

Giles, Kevin. *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017. 128 pp. Softcover. USD 18.00.

With the publishing of his *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), Wayne A. Grudem (PhD in New Testament, University of Cambridge) popularized a hierarchical view of the Trinity among complementarian evangelical and Reformed Christians to support their social agenda—the permanent, functional subordination of women to men in the family, church, and society. In short, Grudem argues that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are equal in essence, but the Son and the Holy Spirit are subordinated eternally in role, function, and authority to the Father (and the Holy Spirit similarly to the Son). Likewise, God created men and women equal in essence, but women are permanently subordinated in role, function, and authority to men. It is in response to this so-called “complementarian doctrine of the Trinity” that Kevin Giles writes his newest book, *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity*.

Kevin Giles (ThD in New Testament, Australian College of Theology) is a native Australian, who has served as an Anglican parish minister for more than forty years. Though primarily a ministry practitioner, he is a theologian in his own right and has been heavily involved in scholarship. A plethora of published books, articles, and book reviews—both scholarly and popular—bear his name. His earlier writings focused on ecclesiology in general (*What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2005]) and, particularly, church leadership (*Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians* [Melbourne, Australia: Collins Dove, 1989]; *Patterns of Ministry Among the First Christians*, rev. and enl. 2nd ed. [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017]). However, the contemporary question regarding gender and church leadership more particularly compelled him, as an egalitarian, to make a biblical case for gender equality in print (*Women and Their Ministry: A Case for Equal Ministries in the Church Today* [East Malvern, Victoria, Australia: Dove Communications, 1977]; *Created Woman* [Canberra, Australia: Acorn, 1985]; *Better Together: Equality in Christ* [Brunswick East, Australia: Acorn, 2010]; and coedited with Denise Cooper-Clarke, *Women and Men: One in Christ* [Melbourne, Australia: Christians for Biblical Equality Melbourne, 2016]). Also, due to the recent “turn to the Trinity” in the gender debate between complementarians and egalitarians, Giles has conducted in-depth research on the doctrine of the Trinity. He has written a handful of books—including this newest one that is being reviewed here—and articles, which argue against the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity, and defend the classical doctrine of the Trinity enshrined in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed (*The Trinity & Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002]; *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006]; *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012]).

In *The Rise and Fall of the Complementarian Doctrine of the Trinity*, Giles offers a history of the key events, persons, and publications that led to the formulation (1977), popularization (1994), and the subsequent rejection (2016) of the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity among evangelical and Reformed theologians (chs. 1–2). In chapter three, he argues against what he believes to be the primary explanation for why this doctrine came to be in the first place—namely a wrong understanding of how to “do” evangelical theology properly. Some basic hermeneutical principles are recommended to his readers before he launches into chapter four, in which he provides an example for how he believes theology should be “done.” This example is his account of the development of the classical doctrine of the Trinity in Christian history. The book concludes, in its final chapter, with some suggestions for how to move forward in the gender discussion now that the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity has “risen” and “fallen.”

Giles should be affirmed for providing a very helpful record of the history of the “turn to the Trinity” in the gender debate among evangelical and Reformed Christians that gives context to the ongoing contemporary discussion. Based on my own research on the topic (see Matthew L. Tinkham Jr., “Neo-subordinationism: The Alien Argumentation in the Gender Debate,” *AUSS* 55.2 [2017]: 237–290), it appears that Giles’s book gives an accurate account of the rise of the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity. As Giles asserts, George W. Knight III does seem to be the one to have first formulated this novel doctrine with his book, *The New Testament Teaching on the Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). The doctrine gained little influence, however, until Wayne A. Grudem and Bruce A. Ware (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) promulgated their development of it in *Systematic Theology* (1994) and *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), respectively. Afterward, the doctrine did indeed spread like wildfire throughout the evangelical and Reformed community, as Giles carefully recounts.

While there may be some scriptural validity to the idea that the relationality of God is imaged in humanity, and thus the reciprocal love and equality of the Godhead should be a model for human relationships in general (see Gen 1:26–28 and the use of אֶחָד [’ehād], “one,” in Deut 6:4 and Gen 2:24; Tinkham Jr., “Neo-subordinationism,” 289–290; Charles Sherlock, *The Doctrine of Humanity*, *Contours of Christian Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], 26–72; contra Giles, *Rise and Fall*, 110), one can also appreciate Giles’s desire to remove the Trinity entirely from the discussion of gender relations (45, 110; see Tinkham Jr., “Neo-subordinationism,” 290). It is theologically dangerous for both complementarians and egalitarians to read their social agendas into the being of God; this amounts to “theological projection” (Giles, *Rise and Fall*, 12). To put it the way that Giles states it, “[T]he minute the doctrine of the Trinity and the relationship of the sexes get mixed up, good theology goes out the door” (23). But more than this, “[i]n doing so we end up with a God we have imagined, not the God revealed in Scripture” (ibid.). This in effect, then, is a case of idolatry, the

creating of a human-made god in our own image (see Tinkham Jr., “Neosubordinationism,” 290).

Additionally, Giles’s fourth chapter provides a succinct, well-articulated, and historically accurate account of the development of the classical view of the Trinity that is considered by many evangelicals and Reformed theologians to be the orthodox teaching. One may disagree with Giles about how well this doctrine actually corresponds to the teaching of the Trinity found in the biblical canon. Nevertheless, his explication of the classical doctrine of the Trinity is helpful for understanding how it developed historically and how it is expressed today by those who affirm it.

Though Giles’s new book has these and other strengths worthy of affirmation, no human work is perfect. This one in particular has a few areas of weakness, a couple of which will be highlighted here. To begin, it should be noted that there is sufficient evidence to say that Giles’s supposed “fall” of the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity in June 2016 may not be as definitive as he makes it out to be in the book. Undoubtedly, the summer of 2016 was an important time for the evangelical and Reformed scholarly community regarding the complementarian doctrine of the Trinity. A theological “civil war”—as Giles calls it—indeed erupted in the blogosphere in June 2016 and the months that followed, during which many complementarians stated their objections to the hierarchically ordered Trinity of Grudem and Ware. In chapter two, Giles helpfully recounts this “civil war,” as well as other succeeding events that led to the supposed demise of Grudem and Ware’s doctrine of the Trinity. In summary, he writes, “It seems that today there are very few evangelical or Reformed supporters of the complementarian hierarchically ordered doctrine of the Trinity” (*Rise and Fall*, 50). This statement may be true in regard to the scholarly community, which seems to have mostly parted ways with Grudem and Ware over the Trinity, rejecting a hierarchically ordered Trinity and affirming the classical Trinitarian doctrine of the ecumenical creeds.

However, this statement is certainly untrue among seminary students and lay church members. Firstly, Grudem’s *Systematic Theology* continues to be a very important textbook for seminary students who are preparing for ministry. I have personally heard evangelical seminary students present papers at the annual meetings of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) after June 2016 that promoted Grudem and Ware’s hierarchically ordered Trinity. Secondly, Grudem and Ware’s “literalistic” approach to Scripture has deeply influenced many lay members to adopt his doctrine of the Trinity, since such a hermeneutical approach purports to simply and plainly take the Bible as it reads. I can bear witness to lay members outside of and within my own faith tradition that cling tightly to the hierarchical Trinity of Grudem and Ware. Anecdotally, I remember a lay member that attended an ETS session just last year (November 2017), who made an argument in favor of Grudem and Ware’s Trinity in a comment to the panel of presenters of that session. All this is to say that, while a hierarchical Trinity has lost sway among evangelical and Reformed theologians, it certainly is “alive and well” among seminary

students and lay members. Thus, more work needs to be done to educate them regarding the biblical view of the Trinity that affirms the full equality of the Father, Son, and Spirit ontologically and functionally in eternity.

By far the greatest weakness of the book, in my view, is Giles's incorrect identification of the primary reason for the rise of Grudem and Ware's hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity. Giles and I can agree that some of "the complementarian theologians got the doctrine of the Trinity wrong because they had a wrong understanding of how evangelical theology is 'done'" (67). The primary reason for the rise of Grudem and Ware's doctrine of the Trinity does appear to be due to an insufficient hermeneutical and methodological approach to interpreting Scripture.

But what exactly is the problem with their approach? Giles suggests that Grudem and Ware's neglect of allowing the ancient creedal confessions of Christianity to shape their theological conclusions about the Trinity causes them to step off the path of theological and biblical orthodoxy (67–68). For Giles, then, "This is a call to return to the creedal and confessional basis of the doctrine of the Trinity as criterion on which to evaluate . . . alternatives" (31). Thus, his fourth chapter is utilized to propose a *prima Scriptura* approach (which in actual practice turns out to be a *prima communitas* approach) in which "the collective [exegetical and theological] wisdom of the whole Christian community, past and the present" ("tradition 1," as he calls it), is utilized as a "source" of theology" to "prescribe how Scripture is to be read" (76, 71, 75; emphasis added). This approach, he believes, is in step with the Protestant Reformation's understanding of *sola Scriptura* (75) and should replace or, at the least, redefine the *sola Scriptura* approach, as it is understood by modern evangelicals, because such an approach is said to be insufficient for resolving theological disputes (76, 71–74). Setting up a "straw man," he then caricatures *sola Scriptura* as "*solo scripture*" (75). Therefore, for Giles, if Grudem and Ware had only employed his proposed *prima Scriptura* hermeneutic, instead of a *sola Scriptura* hermeneutic, their doctrine of the Trinity would have never come to be.

However, as John C. Peckham persuasively demonstrates in his book, *Canonical Theology: The Biblical Canon, Sola Scriptura, and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), interpreting Scripture through the "lens" of the early Christian creeds and tradition is simply inadequate to prevent deviant theological views from arising. The reason for this is because the creeds and tradition themselves must also be interpreted, and have been interpreted in various and diverse ways (as exemplified by this present debate over the Trinity between complementarians and egalitarians, both of whom rigorously claim to be in alignment with the tradition). Peckham compellingly argues that a *sola, prima, tota, and analogia Scriptura* approach, properly understood (see *ibid.*, 140–165), along with a canonical-theological methodology—that is grounded upon solid exegesis of Scripture (that correctly utilizes the historical-grammatical method) and employs the practice of *epoché* (bracketing) as much as is possible in sinful human flesh—is alone sufficient and authoritative for adjudicating controversies, such as the one addressed

here regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Such an approach—in Peckham’s view, as well as in mine—is preferable to the inadequate communitarian approaches of those, like Giles, who instead insist on turning to extra-biblical materials—the creeds of the Christian councils and the writings of the early church fathers who lived in the first five centuries CE (e.g., Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, the Capadocian fathers, Augustine, etc.)—for theological answers (see *ibid.*, 166–195).

Thus, as I understand it, the real hermeneutical and methodological problem behind the rise of Grudem and Ware’s doctrine of the Trinity is not a *sola Scriptura* approach to biblical interpretation or forgetting to consult the Christian creeds and tradition as they constructed their Trinitarian doctrine (which they evidentially did by the many references and appeals to the tradition in their writings on the Trinity) but the employment of an approach to Scripture that can be characterized as excessively “literalistic.” In general, their approach seems not to apply properly the analytical tools of the historical-grammatical method to their reading of Trinitarian texts in Scripture, nor to “bracket” appropriately the presuppositions that they bring to their reading (in this case, their social-cultural perspective that leads them to read the titles “Father” and “Son” not exegetically and canonically, but “literalistically” in harmony with their contemporary, complementarian understanding of those terms [see Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 249]).

In the particular case of their doctrine of the Trinity, Grudem and Ware, among other hermeneutical errors, appear to radicalize Rahner’s Rule (i.e., “*The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity*” [Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel, *Milestones in Catholic Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 22; emphasis original]). They “literalistically” read the unique experiences and actions of submission in the Trinitarian economy into the eternal life and being of the triune God and his immanent intra-Trinitarian relations (though they do this selectively, seemingly in order to support their theological agenda; e.g., Ware recognizes the submission of the Son to the Spirit during his incarnate ministry, but chooses not to read this into the immanent life of God seemingly because to do so would contradict his thesis [see Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, 88–94]). This “literalistic” reading neglects the consistent practice of what is known as “partitive exegesis” properly employed (the task of determining whether what is said in a particular biblical passage about the Son in his incarnation pertains primarily to his *divine* nature or to his *human* nature in the unfolding plan of redemption). Furthermore, it apparently fails to realize the *analogical* nature of human language in “God-talk,” at least in the issue at hand. In my view, this is what should have been the focus of Giles’s critique, rather than caricaturing the *sola Scriptura* approach and chastising that caricature.

Despite the aforementioned shortcomings, Giles’s new book is highly recommended to anyone who has an interest in understanding the history of the “turn to the Trinity” in the gender debate, both among evangelical and Reformed Christians.

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