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The Holy Trinity in Scripture, history, theology and worship A review article with response

by *Kevin Giles and Robert Latham*

Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004, 551 pp. \$24.99 ISBN 0875520006

It was with keen anticipation that I sat down to read this weighty tome on the Trinity by Robert Latham, an adjunct professor of Systematic Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia. Evangelical and 'conservative Reformed' (as Latham identifies himself) theologians have contributed very little to the renaissance in trinitarian theology of the last thirty years. This is the largest and most erudite book on the Trinity published so far by anyone in the evangelical family. Two specific matters were in my mind as I began. Firstly, what was his response to the now pervasive conservative evangelical doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son popularised by Wayne Grudem's widely used, *Systematic Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1994) and secondly, what was his response to my arguments that this teaching is basically heretical. Noticing right from the start that he has an appendix entitled, 'Kevin Giles on Subordinationism' I knew I would not be disappointed on these scores.

I was impressed as I read. After his general introduction he gives a helpful outline of the biblical teaching that demanded the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Then he turns to the historical sources to map out this development. What follows is not simply a summary of other theologians' work. Latham has read and mastered Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine, Calvin, Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, Pannenberg, T. F. Torrance and the Eastern orthodox theologians, Bulgakov, Lossky, and Staniloae. I found very little that I would want to differ with him these chapters. Often he favorably notes comments made that exclude subordinationism and modalism. In his twenty pages on Barth he argues that Barth lays greatest stress on divine unity. It is for this reason and others he has often been accused of modalism. Latham thinks this charge cannot stand although he sees Barth veering in this direction (289). Because of this stress on divine unity he finds no hint of subordinationism in Barth. His discussions of the work of Rahner, Moltmann and Pannenberg are helpful for evangelicals because unlike so many other studies on their work he does not set out simply to reflect their views. He reads and criticises them from the vantage point of historic trinitarian orthodoxy. I was least impressed with his chapter on T. F. Torrance. On the one hand he says, 'Torrance's treatment of the Trinity is probably the best one to date' (373), praising him for his total rejection of subordinationism (370), yet on the other hand he accuses him of a 'modalist tendency' (368, 373, cf. 377) – a charge I think is totally mistaken. What is distinctive about Torrance's theology of the Trinity is its profound commitment to the communal being of God. Why Latham omitted any detailed discussion of the work of the Greek Orthodox theo-

logian, John Zizioulas, was one matter that puzzled me. He is far more important than Sergius Bulgakov to whom he gives 16 pages.

What I found particularly helpful in Letham's exposition of the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity was his appreciation of the importance of divine order and his understanding of what this implied. Divine order he insists has nothing to do with hierarchical ordering, as the Arians erroneously held. It alludes rather to a 'fitting and suitable disposition' among the divine persons (400). One significant slip I noticed in these pages was his comment that Origen 'did not equate derivation of substance with inferiority' (107). I would argue that Origen's middle Platonism led him into just this error. For him a cause is always superior to what is caused because what is caused does not fully participate in the being of the ultimate cause. On this basis he eternally subordinated the Son in being and function to the Father.

More than once Letham takes up the supposed contrast between Western and Eastern teaching on the Trinity. Here he seems to be a little out of date. The trend today is to argue that this contrast has been overplayed. What we have in the early church is a number of significant individual contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity, not an Eastern and Western divide, and today the approach is usually eclectic. There was of course a growing divide from the time of Augustine until the late twentieth century as East and West went their own way. Many modern Eastern orthodox theologians emphasise these differences but contemporary Western theologians generally seek to transcend these differences by building their doctrine of the Trinity on the best of Western and Eastern insights. They are not beholden to any one tradition. Letham argues that the great danger for Western formulations of the Trinity is modalism and for Eastern subordinationism (2-7, 377, 500). In the context of his introductory remarks on this matter he says that the great danger for evangelicals is to give precedence to personal interpretations of the Bible, setting them in opposition to 'the teachings of the Church' (5). Letham is to be commended for his high view of the interpretative and credal tradition that guides his reading of scripture throughout his book. In his later extended treatment of the East-West debate (201-51) he begins with a discussion of the *filioque* clause, arguing that 'the Cyrillian phrase *from the Father in the Son*' is the best solution (219).

To conclude his book Letham has a final major section entitled 'Critical Issues.' At this point the book falls away badly. He first of all returns to his supposed contrast between Western and Eastern models of the Trinity again accusing Torrance for playing down divine differentiation (377). Then he gives what he considers are 'the vital parameters' of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. The three persons are one and yet eternally differentiated as Father, Son and Spirit; they are one in being – 'there are no gradations of deity;' they interpenetrate one another and work inseparably, and 'there is an order among the persons,' understood rightly as an 'appropriate disposition' (382-3). What is missing is that the divine three are indivisible in power and authority, a fundamental element in the historic doctrine of the Trinity. In the New Testament the divine three are all called 'Lord', in the Athanasian Creed (taken as the basis for trinitarian ortho-

doxy for 1500 years in the West) all three are said to be 'almighty,' the Westminster Confession says they are one in 'power' (2.3), and in every orthodox theological text I have ever read all three divine persons are said to share the attribute of omnipotence. Omnipotence, it is to be noted, is a superlative term. There cannot be degrees of omnipotence. The omission at this point of any mention of the indivisible power and authority of the divine three comes as a great surprise. In what precedes he has time and time again commended affirmations by the great theologians he has been expounding on the co-equality of the divine persons and on their shared omnipotence.

His summary of what he calls the 'vital parameters' of orthodoxy prepares the reader for what is to follow. On pages 389-404, in opposition to so much of what he has argued previously, he gives support to the contemporary novel evangelical idea that the Son must in eternity obey the Father. Letham agrees with my argument that to speak of 'the eternal subordination of the Son is outside the boundaries of the tradition' (490, 399). Instead he tells us that he teaches 'the submission of the Son eternally' (490). How this differs from 'the eternal subordination of the Son' completely escapes me. Surely if the Son is, and cannot be otherwise, than the eternally submissive Son he is the eternally subordinated Son. The reason he takes up this matter he says is to counter 'the feminist' agenda 'to eliminate anything appearing to give credence to submission by the Son to the Father in the Trinity.' To argue for a co-equal Trinity as others and I do, he holds, leads to 'a thoroughgoing homogenization of the [divine] persons in fully mutual relations' (392). This then becomes a way to underpin 'ontologically' 'complete reciprocity between male and female in human society' (392). I take it he believes the reverse is also true. An argument for the eternal subordination or submissiveness of the Son gives an 'ontological' basis for men ruling over women in perpetuity. This is his agenda. In this brief polemical aside attacking egalitarians Letham conveniently ignores the fact that it was hierarchalists who first grounded the *permanent* subordination of women on the supposed *eternal* subordination of the Son and they have been the ones to have developed and promoted this novel and dangerous theological argument.

Letham is aware that he is treading on dangerous ground and so he 'emphatically' asserts first of all that he is not speaking 'of "command structures," "hierarchy," and "boss-servant relationships"' (398), or suggesting that the Son is 'inferior' to the Father (399). He is speaking rather of the Son's 'loving submission to the Father' (392). He then goes on to deny most of these things. He argues that 'the Son submits in eternity to the Father,' 'Being God he serves the Father' (402), the obedience the Son renders to the Father is 'unconditional obedience' (401), and 'his human obedience reflects his divine submission' (403). On this last matter he adds, 'it is impossible to separate the human obedience of Christ from who he is' (396). I take it this means 'his being.' He is not just temporally submissive as the incarnate Christ, as in the tradition he has just outlined, or functionally submissive. He *is* the eternally submissive Son who is set under the Father's authority. His subordination/submissiveness defines his person. Surely also if the Son is eternally set under the Father's authority this is inviolable hi-

erarchical ordering? How the eternal submission of the Son can be reconciled with the condemnation in the Second Helvetic Confession of those who teach the Son's eternal 'subservience' or 'subordination' is another important question that Letham needs to answer.

Letham offers three arguments in support of his doctrine of the 'the submission of the Son eternally.' First he appeals to Karl Barth. It is true that Barth speaks of the eternal subordination and obedience of the Son but always dialectically. The Son of God for Barth is eternally at one and the same time both the sovereign electing God and the elect man called to obedience, both Lord and servant. This dialectical understanding of the Son of God, foundational to Barth's Christology, is missed by Letham. What is more for Barth while the Father is not the Son and vice versa, the Son is not other than the Father. The humiliation of the Son is part of the revelation of the Father. In the Son we see that the Father is also Lord and servant. This unity between the Father and the Son so basic to Barth is negated when it is taught that the Son is eternally subordinated or to be submissive to the Father. The Son then becomes other than the Father in what he does and reveals. Divine unity is breached. Letham's appeal to Barth at this point to support the eternal submission of the Son *simpliciter* comes completely out of left field. In his lengthy exposition of Barth's thinking set out earlier in the book Letham gives no hint that he thinks Barth endorses 'the submission of the Son eternally' (398). Indeed, he highlights Barth's stress on divine unity, a stress that excludes absolutely dividing the Father and the Son in authority, or in any other way.

Secondly, Letham argues that the human nature of Christ demands his eternal subservience, an idea he has not found in the tradition he has just outlined in great detail. He reasons that if Christ was subordinated in taking flesh to become man, as all agree, he must be eternally subordinated because he continues to be man. Here Letham fails to make the theologically important distinction between Christ *asarkos* (Christ as man without flesh) and Christ *ensarkos* (incarnate, literally, in the flesh). In becoming incarnate (literally infleshed) the Son of God freely humbled himself becoming the second Adam, who was perfectly obedient even to death on a cross. It is true he continues as God and man after his resurrection, but not as God in the flesh. What Letham seems to miss completely in this unfortunate digression in his book is that the united voice of the New Testament is that after his resurrection and exaltation the Son is no longer the 'submissive Son' who obeys the Father but the Lord and head of the universe.

Thirdly, Letham appeals to Eastern Orthodox theologians in support of his doctrine of 'the submission of the Son eternally' (Bulgakov, Bobrinsky and Meyendorff). This is a surprising move because Letham repeatedly warns of the subordinationistic tendency in Eastern trinitarianism (2-7, 377, 500). His appeal to Bulgakov at this point is even more surprising. It seems to contradict his warnings on Bulgakov's theology given earlier in his extended exposition of his writings. He says Bulgakov builds his doctrine of the Trinity on 'human experience,' embraces 'pantheism,' and he tells us that he has been censured by his own Church for 'infusing masculine and feminine elements into the members

of the Trinity' (338).

Finally, Letham asks, is there any thing in scripture that would support his novel doctrine of 'the submission of the Son eternally'? He admits 'there is very little' (403). The only two texts he thinks may give some support (Phil 2:5ff and Heb. 5:4-5) seem to me to count directly against his thesis. These texts suggest that the Son is subordinated, or must be submissive, to the Father only in his incarnate existence, 'in the days of his flesh' (Heb. 4:7).

How what Letham teaches in these few pages significantly differs from what Grudem and other American evangelicals are teaching and from the 1999 synod endorsed position of the Australian Anglican diocese of Sydney completely escapes me. He avoids the confusing and confused use of the words 'function' and 'role' but he still eternally subordinates the Son to the Father in authority. What he first finds rejected in the Bible and time and time again in the historical sources, namely the eternal subordination of the Son, in the final section of his book he endorses and advocates. The Son is *eternally* set under the Father's authority like women are *permanently* set under the authority of men in the church and the home. Women's subordination is grounded 'ontologically' on a Trinity where the Father eternally rules and the Son eternally obeys.

The chapter following on 'The Trinity, Worship and Prayer, adds very little. Letham seems unaware of the many excellent discussions on the doxological dimension to trinitarian faith.

The book ends with two appendixes that are reprints of articles Dr Letham has written – one countering an essay by Professor Gilbert Bilezikian arguing that the evangelical doctrine of the eternal subordination or submission of the Son is heretical ('Hermeneutical Bungee-Jumping: Subordination in the Trinity' *JETS*, 40 [1997] 57-68) and one reviewing my book, *The Trinity and Subordinationism* (IVP, 2002). He summarily dismisses Bilezikian, arguing that he is the one who has fallen into heresy. In all the rhetorical scorn he pours on this article one could easily miss the fact that on his most fundamental point Bilezikian is absolutely correct. Neither the Bible nor the tradition give any support whatsoever to the doctrine of the eternal subordination/submission of the Son. With one voice this is considered heresy.

In his second appendix he warmly commends my book 'as a powerfully written and often compelling argument' (490). Many of his criticisms deal with my arguments against the permanent subordination of women, a cause close to his heart. In reference to my views on the Trinity he believes I do not sufficiently emphasise divine order *and* differentiation and I am too Western, which leads me, he says, to embrace 'some troubling modalist tendencies' (494). As I am emphatic on divine unity and differentiation, embracing a fully communal understanding of the Godhead, and the theological hero of my case for a co-equal Trinity is Athanasius, an Eastern theologian, I do not find his criticism compelling. In my forthcoming book, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Zondervan, 2006), I say much more on divine order utilising Letham's own important insight that divine order alludes to 'disposition,' not hierarchy.

I think this book should be renamed, *Two Views on the Trinity*, because this is what we have. First Letham gives the historic orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and then in brief the contemporary heterodox evangelical and Reformed doctrine of the Trinity. What is so sad is that an issue that should not influence in any way our formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity, the man-woman relationship, has been allowed to do just this. As a result several hundred pages of excellent work have been undermined by a brief concluding attempt to define divine Father-Son relations in terms of hierarchically conceived male-female relations.

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A reply to Kevin Giles

To begin, let me thank Dr. Giles for his kind suggestion that I reply to his review, and the Reviews Editor for his invitation to do so. In the midst of his spirited report Dr. Giles has made many kind comments, for which I am grateful. I shall address them as they appear in his review.

First, Giles' interpretation of a few readings requires a caveat or two. He says I criticise T.F. Torrance for a modalist tendency; I actually refer to 'Gunton's criticisms of a modalist tendency [in T.F. Torrance]' (368) in support of which I suggest that there is 'a slight hint' (373). Again, where he says I speak of the Son rendering 'unconditional obedience' to the Father (401), I am in fact referring to the Orthodox theologian, Boris Bobrinskoy. Later, Giles says I argue that Dr Gilbert Bilezikian has fallen into heresy; I merely say that Bilezikian's position requires him to demonstrate how he avoids heresy (Nestorianism and modalism).

Moving up a gear, Giles is critical of what he sees as my acceptance of a polarization between the Eastern and Western views of the trinity. It is worth pointing out that I argue that the difference between Augustine and the Cappadocians has been exaggerated, and that it is 'incontestable that [Augustine] operated within the Christian tradition bequeathed by the Cappadocians' (200). In this we agree. However, to downplay the differences in subsequent centuries between East and West on the trinity is to ignore a millennium and a half of church history, besides the *filioque* and its entailments. The Eastern church is strikingly different from the West in liturgy and piety, areas which are the heart of Eastern Christianity. It is a difference between a pneumatocentric and a Christocentric view of salvation and the Christian life. There is good reason to connect this to the respective historical positions on the *filioque*. These differences cannot be airbrushed out of history; they must be acknowledged if progress is to be made in true Christian unity. Even a cursory reference to service books such as *The Festal Menaion* should be sufficient to demonstrate how central is the trinity to the liturgy, piety, and faith of Orthodoxy, whereas the West offers a huge contrast, as any random survey of Western Christians will immediately show. It is the East, not the West, that developed the distinction between the essence and energies of God. It is the West, not the East, that relegated the trinity to an afterthought in its systematic theologies.

On a more explicitly theological level, Giles charges me with neglecting the

obvious point that the three persons of the trinity are indivisible in power. This, he thinks, contributes to a theology where the Son is subordinated to the Father. However, my highly critical comments on Moltmann focus precisely on this very point, that Moltmann has reacted against the omnipotence of God, positing a fellowship of persons without power. Since this is earlier in my book (298-312), the attentive reader will already have noted it. There I cite Barth's accusation that Moltmann's God is a pauper, follow Weinandy in his trenchant refutation of the recent fad for a co-suffering God, and charge Moltmann with producing a castrated theology. Of course God is omnipotent, a point stressed in the Biblical section as well as later, and – as Giles rightly says – in The Westminster Confession of Faith, to which I subscribe by my ordination vows. In the section Giles cites, I point out that 'the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are identical in being. Each person is the whole God. The three together are not more God than any one by himself. Since all three are one identical being, no one person is of higher or lesser status than any other. There are no gradations of deity' (382).

The main area of disagreement between Giles and myself is the section on pages 392-404. This refers to the relations between the Father and the Son and, specifically, to the question of whether the obedience rendered to the Father by the incarnate Son, consequent on his being sent into the world by the Father, reflects eternal antecedent realities. This, I suggest, is so, with the constant reminder that it must be understood in the context of the complete identity of being of the trinity, and the full co-equality of the trinitarian persons. Giles denies this is so, considering such a claim to undermine the Son's status as one in being with the Father. He insists that the obedient submission of the incarnate Son concerns his redemptive work only and cannot be taken in any way to reflect his relation to the Father in eternity.

Here we need to pay close attention to the English language. I consistently use the term 'submission' to denote aspects of the relation of the Son toward the Father in the unity of the indivisible trinity. Giles repeatedly refers to this argument as entailing 'subordination' and even tosses in the word 'subservient'. According to the *OED*, 'submission' refers to 'the action of yielding to another person'; this is an attribute of love, preferring the other, which I affirm as applied to the Son. 'Subordinate', on the other hand, denotes someone 'of inferior rank', 'secondary, minor'; applied to the Son, this is something I deny, for in the trinity there is a loving submission among equals. Giles' claim that 'surely if the Son is, and cannot be otherwise, than the eternally submissive Son he is the eternally subordinated Son' simply does not follow. Still less is the term 'subservient' (slavishly submissive, servile, obsequious, *OED*) applicable. Giles considers my use of these terms to be synonymous; I do not.

The issue, at root, boils down to Christology. My argument is built on a concatenation of the great conciliar statements on the trinity (Nicea I, Constantinople I) and Christology (Ephesus, Chalcedon, Constantinople II, Constantinople III). The third to the sixth ecumenical councils progressively affirmed the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria. In this, the person of Christ was not a composite amalgam of two natures. Rather, the eternal Son assumed into union a human

nature conceived in the womb of the virgin Mary. Thus, in answer to the question 'who is Jesus Christ?' the Fathers responded by affirming that he is the second person of the trinity, the eternal Son or Logos, made flesh. In terms of his personal identity, there is unbroken continuity. Therefore his assumed humanity is compatible with who he is eternally. From this I argue that his human obedience is compatible with his identity as the eternal Son of God, identical in being with the Father, co-equal in status. Failing this, we would be left with a Nestorian division in the person of Christ.

Giles criticises my reference to Barth in support of the idea that the obedience of the incarnate Christ rests upon intra-trinitarian roots. He suggests Barth should be read dialectically. However, my reading of Barth coincides with such as Gunton, in Colyer (ed) (*How to Read T. F. Torrance*, IVP, 2001), John Thompson (*Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, OUP, 1994), and Bromiley (*An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*, T&T Clark, 1979). The volume of the *Church Dogmatics* from which this reference comes (IV/1, 191-205) was first published in German in June 1953. By that time, Barth had moved to a greater or lesser degree to analogy (1931 according to Von Balthasar, 1936 according to McCormack).

However, others than Barth have argued this way. P.T. Forsyth, for one, with language that goes further than mine, and which I do *not* use, wrote that 'subordination is not inferiority, and it is God-like. The principle is embedded in the very cohesion of the eternal trinity and it is inseparable from the unity, fraternity, and true equality of men. It is not a mark of inferiority to be subordinate, to have an authority, to obey. It is divine.' ('The divine self-emptying' in *God the Holy Father* [1897; reprint 1957: London: Independent Press, 42-43]). Also in *Marriage: Its Ethic and Religion* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912) 70-71, he states at length, 'Now the nature of that God is Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. Father and Son co-exist, co-equal in the Spirit of holiness, i.e. of perfection. But Father and Son is a relation inconceivable except the Son be obedient to the Father. The perfection of the Son and the perfecting of his holy work lay, not in his suffering but in his obedience. And, as he was eternal Son, it meant an eternal obedience; for the supreme work of Christ, so completely identified with his person, could not be done by anything which was not as eternal as his person. But obedience is not conceivable without some form of subordination. Yet in his very obedience the Son was co-equal with the Father; the Son's yielding will was no less divine than the Father's exigent will. Therefore, in the very nature of God, subordination implies no inferiority. It is as divine as rule, for it is self-subordination on an infinite scale; it is not enforced. It is sacrifice, it is not mere resignation. It is not slavery, but willing service.'

And again, 'There is an obedience bound up with the supreme dignity of Christian love, so that where most love is, there also is most obedience.' These references are cited by Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (49), who also refers (64) to similar statements by Hans Urs von Balthasar in his *Epilog*.

Giles raises some questions concerning the continuation of Christ's humanity – some break at the resurrection seems inescapable if his position is to be maintained. 'It is true he continues as God and man after his resurrection, but

not as God in the flesh,' he claims. What exactly does Giles mean here? This needs some unpacking and explanation. Of course, there is not a total identity between Christ's states of humiliation and exaltation, as for us there is a glorious transformation at the resurrection, with a continued identity and permanent exalted – but dependent – human creatureliness. With all Christ's resurrection entails, his humanity remains humanity – a point Giles strongly affirms – and so, according to his humanity he remains in some sense submissively dependent. If this were eradicated he would no longer be human and so we could no longer be saved. In turn, there has to be something about the Son *qua* Son that enables this permanent union with the assumed humanity to be congruent.

Giles goes on, 'What Letham seems to miss completely ... is that the united voice of the New Testament is that after his resurrection and exaltation the Son is no longer the "submissive Son" who obeys the Father but the Lord and head of the universe.' Giles here pits submission among the persons of the trinity against rule by the trinity over creation, a confusion of categories.

Readers should be aware of precisely what irks Giles. In the disputed section, I affirm that the fact that the Son, rather than the Father or the Holy Spirit, became incarnate was not random or capricious but fitting (following Anselm), suitable to who the Son is eternally; that the incarnate Son reveals the eternal Son (or else he would not be who he eternally is); that human obedience to God is not servile, as Moltmann supposes, but godly; that Jesus' human obedience saves us; that the Son's humanity is not limited to the time of salvation only but is for ever; that it is congruous for the Son to unite to himself a human nature and in that nature to yield obedience to the Father; and so that the human obedience of Christ has a basis in the eternal Son of God. I go on to stress that this is not subordinationism; that it is undergirded by the faithfulness of God, since he is as he reveals himself to us, or we would have no secure basis for knowing him; and, finally, that the Son's obedience to the Father is compatible with his full and unabbreviated deity.

If Giles is unhappy with any of these points he seems to me to be in danger of embarking on a path that would eventually lead to Nestorianism, by driving a wedge between the natures of Christ, or of modalism, by undermining the truth of our knowledge of God by considering the relation between the incarnate Son and the Father to be a singularity. Moreover, Giles would appear to lead us towards a position in which the economic trinity no longer reveals the immanent trinity.

Despite the polemics, from friendly private communication it is clear to me that Giles wishes to be within the bounds of trinitarian orthodoxy. He emphatically rejects Nestorianism and modalism as I do subordinationism. However, in my estimation he has not given sufficiently careful attention to the dogmatic connections.

Neither should we forget that the central purpose of our attention to the trinity is the worship and service of our lives, as I attempt to show in the book with the help of a plethora of liturgical trinitarian prayers from both East and West. With this, I am sure Giles agrees. Our goal is unfettered worship and accurate

understanding of the revelation of the glorious and indivisible trinity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, three irreducible persons, one and indivisible in love, grace, and power, to whom be glory unto the ages of the ages.

*Robert Letham
Wilmington, Delaware, USA*

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