

# Reply to Kevin Giles

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## Points of agreement

In his writings over the past few years Kevin Giles has seen himself as Athanasius to his debating partners' Arius or Eunomius. He has vigorously asserted the full deity of the Son and his complete equality with the Father. There is much to commend in his article. Giles' opponents, at best, have often expressed themselves in unfortunate terminology. In part, this may be due to a lack of familiarity with historical theology, a common weakness of evangelicals.

The first point of confusion is the language of subordination. This has been used in an orthodox sense as well as a heretical one. However, it conveys the impression, as Giles suggests, of a hierarchical Trinity in which the Son – and the Holy Spirit – are somehow less than the Father.

Talk of a hierarchical structure of authority within the Trinity raises these same questions in even more acute form. It implies that God is inherently like an army with commanding officers and subordinates.

Giles is also correct in pointing to the recent introduction of the term 'role'. Apart from its implying that the works of the Trinitarian persons do not necessarily represent who they are – as an actor may take on this role and then that – the term has not established a place in the tradition. That does not preclude new terms being used – the fourth century saw language shaped in fresh ways – but it does require them to be examined at length and in detail before finding acceptance.

Again, Giles correctly pinpoints a cardinal error of the leading members of the Evangelical Theological Society (LMETS) in arguing from human relationships to the relations of the Trinity. The Arians did this to argue that, as a man began to be a father at the birth of his son, so God became Father when the Son was created. The pro-Nicenes on the other hand opposed this procedure, countering with the assertion that the personal names 'Father' and 'Son' denote identity of nature. Giles is sound both in his use of the NT and his discussion of the fourth century controversy. The LMETS are wrong here.

Giles is also right to argue against undue reliance on 1 Corinthians 11:3 on the grounds that it is a difficult text to interpret. This should apply whatever the conclusions one reaches on its meaning. If a case has to be constructed, one way or the other, on this passage it is a weak case from the first.

I agree with Giles that the *shaliach* concept is crucial for appreciating the work of the Son. As he says, the Son represents the Father (cf., John 14:1-11). This is the underlying base for apostolic authority; I have argued this myself.<sup>1</sup> The writer of Hebrews speaks of Christ as 'the apostle... of our confession' (Heb. 3:1).

Giles states that 'it is to be recognized that the human language of sending distinguishes the persons – the Father is the one who sends, the Son the one who is sent – but the emphasis falls on the authority of the Son as expressing the authority of the Father.' He is on good ground but the point needs to be made that this relation is never reversed. The Son is generated by the Father and is sent by the Father; it is always so and is never the other way round. Moreover, while all three persons work together indivisibly – as always – in the incarnation, only the Son became incarnate, not the Father or the Holy Spirit. The Son has permanently and everlastingly united to himself humanity; the Father and the Spirit have not. These relations – at the heart of classic Trinitarian theology – disclose a difference-with-equality between the Trinitarian persons. This Giles does not mention.

It is commendable too that Giles distances himself from modalism. His insistence on the oneness of God's will is vital. It is surprising that some LMETS do not recognize this. To speak of three wills is heterodox, implying tritheism.

### Historical qualifications

This is not to say that Giles' argument should go unquestioned.

First, there are some *historical qualifications* that need recognition. First, it is of course correct that Athanasius emphatically taught the unity of the Father and the Son and their identity of being. But he also wrote of the Father as the one who originates the works of God and the Son as the executor, and never of this in reverse. See *De Incarnatione*, where 'the one Father has employed the same agent for both works [creation and salvation], effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word who made it at first.'<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, secondly, Giles does not mention that the Cappadocians had to defend themselves against accusations of tritheism – never a charge raised against Augustine – see Gregory of Nyssa, *On Not Three Gods*.<sup>3</sup>

Third, Augustine, in referring to the Father sending the Son, says this does not refer to God's essence or substance and, since he has no accidents, it is to be understood of the relations of the persons.<sup>4</sup> In this way the sending does not speak of gradations of deity – Giles is quite right – but it *does* point to irreversible distinctions between the persons. Again, this is more than Giles recognizes.

Fourth, the Athanasian Creed has not found acceptance in the east, and it was

1 R. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 95.

2 Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, 1:1 (PG 25:97-98).

3 PG 45:115-36.

4 Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 5:2:3 – 6:5:7 (PL 42:912-28).

there that the dogma of the Trinity was worked out. In fact, concerning Orthodox trinitarianism, John Meyendorff writes: 'By accepting Nicaea, the Cappadocian Fathers eliminated the ontological subordinationism of Origen and Arius, but they preserved indeed, together with their understanding of hypostatic life, a Biblical and Orthodox subordinationism, maintaining the personal identity of the Father as the ultimate origin of all divine being and action.' He goes on to say that Byzantine theology had to face accusations of tritheism and responded by pointing to the Nicene 'consubstantial' as the safeguard.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Giles misses the later Reformed doctrine of the covenant of redemption in eternity, in which the Father makes certain stipulations, which the Son agrees to fulfil, and promises a reward on successful completion of the task. I have criticized this construal of the Trinitarian plan of salvation in covenantal terms and pointed to its tritheistic and subordinationist tendencies.<sup>6</sup> However, the doctrine has been around since the middle of the seventeenth century; Giles does not seem to be aware of it. Rather, in keeping with this, Giles considers Richard A. Muller to be 'confused' in his interpretation of Calvin; he refers to him throughout the book as Richard H. Muller.<sup>7</sup>

### Giles on Grudem

Second, there are some *points of correction concerning Giles' representation of one LMETS*. I myself cannot speak for the ETS, of which I am not a member. There is neither the time to examine all the relevant writings of all the LMETS, nor is there space to consider them. However, I decided to test Giles' comments by referring to one of the works he cites which I had close to hand, Grudem's *Systematic Theology (ST)*, which Giles says is the high water mark of the LMETS' position.<sup>8</sup> I have no brief to defend Grudem, who I imagine is well equipped to do that himself, but I use this book as a check on Giles.

Giles accuses these people of Arianism and / or tritheism. The argument seems to have the following steps.

- (1) LMETS teach that the Son is eternally subordinate in authority to the Father.
- (2) Therefore LMETS deny that the Son is equal in power with the Father and the Holy Spirit.
- (3) By implication LMETS deny that the Son is one in being with the Father and the Holy Spirit. This, even if implicit, is the Arian heresy.
- (4) The unwritten entailment of this accusation, if it is correct, is that LMETS are guilty of the Arian heresy.

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5 John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 183-84.

6 Letham, *Work of Christ*, 52-53.

7 K. Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 164.

8 W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

These are huge allegations. If true they could affect the standing, livelihoods and ministries of those concerned.

The crucial point is the first: whether LMETS teach that the Son is eternally subordinate in authority to the Father. On this, Grudem states: 'we cannot say that the Father is more powerful or wise than the Son' (248). Giles argues that Grudem *does* consider the Father greater in power than the Son; Grudem denies it. Earlier Grudem defends the Son being fully God (234-38) and decisively refutes both Arianism and subordinationism (243-45). He uses the term 'subordination' but restricts it to 'subordination of role'. I have already commented on the unfortunate use of terms here. However, for Grudem this subordination of role is set in the context of what he terms 'ontological equality' – or 'equality of being' – precisely what Arius and Eunomius denied. 'The persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes', he writes – contrary to Giles' accusation. He continues, 'The Son and the Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father'; Giles accuses him of the opposite. Grudem's use of 'subordination' is restricted to subordination in roles (249).

Grudem also points to Biblical patterns in which the Father acts through the Son, a pattern never reversed. He questions whether the Father could have become incarnate instead of the Son, and denies it (249-50). In this he is following questions discussed in detail by Anselm in 1094 in *De fide Trinitatis et de incarnatione Verbi*, who ended with the same answers.<sup>9</sup> Giles points out that 'theological orthodoxy with one voice holds that all divine attributes are equally shared by all the divine persons. God is one in being and attributes. Charles Hodge rightly and emphatically says, "In the Bible all divine titles and attributes are ascribed equally to the Father, Son, and Spirit."' Grudem does too. Nowhere does Grudem say that the Son differs in *any* attribute from the Father; in fact, he denies it. Nowhere does he use the term 'subordination' for anything other than the appropriations – or as he terms it the 'role' of the Son.

The third stage of the argument is also vital. Do LMETS deny that the Son is one in being with the Father and the Holy Spirit? If so, they would be guilty of Arianism and possibly tritheism. It should be clear that this accusation is undermined, as far as Grudem is concerned, by the considerable theological differences he has with Arianism. Arianism, both in the little we know of Arius himself and in his more able successor Eunomius, held that the Son was created. He was not co-eternal with the Father. He was a different being, a creature. Grudem denies this. For him, the Son is one of the holy Trinity. He states 'there are no differences in deity, attributes, or essential nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God and has all the attributes of God' (251). If Giles thinks this is akin to Arianism either he does not know Arianism or he has not properly read Grudem, who goes on to say 'The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other and to the rest of

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9 Anselm, *De fide et de incarnatione Verbi*, in *Anselm of Canterbury*, (ed. and trans. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson; Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1975-1976), 3:13-37 (PL 158:265-84).

[sic] creation' (251). He states in the heading to this section that nothing can be said that will deny the full deity of all three members of the Trinity (248). He opposes tritheism (248) and asserts at length that there is only one God (238-40).

Underlying these accusations is Giles' argument that 'functionally differentiated' entails 'permanently subordinated in authority'. Is this so? Because Michael Hussey is a batsman and Glenn McGrath a bowler, does that mean the one was subordinate to the other when they played for Australia? Giles has taken a phrase here, a phrase there and built an accusatory case upon it, one with no substantial foundation.

## Theological issues

I have other questions for Giles of a *theological* nature. They concern not so much what he says as what he leaves out. His staunch advocacy of the complete deity of the Son is fine but as he himself admits he has not considered other pertinent and central matters on the Trinity. He is aware of them, confesses them, and acknowledges their importance. However, neglecting to take them fully into consideration can result in a fatally one-sided case. A brain is an excellent thing but only when combined with other body parts.

First, his argument raises important Christological considerations. Most in the Western Church assume Chalcedon (451) settled the Christological question; it did not. It created new problems only resolved at Constantinople II (553) and III (680-681). Chalcedon conveyed the impression that in the incarnation two natures came together to form one person. This had the appearance to many of Cyril's supporters of an undue concession to Nestorianism. Ultimately Cyril's Christology prevailed. What the later councils recognized is that the person of the incarnate Christ is that of the eternal Son of God. In the incarnation he assumed into union a human nature, which became the humanity of the Son, or Logos. Hence, in answer to the question of *who* Jesus is, the church replied that he is not a composite but is the eternal Son. Consequently, the incarnation is not some singularity. It is not a temporary expedient simply for the purpose of securing salvation. Christ's humanity is compatible with his divine person and thus congruent with him. In contrast, Giles' position requires some form of kenosis of deity in the incarnation and a similar kenosis of humanity at the resurrection. The former is needed since the relations between the incarnate Son and the Father cannot be read back into eternity. The latter is required since the inherent aspects of human creatureliness are swallowed up in his glorification since the derivative nature of the human activity in relation to the divine is not continued. However, we know that the Son's assumed human nature, body and soul, is at the right hand of God, his very presence being intercession. We know that the Son as man fulfils God's plan for creation according to Psalm 8 (Heb. 2:5ff). His humanity does not cease to be humanity, in indissoluble personal union but ever humanity and ever creaturely. This points to the *appropriateness* of the Son's becoming incarnate, as Anselm and Grudem both argue.

Second, Giles strenuously opposes any hint of subordination but misses the

point that *submission* is not incompatible with the full authority and power he rightly maintains belongs to the Son. The Son's self-emptying, his seeking the interests of the other in his incarnate ministry, is not alien to who God is. This is what God is like. The Son freely chose to become man. He did not regard his equality with God as something to be exploited. His actions recorded in the gospels mirrored his determination in eternity; they were far from incongruous. Wolfhart Pannenberg in recent times and Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century both wrote of the Father seeking glory through the work of his Son, of the Son bringing glory to the Father, and of the Holy Spirit speaking not of himself but of the Son; a revolving circle of glory, Gregory called it.<sup>10</sup> The problem both Giles and LMETS face is equating this with the command structure of an army, and with relationships in a fallen world in which exploitation occurs on a regular basis. This is to fall into the same trap against which Giles so trenchantly warns – using human relationships as the basis for making inferences about God. In this sense, the verb 'to subordinate' entails bringing another under dominion, with the result that the subordinate is compelled to act in a way his superior dictates; he has no choice in the matter. Giles is right to point out the inappropriateness of this language in a trinitarian context; it is the reason I have never used it. On the other hand, 'to submit' is a free action chosen willingly by the one who submits and is presented in the Bible as an act of love, for Christian believers are to submit to one another. This is how God exercises his sovereign omnipotence – in love, looking to the interests of the other, in the unity of his indivisible will with, as John Owen put it, its distinct operations in the three persons. The Son's refusal to exploit his divine status in eternity for his own advantage, his willing submission to the Father in his incarnate ministry, his looking to the interests of others; these are all pre-eminent examples of what this entails.

I leave the last word with Giles who, in an earlier work, says repeatedly that 'voluntary submission is godlike.'<sup>11</sup> If in this Giles recognizes that the expression of love towards the other is an outflow of who God is – and I think Bonaventure said something similar – we may have a way forward to sharpen our appreciation of who God is, deepen our worship, and give meaning and focus to the life of self-denying love to which we have been called.

### Abstract

Giles has made some valuable criticisms of language and arguments used by evangelicals who defend the idea that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in what they call 'role'. He defends the full equality of the trinitarian persons and correctly opposes hierarchical relations. However, he neglects the point that

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10 W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:320; Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit against the followers of Macedonius* (NPNF2 5:324).

11 K. Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 18, 31, 116, 117.

the relations of sending and being sent are irreversible. Moreover, in accusing scholars like Grudem of Arianism he has misrepresented what Grudem wrote. His accusations of implicit Arianism and tritheism are unfounded. Giles fails to consider the conciliar development of Christology; Jesus is the eternal Son incarnate. Ironically, he reads back fallen human structures into the Trinity and misses the self-giving love at its heart, whereby the Son's submission is an expression of his omnipotence and union with the Father.

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