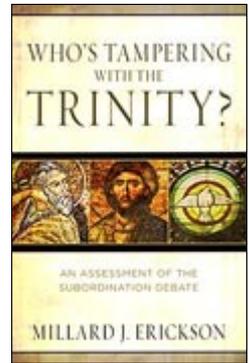


Who's tampering with the Trinity?

An assessment of the subordination debate

Millard J Erickson (Kregal Publications, 2009)



What has the Trinity got to do with women leaders? Why would one want to read a book about the Trinity? Well, this book is not exactly easy reading, but the subtitle is a clue about why it's important. The reason that the Trinity is currently a hot topic among some evangelicals is that currently there is a debate raging between those who think that Jesus is eternally subordinate to the Father and those who think that Jesus is equal with the Father. And the reason this affects women leaders is that those evangelicals who take the former position argue that this means that women are permanently subordinated to men—in the church and in the home.

This book is the latest contribution to the debate, and tries (apart from the title, which is rather a give-away on the author's stance) to be even handed in weighing up the arguments on both sides. And it's a complex issue. It is bound to be, when we are talking about evangelicals who are committed to scripture on both sides of the debate, both arguing from scripture, backed up by tradition—the way particular passages have been interpreted in the past.

Cynical followers of this debate might wonder whether those who have more or less lost (or at least not won) the case for keeping women in their place on exegetical grounds (based on 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 14, and 1 Corinthians 11:3), have now shifted the emphasis of the argument to the wider canvass of the apparent parallel between God and Christ and man and woman, which also derives from 1 Corinthians 11 but has become an argument about the nature of God. This book seeks to explain the debate and come to a conclusion about where the weight of evidence lies.

After an introduction to the debate, the next chapters outline the case for each 'side'. Erickson gives them the names 'gradational-authority' and 'equivalent-authority', discussing later in the book why he avoids the word 'complementarian', which he believes the 'gradational-authority' side have wrongly appropriated, when it could more rightly be applied to those often referred to as 'egalitarian'. If this sounds like splitting hairs, unfortunately much of the book may appear like that—but a lot hangs, especially for women leaders, on the outcome. So if you have some grasp of the theology of the Trinity and you enjoy close argument and logic and want to understand this debate better, then this is a valuable book.

Other chapters cover the criteria for evaluating evidence, and biblical, historical, philosophical, theological and practical issues. In each chapter, Erickson evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of each position. While coming to a provisional conclusion at the end of each chapter, it is not until the end that he states that 'the equivalence view is, on the basis of the criteria we have outlined, considerably the stronger of the two views and thus to be accepted over the gradational view.' He also maintains that it is impossible to have ontological equality but functional hierarchy, and he argues that this effectively means ontological subordination—of Christ (which has serious implications for the Trinity) and of women...

I was particularly interested in the insight that the debate about the Trinity is a debate about theological method, and that quoting biblical verses and their interpretation is not enough. I was not aware that Athanasius pointed out as early as the 4th century that a better way was to look at the scope of scripture. We seem to have been slow to learn.

It is hard to sum up a closely-argued book like this. I am tempted to suggest that we are only having this debate about the Trinity because of the debate about women, but we are where we are, and this is a careful and thorough assessment of the debate as it currently stands.

Rosie Ward © CPAS 2010

