

# Book Review: *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?*

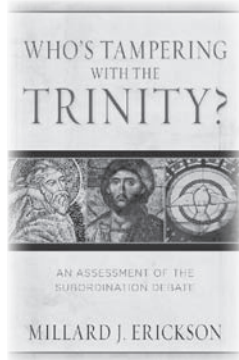
By Millard J. Erickson (Kregel Academic, 2009)

REVIEWED BY JOHN JEFFERSON DAVIS

I am very happy to have this opportunity to recommend strongly Millard Erickson's *Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* to the readers of *Priscilla Papers* and to the wider evangelical community in general. Erickson's book addresses two areas of vital importance to the church: the doctrine of the Trinity and the role of women in the church and family. Erickson tackles the arguments of the "new evangelical subordinationists"<sup>1</sup> who have been arguing that *the Son is eternally functionally subordinate to the Father* within the Trinity in order to bolster their arguments by way of analogy for the functional subordination of women in the church and in the family.

In eight very balanced and carefully argued chapters, Erickson (1) considers the "gradational authority" view; (2) the historic, mainstream "equivalent authority" view in which the Son is not eternally subordinate to the Father, but only (willingly) subordinate to the Father during his earthly ministry; (3) the criteria for evaluating these views; (4) the biblical evidence; (5) church history, creeds, and tradition; (6) philosophical issues; (7) theological dimensions; and (8) practical implications for the Christian life and church ministry.

The author's overall conclusion (257) is that the historic view of equivalent authority of the Father and the Son is "considerably the stronger of the two views and thus to be accepted over the gradational view." While Erickson allows that, while the "eternal functional subordination of the Son" view might be technically still within the bounds of historic, orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, he is concerned that, in the longer run, the idea of *the eternal and necessary supremacy of the authority of the Father over the Son and the Holy Spirit* will undermine historic Nicene orthodoxy (*homoousios*, "of the same essence") and ultimately lead to heterodoxy. Eternal and necessary subordination in *function* logically implies an eternal difference of *nature* in which function is grounded, and so undermines equality of nature in the Father and the Son. Erickson closes with a plea to the new evangelical subordinationists to reconsider their views, and to pull back from them: "Please think through the implications of your view, observe the body of evi-



dence against it, and reconsider the idea of the eternal functional superiority of the Father over the Son and the Holy Spirit. . . . Go back. You are going the wrong way" (259, 258).

I agree with Erickson's conclusion and his clear, balanced, and cogently stated arguments; if anything, however, I think that his conclusions could have been even more strongly stated in three areas: the historical, the exegetical, and the missiological. In the area of history and tradition, for example, I believe that weight of evidence from church history and the creeds is even more clearly in favor of the "equivalent authority" understanding than Erickson might have seen. In an important synodical letter of AD 382, the bishops who had gathered in Constantinople to formulate the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed stated that the Nicene Creed

tells us how to believe in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: believing also, of course, that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have a single Godhead and power and substance, *a dignity deserving the same honor and a coeternal sovereignty* [emphasis added]. . . . To sum up, we know that he was before the ages fully God the Word, and that in the last days he became fully man for the sake of our salvation.<sup>2</sup>

The bishops, in their commentary on the Nicene Creed, make it clear that they believe that the Father and the Son have a "coeternal sovereignty" (*basileias*); there is no way that a "coeternal sovereignty" can be squared with the notion of an eternal *subordination* of the Son.

In a series of influential theological lectures on the Trinity given in Constantinople prior to the Council of 381, Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian fathers greatly influential in the formulation of Trinitarian orthodoxy, in his *Fifth Theological Oration*, stated that

We believe in three Persons. For one is not more and another less God; nor is one before and after; nor are they divided in will or parted in power. . . . I hope it may always be my position . . . to worship God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost, three Persons, one Godhead, *undivided in honor and glory and substance and kingdom*. . . . [emphasis added]

A coequal and coeternal *kingdom* implies coequal *authority* and is contrary to any notion of eternal subordination of the Son.

In a synod in Rome in 382, Pope Damasus issued the so-called "Tome of Pope Damasus," emphatically stating the equality of the Son and the Father:

Anyone who does not say that the Son of God is true God . . . that he can *do all things* [emphasis added] . . . and is equal to the Father, is heretical. . . . Anyone who does not say that there is only one Godhead, one might, one majesty, one power, one glory, *one lordship, one kingdom* [emphasis added], one will and truth of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit is heretical.



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