership is threatened.

“All that ETS members are committed to is the doctrine of the Trinity,” said Beckwith, an associate professor of church-state studies at Baylor University. “Within the membership, there are different ways in which people understand that.”
–Adelle Banks, *Religion News Service*