

REVIEW ARTICLE: YOUR WILL BE DONE

Mark Smith

The following review article was originally written before Mike Ovey's death. The plan had been for it to have formed the first half of a Churchman dialogue, with Mike providing a response piece reflecting on the reception of his book. Sadly, it will now be for others to continue the debate in Mike's stead.

YOUR WILL BE DONE: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility (Latimer Study 83)

Michael J. Ovey

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To review this book is a not entirely enviable task, for two reasons.

Firstly, although coming in at under 200 pages, it is densely argued, highly technical in places, and involves a complex synthesis of biblical, patristic and systematic reflection.

Secondly, the position it defends has been the subject of significant controversy. Around the time that Ovey's book was published, a fierce storm arose in the blogosphere and across social media, concerning whether the doctrine of the eternal subordination of the Son was not only erroneous, but straightforwardly heretical. One of Ovey's critics went so far as to call for him to resign. Whilst aspects of this debate had been doing the rounds for years, what was striking about this particular flare-up was that it was largely being conducted *within* Reformed evangelical circles. Ovey's position was no longer just being condemned by liberals like Kevin Giles, but by fellow-conservatives like Carl Trueman—men, in other words, who stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Ovey in supporting complementarianism, but who were deeply concerned about any attempt to root that doctrine in a supposed intra-Trinitarian dynamic. Hence the somewhat unenviable task of this review—for it is clear that Ovey's position on eternal subordination is deeply divisive within our own constituency, and that good Christian brothers can, and have, come to sharply different conclusions regarding its merits.

With this in mind, then, I will begin by summarising—in some detail, and where possible quoting Ovey directly—the arguments that he makes in *Your Will Be Done*, so that those who haven't read the book can be given

a fair and impartial guide to its contents. Only after that, in the second half of the review, will I attempt to make some wider evaluative remarks.

Chapter 1 sets out the main contours of Ovey's position. He begins, "It has been argued that those of us who hold that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father have fallen into the old heresy of Arianism" (p. 1). Such opponents contend that the doctrine is not found in the history of the church's teaching, is contrary to (or at least not demonstrable from) Scripture, and has unhelpful implications for the exercise of human power. Ovey is under no illusion that the stakes are high—either he is a heretic, or his critics are guilty of the sin of schism. Ovey then lays out his central claim: "since the Son is a true son, two things follow: first, he shares his Father's nature, and is therefore fully God; and secondly, he is in an eternal relationship as son in which he submits to his Father, as sons do, something aptly described as subordination" (p. 2). There is, in other words, a mutual but asymmetrical love between Father and Son: "the Father loves paternally, instructing and providing inheritance for his Son; the Son loves filially, obeying and doing his Father's will" (p. 2).

Ovey also draws attention to a division among critics of his position: some (like Jürgen Moltmann) deny that the Son obeys the Father in any sense, because any authority/submission relationship in the Godhead is seen as inappropriate, whilst others (like Kevin Giles) accept that the Son obeys the Father, but limit that obedience to the incarnate Son's obedience in and through his human nature. Both groups are united, however, in thinking that the Son's eternal obedience to the Father would undermine his ontological equality with the Father. The underlying issue, in short, is "what relational contours follow from the eternal sonship of the Son?" (p. 8).

Chapters 2–4 assess the patristic material on the doctrine of the Son's eternal subordination. For the pro-Nicene fathers, Ovey argues, "eternal subordination is part of the rationale which upholds the key twin values of monotheism and the divine monarchy" (p. 12).

Ovey turns firstly to the contribution of the ante-Nicene father Tertullian (in his *Adv. Praxeam*). In order to reject Monarchian modalism, Tertullian emphasised that "the Son derives his rule from his Father," so that "the divine monarchy is not subverted by being divided, and the Son is subordinate to his Father outside the incarnation" (p. 18). The Son's eternal (rather than merely incarnational) subordination is crucial to Tertullian's case, since it is a necessary part of defending the eternal unity of the divine monarchy against his Monarchian opponents. Ovey

acknowledges, however, that Tertullian's theology lacked a completely satisfactory account of the Son's personhood.

Ovey then delves into the complex development of various Nicene and Arian positions in the mid-fourth century. Ovey makes it clear that, on a strict definition of terms, he is in no sense an Arian—the key idea of Arianism was that the Son was a creature, and Nicaea (which Ovey affirms) opposed this by teaching that the Son was begotten of the Father, and consubstantial with the Father. Ovey explores a number of the lengthy creeds that proliferated during these decades, and finds in several of them references to the subordination of the Son. He concedes that not all of these documents are straightforwardly orthodox—but claims that there is a distinction between an *Arian* subordination of the Son, which proceeds from treating the Son as a creature; and an *orthodox* subordination of the Son, which is compatible with the Son's full deity.

Ovey appeals to Athanasius, as evidence for a pro-Nicene theologian who rejected the Arian assumption that the Son's obedience/subordination intrinsically precluded his ontological equality with the Father. The Father's possession of a paternal authority over the Son did not thereby make the Son a creature. Ovey also makes the point that, in order to counter the Arian arguments effectively, Athanasius could not confine the Son's submission to his incarnation, since the debate was precisely about the status of, and relationship between, the Father and the Son in eternity.

Ovey appeals in a similar vein to Hilary of Poitiers. He quotes, for instance, from *De Synodis* 64, where Hilary writes, regarding the Father and the Son, that “one is not superior to the other on account of the kind of his substance, but one is subject to the other because born of the other. The Father is greater because He is Father, the Son is not the less because He is Son. The difference is one of the meaning of a name and not of a nature” (pp. 53–54). As Ovey explains, the Father's superiority “is therefore not at the level of nature, a matter of ontology, but at the level of ‘name,’ or of the Persons and how they relate to each other” (p. 54). Similarly, Hilary's exposition of the *homoousios* is, according to Ovey, founded upon the Son's filial subordination to the Father. The Son's subordination is thus not in tension with his full deity, but is rather part of what it means for the fully divine Son *to be the Son*.

Ovey's treatment of other pro-Nicene fathers is briefer. He finds in Basil the Great the same commitment to the divine monarchy, and so the necessary priority of the Father. Again, Ovey is careful to define his terms here: “eternal subordination properly understood is at the level of relations between the Persons and does not deny equality at the level of

nature” (p. 69). Augustine is shown as articulating a similar account of the asymmetrical relational attributes of Father and Son.

Chapter 5 moves the focus to Scripture, and specifically to an evaluation of the teaching of John’s Gospel on the Son’s eternal subordination. Ovey argues that, for John, the identities of Father and Son are co-relative and asymmetrical. He explains: “the Son’s love is filial in that he loves the Father and reveals this by his obedience to the Father and his will...the Father’s primacy of will is contoured by his other-personed love of the Son and the Son’s love is shown in his obedience” (p. 77). Jesus is the true Son, but he is not thereby a rival second God—rather, he is distinguished from the Father in that the Father sends and the Son is sent; and the Father gives and the Son receives (e.g., John 5:19–30). These relations are not simply true of the incarnation, but reflect the eternal relations within the Trinity—the obedience of the Son in the economic Trinity reveals the equivalent obedience of the Son in the immanent Trinity. Moreover, the revelation of Jesus’ love for his Father is closely tied to his obedience to his Father (e.g., John 14:30–31). Here, again, Ovey argues for a necessary correspondence between economic and immanent realities. Without such a step, he explains, the truth of God’s self-revelation in Christ is dangerously undermined.

Chapter 6 considers how the traditional affirmation of the two wills of Christ bears on the issue of the Son’s eternal subordination. Ovey is aware that the objection could be made that the Son’s eternal subordination is a “category error” because “the Father, Son and Spirit share the same divine natural will, that is, will at the level of their common nature” (p. 101). If there is only one divine will, then in eternity the Son cannot willingly exercise obedience to his Father’s will—for there is no “other” will to obey. But Ovey claims that this argument fails to land its punch, since his case is based on the subordination of the Son at the level of personal relationship (the Son’s subordination *as Son*), and not at the level of nature. Thus, for Ovey, the divine will may be actualised or exercised distinctly and personally by the eternal Son.

In this context, Ovey focuses on Jesus’ words to his Father in Gethsemane: “Yet not what I will/want, but what you will/want.” Here Ovey thinks there are “very significant objections” (p. 111) to the traditional exegesis of this text, namely, that the incarnate Son refers here firstly to his own human will (“yet not what I will”), and secondly to the divine will (“but what you will”)—a divine will which, as God, he shares with the Father and the Spirit. Ovey worries that this position “comes close to saying that Jesus’ natural human will submits to himself...in his

divine will,” whereas “submission and obedience seems necessarily to involve the will or desire of another which one prefers to one’s own” (p. 110). It also threatens to create “a real rupture in the unified Person of the Son” (p. 112), and at the very least represents a flirtation with Nestorianism. By contrast, Ovey interprets the prayer as “not referring to wills as faculties of nature, but rather will in the context of the personal relations” (p. 112). In other words, the one unified Person of the Son is here addressing himself to his Father, and obediently submitting to his Father’s will.

Chapter 7, finally, considers the theological implications of eternal subordination for a Christian understanding of power, individualism and virtue. Ovey contends that his position offers “a way of seeing how other-personed love and authority between ontological equals is both possible and holy...it helps us to see how obedience and humility are God-like virtues, since humble other-personed love finds its root in the eternal relations of the three Persons” (pp. 115–116). Ovey contrasts his account both with Moltmann’s assumption that divine monarchy legitimises human tyranny, and with a modern individualism that considers hierarchy and obedience as antithetical to true love.

Ovey wants to show, in other words, that the ramifications of the doctrine of the Son’s subordination are profoundly pastoral: it is “of the greatest comfort and significance to realise that the Persons of the Trinity manifest in their eternal relationships with each other not pride and self-love but humility and other-personed love and regard” (p. 137). It also provides, Ovey claims, a valuable counter-witness to the self-serving disordered self-love in the world around us, and demonstrates that power relationships are not inherently sinful, and humility and obedience are not inherently dehumanising.

As the foregoing summary has hopefully demonstrated, Ovey’s book represents a significant and impressive contribution to evangelical Trinitarian and Christological thought. It is difficult to evaluate its arguments succinctly, not only because they are often complex and always carefully nuanced, but also because at almost every turn they touch upon “the deep things of God.” Nonetheless, in what remains of this review, I will attempt to outline two strengths of Ovey’s position, and two concerns that it raises.

Firstly, it is clear that Dr Ovey is not an Arian. He affirms the consubstantiality and eternal generation of the Son, and the Son’s eternal coequality with the Father and the Spirit. He defends the teaching of the Nicene Creed, and enthusiastically endorses the pro-Nicene theology of

Athanasius and Hilary. On the basis of this book, Ovey's more aggressive critics should now acknowledge that their accusations of Arianism against him are unfounded, and that in making such a claim they have seriously misrepresented his position. Though perhaps, for the sake of mutual clarity, those on Ovey's side of the argument could now drop the terminology of the Son's "subordination," and use the word "submission" instead. "Subordination" does have an unfortunate historical association with the (genuine) heresy of "subordinationism," and so is for that reason best avoided.

Secondly, Ovey has done a great service in opening up afresh the meaning of divine Sonship. The central issue he wrestles with throughout his book is what it means for the eternal Son to be the true *Son* of the Father—and whether that sonship makes it appropriate (indeed necessary) to speak of the willing, loving, eternal subordination/submission of the Son to the Father. This is a question, then, not of ontological inferiority, but of the delineation of the proper order (*taxis*) within the perfect coequality of the Trinitarian life. In paying careful attention to the Scriptural witness regarding the asymmetrical loving relation of Father and Son, Ovey has raised new and intriguing questions about this divine dynamic.

Ovey's book, then, emphatically deserves these two cheers. It is difficult, however, to award it a third—because the lines of argument that Ovey pursues also raise a number of causes for concern.

Firstly, there is a danger that in enthusiastically embracing "Rahner's rule," Ovey risks collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic Trinity. He is often too quick to take a truth revealed within the ministry of the incarnate Son, and to map it onto the intra-Trinitarian divine life, without preserving the necessary "analogical interval" between the two contexts. His understanding of Scriptural language, in other words, frequently strays too close to the univocal. Ovey seems impatient, even dismissive, of the traditional hermeneutic which interprets those sayings of Jesus that imply inferiority as referring to the incarnate Son's assumed humanity. Yet this approach is far more deeply embedded in the "grammar" of patristic (and, for that matter, Reformed) exegesis than he seems willing to countenance—and is, moreover, a hermeneutic that proceeds from a right concern to preserve the perfect deity of the Son *qua* God.

We may certainly say that the incarnate Son submits to the Father as man; we may go further, and suggest that this submission reflects *something* of the way that the Son relates in eternity to the Father. But the shape that such a "submission" might take in the eternal and unchanging life of the

one God is pretty hard to even conceive of, let alone dissect systematically. This is precisely why, on the whole, the church fathers show little interest in exploring the question of the Son's eternal submission. They generally neither condemn it, nor explicitly affirm it—they just don't go there. They are instead content to define the distinct relation of the Son to the Father in terms of the Son's begottenness (that is, his mode of eternal generation from the Father), and to leave it at that—lest in saying any more they unwittingly import inappropriately creaturely or temporal concepts into the Godhead (cf. Gr. Naz., *Or.* 29, 30; Aug., *De Trin.* I–IV). In this way, whilst Ovey's position is not straightforwardly contrary to the patristic witness, it does rather go against the grain of pro-Nicene thought as it developed from the Cappadocians onwards.

The ultimate danger is that Ovey's line of argument, if pushed to its natural conclusion, raises the spectre of social trinitarianism. This is where an unguardedly univocal form of predication leads to the Trinity becoming a tritheistic community of three people (rather than a unity of three hypostases), and a Feuerbachian projection of our own ideals of human sociality. It is ironic, indeed, that Ovey's position should risk heading in this direction, since over the last century social trinitarianism has generally been used to justify the kind of strongly egalitarian understandings of Father, Son and Spirit that Ovey would (rightly) find distasteful.

Secondly, there is a danger that Ovey's trinitarian reflections push him towards a heterodox Christology. In his book, Ovey displays significant unease with the traditional exegesis of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, where a distinction is made between the Son's human will and the one divine will which the Son, in his divinity, shares. The underlying dilemma for Ovey is that a strong affirmation of the Son's eternal submission to the Father seems to require the Son to be a distinct willing agent, who in perfect obedience conforms his personal will to that of his Father. Indeed, Ovey would like to read the Gethsemane prayer as an economic revelation of precisely this immanent dynamic. Yet this, of course, presents Ovey with a problem, because there is only one divine will (the divine will being a property of the divine nature).

As the summary of Chapter 6 above made clear, Ovey recognises this challenge, and (if I have understood his position correctly), seeks to argue that the one divine will can be expressed and possessed distinctly at the level of the divine hypostases. This is an admittedly subtle rejoinder (and Ovey may find some Reformed support for it in, for instance, John Owen's reflections on the *pactum salutis*), but it remains unclear whether

it is ultimately coherent. For the more that the Son's will becomes an expression or property of his hypostasis, the more that the door is opened either to tritheism, or to monothelitism. The latter danger is particularly insidious, since it would tend towards undermining the distinct human will in Christ, and so ultimately strike at the reality and efficacy of Christ's atoning work as man.

Where, then, does all this leave us? It leaves us, I think, with a ferociously intelligent and thought-provoking book, which represents a substantial and valuable contribution to the ongoing debate over the Son's eternal submission. The concerns that it raises are, in the final analysis, a consequence of, and a testament to, the scope of its theological ambition.

MARK SMITH
Christ's College, Cambridge

A BRIEF RESPONSE TO MARK SMITH'S REVIEW

Nick Tucker

I am very grateful to Mark Smith for the invitation to respond to his review of Mike's work. Mark's review is patient, precise and accomplished, marked by the irenic tone that befits a conversation between brothers. I only wish that Mike could have read it and responded for himself. Sadly he cannot and on this occasion, it falls to me as a former colleague and student of Mike's to write a brief response on his behalf, albeit as a distinctly inferior substitute. In offering a response I need to begin by observing that questions raised here require much fuller treatment than space or time allows. As such I offer not so much a response as an attempt to show something of the direction I think a fuller response might take.

So to begin. I find myself in easy agreement with Dr Smith's "two cheers" for Mike and agree with him that Mike would have done well to avoid the use of the word "subordination." I am convinced that Mike's usage of the word was orthodox and semantically justifiable, however, we are all shaped by our personal histories and it's only fair to remember Mike's particular background as a statutory draughtsman. Most of us hear the word subordination and it smells a bit Arian: given that the theological shorthand for Arianising theologies is "subordinationism." I would suggest that Mike's problem at this point was that he opted for precision rather than rhetoric. As someone who dwells rather closer to ground level intellectually, I have to agree that using the language of order (*Taxis*) is more helpful and less likely to provoke anxiety than the easily misunderstood "subordination" even though the semantic gap is negligible. The suggestion of "submission" has definite advantages, although Mike deliberately avoided prioritising this word to avoid any hint of tritheism (see below).

In withholding his third cheer, Dr Smith raises two particular concerns about Mike's work although they seem to boil down to the same basic problem: namely, to what extent do the Gospels reveal anything about the eternal relations of the Father and Son? One aspect of this is the suggestion that in his embrace of Rahner, Mike adopted an overly univocal approach to Scripture. We should note that Mike was certainly very aware of the dangers of pushing Rahner too far and frequently warned his students about collapsing the immanent Trinity into the economic. This does not necessarily exculpate him, but it is not insignificant.

Dr Smith's concerns about Mike's handling of the relationship between the immanent and the economic seem to revolve around apparent trajectories rather than explicit statements. The suggestion seems to be that Mike's ideas tended towards social trinitarianism and Monothelitism even if they did not embody them. The first of these deserves, respectfully, rather shorter shrift than the second. Mike could hardly have been more explicit in grounding his understanding of the unity in the shared divine essence. Simply speaking of intra-trinitarian relations and the non-interchangeability of the persons, should not render him subject to the charge of incipient tritheism.

It is hard to imagine, on this basis, how a statement such as "you loved me before the creation of the world" (John 17:24) could entirely escape the accusation of social trinitarianism, unless "love" is to be evacuated of any relational implication at all. The problem we all face is that it is beyond our ability to comprehend what shape relationship of any kind might take in the life of an eternal being. Furthermore, it seems to me that some of Mike's critics have swung much too far in the other direction. It perhaps betrays my ignorance that I have oftentimes found myself baffled at the way some have looked to the *Pactum Salutis* to explain away some of this language of filial obedience. Surely if the *Pactum* represents a change in the relations of the eternal persons the whole game is up. The fact that the *Pactum* has regard to an *ad extra* work does not take it out of the realm of eternity, it is "before the creation of the world." If we permit this to be a cypher for a change in the eternal relations we must surely throw our lot in with Teilhard de Chardin and Norman Pittenger and embrace process theology.

Dr Smith's more significant critique revolves around Mike's handling of the question of wills, both divine (Father and Son) and Christological (divine and human). This probably requires a full-length paper (or even thesis) of its own. In brief, though, it is important to recognise that Mike was employing a technical distinction between will as a faculty, and actualised personal will: a distinction he derived from the arch-dyothelite Maximus the Confessor. That he was seeking to steer well clear of Monothelitism should be evident from that fact alone. As Dr Smith notes the *Scylla* to the Monothelite *Charybdis* is Nestorianism and whilst there has been much discussion of Nicene orthodoxy in dealing with Mike's work, Chalcedon should not be forgotten. It is the person who acts, not the nature. The way that "will" has been handled in the debate over the Son's obedience suggests that there is much work to be done on both sides

in understanding the other and in keeping each other out of the various ditches that beckon.

One final comment, if I may, is that it is perhaps a little unfair to suggest that Mike “displays significant unease with the traditional exegesis of Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane.” The tradition is hardly one sided on this and Mike was hardly ploughing a lone furrow. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, offers the following on Mark 14:36:

Although he was obedient, it was a voluntary obedience. The only begotten Son humbled himself, and obeyed his Father even to the death of the cross. But was it as a human or as God that he was subjected to the Father? His subjection is that of one to whom all things have been subjected. This subjection is not a sign merely of a temporal obedience, for his allegiance is eternal. Rather it was an instance in time of the dispensation of the eternal mystery of his humbling. His actual humbling occurred within time. Yet in its very unpretentiousness, it displays the eternal mystery of his humiliation. (*On the Trinity* 11.30)

The tradition is variegated enough that we do well to avoid placing each other too quickly outside it, assuming that we remain within the bounds of orthodoxy.

NICK TUCKER
Edgebaston Old Church

