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The public controversy over trinitarian theology that culminated online in the summer of 2016 was a remarkable event. Academics and commentators, pastors and laypeople, experts and amateurs, bloggers and tweeters got involved, hashing out the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. The multi-sided, multi-platform discussion called to mind Gregory of Nyssa's complaint about what Constantinople was like once the public got interested in the Euno-mian controversy:

Everywhere, in the public squares, at crossroads, on the streets and lanes, people would stop you and discourse at random about the Trinity. If you asked something of a moneychanger, he would begin discussing the question of the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you questioned a baker about the price of bread, he would answer that the Father is greater and the Son is subordinate to Him.¹

On the one hand, trinitarian theologians couldn't help but be glad to see Christians become so interested in the doctrine, and many fine essays appeared online, read eagerly by an expanding public as the discussion churned on. Free, public essays on trinitarian theology were being served up daily and read immediately! On the other hand, the discussion was often overcharged with polemics, crowded

¹Gregory of Nyssa, "Oration on the Deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit," in *PG* 46, col 557.

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with presuppositions, conducted in haste, diverted by irrelevant associations, and pervasively skewed by faulty framing. Even more than Nyssa on Eunomianism, the discussion sometimes seemed like the dangerous confusion of the English Reformation as described by C. S. Lewis:

The theological questions really at issue have no significance except on a certain level, a high level, of the spiritual life; they could have been fruitfully debated only between mature and saintly disputants in close privacy and at boundless leisure. . . . In fact, however, these questions were raised at a moment when they immediately became embittered and entangled with a whole complex of matters theologically irrelevant It was as if men were set to conduct a metaphysical argument at a fair . . .²

Throughout the public controversy (about which you can read in some detail in this book), I found myself worried about two things. First, I worried about the way the discussion was canalized into a set of narrow contemporary concerns, which led to the various positions being fairly predictable along tribal lines, and many positions being taken on an *ad hoc* basis as challenges arose. Second, I worried about the rising generation of evangelical theologians who were first being drawn into discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity in this controversial context. In many cases, my worries were assuaged by the participants themselves: a host of energetic younger evangelical theologians took to the blogosphere precisely to place the discussion in a broader context methodologically, hermeneutically, historically, and dogmatically. Still, my worry persisted. In a conversation so diffuse and wide-ranging, it was impossible to know who was learning which lessons from which engagements.

² C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 37.

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The present book, which I first read in an earlier form as a dissertation, is a great encouragement to me that younger theologians can fend for themselves, get their bearings, and make sense of contemporary controversy. Hongyi Yang had already been hard at work for a few years on the issues arising from the controverted discussion of Trinity and gender in evangelical circles. This Trinity-and-gender discussion was one which I had for a long time publicly wished had never happened; again, the footnotes of my demurrals are all in the text before you. But even as I lamented the existence of the discussion, I was well aware that conversations have to happen, and it would be better for them to happen well than poorly.

The conditions for a good conversation about Trinity and gender are fairly stringent. In particular, a good book-length contribution to the subject would have to be impartial enough to identify the real core commitments held by the key participants. It would have to take its bearings from the longer historical arc, and make some judgments about how to appeal to that history. It would have to be willing to engage in some actual exegesis of a few contested passages of scripture. It would have to be committed to setting the conversation in a broader doctrinal context, and on that basis it would have to be willing to identify the blind spots and lacunae in the discussion all sides. And its author, having invested in such a wide range of preparatory work in more classical scholarly modes of study, would have to finish the project up by scrambling after the latest documentation of things like conference panel discussions, recorded interviews, and blog posts.

Hongyi Yang has written the book that does all that, and does it well. I commend it as a responsible journalistic report on the 2016 controversy, and a very helpful placement of that controversy in a broader context. Recall that Dr. Yang had been at work on the subject for some years before the controversy broke out, and seems providentially prepared to serve as an informed commentator.

I also commend this book as a piece of theological research from the complementarian perspective that seeks to make a contribution to Trinitarian understanding in the present.

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Dr. Yang's particular hypothesis is that the modern cultural context is so strongly oriented toward equality of all kinds, and against hierarchy of any kind, that it threatens to distort the traditional Christian confession that the three persons exist in coequal and coeternal fellowship that is nevertheless structured according to a particular interpersonal *taxis*. It is indeed a striking intercultural observation about the difference between the ancient Christian culture that produced classical Trinitarian confessions (a culture at home with a range of hierarchical realities, and fluent in describing them), and modern Western culture (a culture inveterately suspicious of all ordered structures and allergic to hierarchies of any kind). Dr. Yang argues that in order to continue saying the same thing we have always said about the unity and distinction of the three persons of the Trinity, it would make sense for the church in modern culture to take the step of articulating the ordered distinction between the Father and the Son in terms of some sort of interpersonal, relational authority. That some evangelical theologians attempted to do this without the resources of classical Trinitarianism—indeed, even sometimes denying them—was inauspicious in the extreme. Dr. Yang has learned the right lessons from those episodes, and teaches them here.

Dr. Yang's work is an attempt to renew the research program of pushing back against the prevalent egalitarian spirit of modern culture precisely for the sake of saying the right thing about the ordered distinction of persons within the being of God. This is where its importance lies, and what makes it not only a clarifying account of the recent controversy, but also a strategically valuable contribution to the conversation. Even where I disagree with her findings (as for instance she documents below on the question of whether we ought to try to relate Trinity and gender), I am glad to have this careful articulation set forth as part of the dialogue.

There is today a real danger that the conceptualities of modern social equality may so thoroughly pervade our thought forms as to render the Father-Son relation harder for moderns to grasp.

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Theology today needs, but mostly lacks, voices that will call our attention to the strictures that we rarely notice because we share them so completely with each other. Where may we expect to hear these voices? We may hear them from the theologies of the developing world beyond the traditional centers of theological instruction: Asian and African theologians in particular may draw from other cultural forms and sources than Westerners take for granted. We may also hear them from Eastern Orthodox theologians, with the so-called “monarchy of the Father” rooted deeply in their tradition. But what Dr. Yang has especially noted is that the emergence of “the contemporary doctrine of the Son’s eternal subordination to the Father in role, function, and authority” among some evangelical theologians can also serve as a place where we may hear this voice. She considers the teaching as “a doctrinal development in response to the prevalent egalitarian context, yet based on the truth already contained in Scripture rather than a departure from biblical teachings.” That is, according to her sympathetic reading of the overall movement, what some have called complementarian Trinitarianism articulates something latent in classic Trinitarianism. Strong assertions of the way the Son looks up to, or receives from, or is purely filial toward, the Father, are implicitly contained in the biblical and classical Trinitarianism of Christian confession; they simply didn’t emerge explicitly until the pressure of modern egalitarianism brought them forth and made them necessary.

The filial character of the Son’s hypostatic distinctiveness is extremely hard to confess instructively, and in my opinion the entire recent controversy has made it even harder. To me, the way forward seems to be to retrieve and then extend more classic conceptualities, so I tend to avert my eyes from the current controversy when possible, and wait for its dust to settle before expecting to make progress in the steady task of catechizing the Christian church in its Trinitarian confession. Dr. Yang has adopted another strategy, which is to plunge directly into the current discussion in order to draw out resources for doctrinal work. Near the end of her project here,

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Dr. Yang admits that “one still awaits a more coherent presentation that includes ...a more balanced view of the whole portrait of biblical trinitarianism.” She also signals that the way forward in this regard is to ponder more deeply the nature of the Fatherhood of God the Father, as a way of grasping what is distinctively filial in the Sonship of the Son. This is exactly right. There is indeed more work to be done here in building up a responsible modern confession of the triune God, and I am grateful for Hongyi Yang’s principled, diligent, and clarifying work in this field.

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