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WASHINGTON (RNS)—For centuries, theologians have debated the Holy Trinity. For decades, evangelical Christians have argued over proper roles for men and women. Now, the two fights are merging into one.

Some scholars, drawing support from their interpretations of the Bible, link a belief that women should be submissive to men with a belief that Jesus is eternally subordinate to God the Father.

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

The relatively private and esoteric theological discussion went public at a recent meeting of the [Evangelical Theological Society](#). In a gathering where papers typically are politely delivered and received, a 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 Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in his paper titled “Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles.”

Ware cited the Bible’s use of father-son terminology as demonstrating an “eternal relationship” rather than an “ad hoc arrangement.”

“We have scriptural revelation that clearly says that the Son came down out of heaven to do the will of his Father,” he wrote.

Kevin Giles, an Australian who wrote a [2006 book](#) disputing the idea of Jesus’ eternal subordination to God, countered Ware’s views with his paper on “The Father and the Son: Divided or Undivided Power and Authority.”

“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.

The suggestion that Jesus is eternally subordinate in authority denies he has the same power and essence as God and the Holy Spirit, Giles insisted.

Beyond the scholarly meeting, the debate continues between two groups that have differed on gender matters. The [Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood](#), for one, believes men have the leadership roles in the church and the home. On the other side, the group Christians for Biblical Equality promotes “gift-based,” rather than gender-based, ministry that supports women serving at various levels in the church and in the home.

Mimi Haddad is president of the equality group and the leader of the [Gender and Evangelicals Study Group](#) within the Evangelical Theological Society that brought the scholars together for discussion at the society’s meeting.

“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 [Phoenix Seminary](#) professor, says the ongoing discussion pits what often are called complementarians—those supporting different roles for men and women—against egalitarians—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 of the Bible verses 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 eternally authoritative over God the Son “unconvincing.” But Ware, from Southern Seminary, believes 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.

Giles argues that proponents of Jesus’ eternal subordination to God the Father are guilty of “[Arian heresy](#),” a fourth century teaching that denied the full divinity of Christ. He believes that viewpoint contradicts the Evangelical Theological Society’s doctrinal statement, which says the members of the Trinity are “one in essence, equal in power and glory.”

And where does this leave the third member of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit—who arrived on the scene after the resurrected Jesus ascended to

heaven?

“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.”

Francis Beckwith, president of the Evangelical Theological Society, said there is a “pretty vigorous debate” over the issue, but he doesn’t think it threatens anyone’s membership within the academic organization.

“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.”

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