OCCASIONAL NOTES

S t r a n g e r s R e s t E v a n g e l i c a l C h u r c h

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**“Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple**

**and in three days I will raise it up.”**

**(John 2:19)**

By Mark Mullins

As we approach Easter we consider again the wonder of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Of all the events in history, the resurrection is pivotal for as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:17, “if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain: ye are yet in your sins”.

**Resurrection by Father, Son and Holy Spirit**

The resurrection demonstrates that The Lord’s victory over sin is real and that Christ did what he said he would do, which was to raise up his body again.

As we consider this wonder I would like to return to the theme of the Trinity.

In this great event we see once again the divinity of Christ demonstrated. In Acts 2:32 Peter ascribes the resurrection to the Father: “This Jesus hath God raised up”.

In Romans 8:11 Paul ascribes the raising of Christ to the work of the Holy Spirit when he wrote, “the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead…”

So we see that all three persons of the Trinity were involved in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus which is not surprising because the Godhead is undivided so that no person of the Godhead performs any act independently of the other.

Last year we celebrated the second centenary of JC Ryle’s birth. He was a pillar in the Established Church for evangelical truth and wrote with great clarity on the Trinity. His testimony lives on in his expository thoughts on the Gospel. This is what he wrote about John 2:19 in his expository thoughts on John’s Gospel:[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is a prophecy of our Lord’s resurrection. But it is a very remarkable one, from the fact that our Lord distinctly asserts His own power to raise Himself up. It is like the expression, " I have power to lay down my life, and I have power to take it again." (John x. 18).

Both the expressions deserve particular notice, because many now-a-days assert that our Lord's resurrection was owing to the operation of God the Father and of God the Holy Ghost, and that He did not rise by His own power. This is a dangerous error. That the Father and the Holy Ghost co-operated in the resurrection of our Lord's body there can be no doubt. It is clearly taught in many places. But to say that our Lord did not raise his own body, is to contradict the text before us, and the other which has been already quoted.

Hurrion, quoted by Ford, observes, ''The efficient cause of Christ's resurrection was the infinite power of God, which being common to all the Persons of the blessed Trinity, the resurrection is sometimes ascribed to the Father, sometimes to the Son, and sometimes to the Holy Ghost. Christ's being raised by the Father and the Spirit is not inconsistent with His raising Himself; for 'what things soever the Father doeth, these also doeth the Son,' (John v. 19,) for being one in nature, they are also one in operation.

In short, then, every action by one member of the Trinity always involves the other persons of the Godhead working in perfect harmony and unity. We have seen that JC Ryle quotes from John, chapter 5 where the Lord Jesus distinguishes his obedience to his heavenly Father as man and his equality with God as His Son. When commenting specifically on John 5:19, (The Son can do nothing of himself), JC Ryle relied on a quote from Toletus as follows:[[2]](#footnote-2)

When it is said 'the Son can do nothing of Himself, ‘this does not mean want of power, but the highest power, just as it is a mark of omnipotence not to be able to die, or to be worn out, or to be annihilated, because there is nothing that can injure omnipotence, so, likewise, 'to be unable to do anything of Himself' is no mark of impotence, but of the highest power. It means nothing less than having one and the same power with the Father, so that nothing can be done by the One which is not equally done by the Other.

Matthew Henry (1662-1714), the great non-conformist Puritan who wrote a seminal commentary on the Bible, when commenting on this verse, included the following statement on the equality between the Father and the Son[[3]](#footnote-3):

Yet he is equal with the Father in working; for what things soever the Father does these also does the Son likewise; he did the same things, not such things, but tauta, the same things; and he did them in the same manner, homoiōs, likewise, with the same authority, and liberty, and wisdom, the same energy and efficacy. Does the Father enact, repeal, and alter, positive laws? Does he over-rule the course of nature, know men's hearts? So does the Son. The power of the Mediator is a divine power.

The 19th Century Anglican theologian, Edward Henry Bickersteth, Bishop of Exeter, answered the charge of the Unitarians that Christ was subordinate to the Father in this way:[[4]](#footnote-4)

These passages affirm his proper humanity, and his humble mission as a servant. This humanity we assert as strongly, this mission we believe as verily as yourselves (*the Unitarians*). All that faith requires is to act upon the great principle of comparing spiritual things with spiritual; and, wherever we find any assertion of his subordination as man, if we can place by its side a parallel assertion of his supremacy as God, faith demands nothing more. Often, the immediate context will supply the corrective, and adjust the balance. If not, we shall never consult in vain the whole counsel of the lively oracles of God.

Specifically on John 5:17-20, Edward Bickersteth wrote:[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Jews accused our Lord of making himself equal with God, because he said God was his Father. What is his reply? Instead of protesting against their construction of his words. which if only a man, he would have done with indignation and abhorrence, he proceeded, while acknowledging the subordination of his mission as man, to set forth the original and essential supremacy of his person as God. For if the Son [Verse 19] does all things what things so ever the Father does: [Verse 21] if the Son quickens whom he will. If the dead shall [Verse 27] hear his voice and live: if he executes judgment on the universe; if all men must honor the Son, even [Verse 23] as they honor the Father: then is he equally Almighty.

Equally the communicative fountain of life: equally God who alone can raise the dead: equally the Omniscient who alone can judge an assembled world: and equally the center of universal homage and adoration.

Thus Thomas, was properly able to exclaim to the Lord Jesus, “My Lord and My God!” when shown the holes in the Lord Jesus’s hands and side (John 20:28) because he was speaking to God Himself in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Each Person of the Trinity is Jehovah**

The mystery of the Trinity is that each person of the Trinity is Jehovah which is the incommunicable Name of God. There is a number of places where Jehovah is applied directly to the Lord Jesus Christ. I will cite two. In Isaiah 8:13-14, Isaiah states that Jehovah shall be a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to Israel. In 1 Peter 2:7-8, Peter, referring to what is written in scripture in verse 6, interprets that stone as the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Romans 10:13 Paul quoted from Joel 2:32 to say that “whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”. In Joel 2:32, the Lord is Jehovah. It is plain from Romans 10:9 that Paul applies this verse to the Lord Jesus, making the Lord Jesus, Jehovah. Therefore Christ is Jehovah of Hosts himself. It is worth reminding ourselves of some of the properties of Jehovah which by definition also apply to the Lord Jesus Christ. His attributes include that He is omnipotent (Jeremiah 32:17). He is Omnipresent (Jeremiah 23:23-24), He is Omniscient (Ezekiel 11:5) and He is Sovereign (Psalm 115:3).

**The Rise again of Subordinationism**

There has been an unfortunate revival of the false teaching that the Lord Jesus is eternally subordinate to the Father within the Godhead which is inconsistent with applying the attributes of Jehovah to the Lord Jesus and inconsistent with the testimonies of the great men of God that I have cited above.

It is even claimed by some that it is necessary that the Son is subordinate to the Father in order to distinguish the persons of the Trinity. However, the Orthodox view formulated in the Nicene Creed of 381 and the Athanasian Creed (so-called after Athanasius but not composed until the 6th Century) is that the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by the Father being uncreated and unbegotten, the Son being uncreated and begotten by the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son. This is also the testimony in the great reformation confessions of the 17th Century.

Interestingly Wayne Grudem, a well-known theologian in some evangelical circles, used to take this view because he denied the eternal generation of the Son. However during the question and answer session at Evangelical Theological Society’s Conference 2016, he stated that he now accepts the Eternal Generation of the Son which means it is no longer necessary for him to insist upon the so-called subordination of the Son to the Father in order to distinguish the persons of the Godhead.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Mike Ovey**

I count myself fortunate to have known the late Mike Ovey, who until his untimely and sudden death on 7th January 2017 had been the Principle of Oak Hill Theological College. I digress briefly at this point to express my great sadness at his death and my gratitude to him for being willing, in 2006, to write an extensive witness statement in support of my refusal to represent a person seeking to enter the UK on the grounds of his same-sex relationship with another person living here. I felt that in conscience I could not promote a relationship that was contrary to the Bible’s teaching and which could not be cured except by separation of the two individuals. Mike explained in his statement the historical position of the Church and that my stand was in line with that tradition. What I so appreciated was his willingness to come to the help of someone who he did not know very well when he was, himself, so busy at Oakhill College with lecturing. It was plain from the obituaries and tributes to him at his memorial at All Soul’s Langham Place which was filled to capacity, that the pastoral concern he showed to me was typical of his concern for others.

Mike was also a great support to the Lawyers Christian Fellowship (“LCF”) when I was involved with the Public Policy Committee in assisting us to work out a biblical framework of engagement in order to make a stand for biblical truth in the public arena.

Furthermore, I like many evangelicals, was grateful for Mike’s strong stand against the attack against Penal Substitution made by Steve Chalke and others which led to the publication of “Pierced for our transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution”.

Finally I met Mike in November at the LCF Conference and asked his advice about an issue I wrote about in my previous Occasional Notes regarding the error of Incarnational Sonship which was held by Anton Bosch whose fellowship we had much appreciated. Mike immediately pointed me to the Nicean Creed of 325 and encouraged me to take a stand as Athanasius had done when similar errors were present in the 4th Century.

It is therefore with sadness that I discovered that Mike had been promoting the eternal subordination of the Son within the Godhead. I wrote to Mike about this at Christmas enclosing the previous edition of the Occasional Notes where I first raised the issue but was unable to take up matters further with him.

In June 2016, Mike published his last book called “Your Will be done”, Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility”[[7]](#footnote-7). In that book he sought to justify the eternal subordination of the Son within the Godhead by reference to some 4th Century creeds, quotes from Athanasius, Hilary of Poitiers, the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine and a number of verses from John’s Gospel. Finally Mike asserted that Christ’s prayer in Gethsemene where he pleaded, “Thy Will be done”, concerned not his human will but a prayer to the Father by his Son, referring to their wills in the context of the Personal relations.

Space does not allow me any more than a brief comment about Mike’s views. In short Mike argued that Arians were those who believed that Jesus was a creature and not God[[8]](#footnote-8) and sought to distinguish that position from those who believed that Jesus was God but was subordinate to the Father in eternity.

**4th Century Creeds**

In support of his argument, Mike referred to a number of 4th Century Creeds, being the Dedication Creed of AD341, the Makrostich or Long Lined Creed of AD345, the First Creed of Sirmium of AD351 and the Second Creed of Sirmium in AD357.

All these creeds refer to the Son as God (God from God) unlike Arius who held that the Son was a creature. However none of the creeds refer to the Son as of the same substance as the Father because the signatories were worried that to do so would be to fall into the Sabellian heresy of modalism (confusing the persons of the godhead). Each of these creeds explicitly speaks of the Son being eternally subordinate to the Father.

Even Mike agreed that the 2nd Sirmium Creed (known as the Blasphemia) was Arian[[9]](#footnote-9), yet that creed confesses the Son to be ‘begotten of the Father’ … ‘before the ages…, God from God, Light from Light by whom all things were made’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Mike went on to quote from the anathemas pronounced in the ‘Blasphemia’:[[11]](#footnote-11)

There is no question that the Father is greater. No one can doubt that the Father is greater than the Son in honour, dignity and splendour, majesty, and in the very name of Father, the Son Himself testifying, *He that sent me is greater than I. And no one is ignorant that this is Catholic doctrine that there are two persons of Father and Son; and that the Father is greater, and the Son is subordinated to the Father, together with all things which the Father has subordinated to Him* (Mike’s italics).

Mike argued that what is Arian is seen in the words, ‘the Son is subordinated to the Father together with all things’. He claimed that this placed the Son ‘on the side of the creatures which was the classic Arian position’. However this does not appear to be the case since the creed explicitly confessed Christ to be ‘God from God … by whom all things were made’. This creed illustrates the problem with all arguments for the subordination of the Son which is that by stating that Christ is subordinate to the Father, it places him in the same position as created things, that is, under the Father.

**39 Articles and the Athanasian Creed**

What I found surprising in Mike’s book was the absence of any reference to the Athanasian Creed which is binding on all Anglicans by Article 8 of the 39 Articles. As Kevin Giles pointed out in his Response to Mike’s chapter in ‘One God in Three Persons’, three clauses, in that Creed, deny that the Son is less than the Father in authority:

1. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet there are not three almighties but one almighty;
2. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord and the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet not three Lords but one Lord; and
3. In this Trinity none is afore or after another: none is greater or less than another … all are co-equal’.

The absence of any reference to the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father when it is present in each of the creeds of the 4th Century demonstrates that by the 6th Century the Church in the West had rejected all forms of subordinationism.

Very sadly, Mike made no reference to the views of either JC Ryle, Edward Bickersteth or Matthew Henry who were all of one voice arguing the equality within the godhead from scripture. If Mike had done so I cannot conceive that he would have so quickly dismissed their testimony.

**Sending or Giving implies Subordination**

In Mike’s chapter on John he relied on the fact that the Son is sent or given to demonstrate his subordination to the Father in eternity. Edward Bickersteth addresses this point in respect of those teaching the subordination of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son in his seminal work on the Trinity called “The Trinity”. His reasoning equally applies to passages speaking of the giving or sending of the Son:[[12]](#footnote-12)

If any object that he is said to be sent by the Father and the Son, and that this mission implies inferiority, we answer that, even among men, the being sent is by no means always a mark of subordination. “The members of a senate consult together relative to some negotiation, in executing which great wisdom, judgment, and experience are required. It is resolved to send one of their number. Is it any mark of inferiority to be selected, and sent on such a service?”

On page 85 of “Your Will be done”, contrary to the orthodox evangelical view (held by, amongst others Matthew Henry, JC Ryle and Edward Bickersteth) Mike disagreed that any obedience that Jesus exhibits to his Father in the New Testament is in his human nature only. Referring to John 5:19-30 he reasoned that the context of these verses was that the Lord Jesus was refuting the charge in verse 18 that he had made himself equal to God. However Mike was mistaken because the Lord Jesus does nothing of the sort as Edward Bickersteth demonstrated on page 2 above.

On page 86 Mike referred to the Lord Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemene where he prayed “Thy will be done” and asserts that Christ was praying on the basis that they had distinguishable wills. He took this matter up further on page 114 suggesting that if they had identical wills in their divinity then the prayer was superfluous. However this again is contrary to orthodox evangelical doctrine as we see from Matthew Henry’s commentary where he referred to the divine will being one will and Christ’s human will as separate when he comments on Matthew 26:42:

(We may observe from the prayer) “His entire submission to, and acquiescence in, the will of God; Nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt. Not that the human will of Christ was adverse or averse to the divine will; it was only, in its first act, diverse from it; to which, in the second act of the will, which compares and chooses, he freely submits himself.”

Let me take another verse to demonstrate the gulf between Mike’s interpretation and that of received evangelical orthodoxy.

In John 14:28, the Lord Jesus said:- “If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I.” Mike mentioned this verse in a number of places. It is referenced in a quote by CK Barrett on page 75. Mike used the quote to refute the claim made by Kevin Giles that CK Barrett did not accept eternal subordinationism. JC Ryle addressed this verse, which was widely used by the Arians in the 4th Century to justify subordinationism, as follows:[[13]](#footnote-13)

What, did our Lord mean by saying, "My Father is greater than I"? I answer that the words of the Athanasian Creed contain the best reply. Christ is no doubt "equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood." This we may freely and fully admit, and yet not give up a hair 's breadth to Arians and Socinians, who always throw this text in our teeth. The enemies of the doctrine of Christ's divinity forget that Trinitarians maintain the humanity of Christ as strongly as His divinity; and never shrink from admitting that while Christ as God is equal to the Father, as man He is inferior to the Father. And it is in this sense that He here says truly, "My Father is greater than l." It was specially spoken of the time of His incarnation and humiliation. When the Word was" made flesh" He took on Him "the form of a servant." This was temporary inferiority. (Phil. ii. 7.)

Mike Ovey was by no means alone in promoting the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father. This has been the position of many Anglicans from the Diocese of Sydney for a number of years. Indeed many evangelicals across the denominational divide have embraced it.

John Stevens, National Director of FIEC, wrote a blog in June 2016 in which he concluded:[[14]](#footnote-14)

If those of us who consider the concept of eternal submission to be Biblical are wrong, we need to be humble enough to listen and to submit ourselves to Scripture. However from what I have seen of the arguments so far, I don’t feel that this is the case. Call me a heretic if you like, but it seems I will go down with a large number of my brothers and friends.

John’s openness to reconsider the position is commendable but, and I say this respectfully, he urgently needs to look again at the matter because I he has departed from orthodoxy and entered dangerous territory. We would all do well to remember Edward Bickersteth’s warning:

There are precipices on the right hand and on the left. Let us not go a hair’s breadth beyond the declarations of Scripture: but at the same time let us accept, with confidence and candor, all those declarations. From everlasting to everlasting, before, during, and after his humiliation, Jesus Christ was, and is, and is to come, the Lord God Omnipotent and Omniscient.

**The Importance of a Right Doctrine of God**

Our doctrine of God is fundamental to the Gospel for the following reasons:

1. If Christ is subordinate to the Father within the Godhead then He cannot be Jehovah because Jehovah is almighty and by definition a God who is subordinate to another God is not omnipotent.
2. Furthermore, in order for the Lord Jesus to be eternally subordinate to the Father then each person of the Trinity has to have an independent will. Yet God has one will. If each person of the Trinity has his own will then the Trinity is destroyed and instead of one God in three persons we have three Gods (or Tritheism).
3. If it is accepted that the Trinity demands one will within the Essence of the Godhead then the subordination of the Son to the Father becomes a necessary subordination, just as the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit are necessary. A necessary subordination implies a difference in essence.
4. Subordinationism necessarily requires either that Christ is a created being (as Islam and Jehovah’s witnesses teach) or else that Christ is less than fully God which is semi-Arianism.
5. The attempt to justify subordinationism as being consistent with Trinitarian orthodoxy is an attempt to do the impossible because the two are incompatible. This logical inconsistency will not be lost on Unitarians which will undermine our witness to them.
6. A Jesus who is less than God in any of his attributes is not God at all and amounts to a denial of the Son. John warns that “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God.” (2 John 9). No doubt this is why the Athanasian Creed makes the doctrine of God a salvation matter.

For these reasons it is vital that evangelical leaders speak out with a clear voice on the correct doctrine of the Lord Jesus and reject eternal subordinationism within the Trinity as a serious error.

**Subordinationism – why Now?**

The reason that subordinationism has surfaced has been to support the complementarian position regarding the submission of women to men within the ministry. This is misguided because it involves reflecting the created order back into the imminence of the Trinity. Yet God is inscrutable and incomprehensible (Isaiah 40:28) and can only be known what is revealed through scripture.

The teaching of the Bible about the submission of women to men within the ministry and within marriage is clearly set out by Paul in 1 Timothy 2, 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 and Ephesians 5. If we truly believe in the inerrancy and clarity of the scriptures then we need go no further than the verses of scripture contained in these passages.

My plea to my brothers who are persuaded by the arguments in favour of the eternal subordination of the Son to the Father is to look again at the scriptures and conclude, with the giants of the evangelical faith that have gone before us, that the only way to reconcile the verses on the subordination of the Son to the Father and with those verses speaking of his supremacy as God is to attribute all references to his subordination to his humanity as mediator. Let us not ignore the rich evangelical heritage that points us back to a right understanding of scripture as the Psalmist reminds us, “thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name”[[15]](#footnote-15).

**A Glimpse into Heaven – the Final Proof of the Equality within the Godhead**

We started with the Resurrection so let us finish with the consummation of all things. 1 Corinthians 15:28 states, “And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.”

John Wesley, in his Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament” comments “*The Son also shall be subject* - Shall deliver up the mediatorial kingdom. *That* the three-one *God may be all in all*”. John Wesley understood that this verse was not justifying eternal subordinationism within the Trinity.

Let us end with a glimpse into heaven itself as Edward Bickersteth described the supremacy of both Father and Son who now sit upon the Throne together which should persuade all that there is no such thing as eternal subordination of the Son to the Father:[[16]](#footnote-16)

The possessor of the heavenly throne is God himself. The occupant of that throne is the Most High. Be it so. Then the last chapter of the Divine Revelation supplies the last proof of the one and equal supremacy of the Father and the Son, for there, repeated with solemn emphasis, we twice find the seat of the Eternal described, as THE THRONE OF GOD AND OF THE LAMB. [Revelation 22:1-3]… this is, of itself, sufficient to set the question at rest for ever, when we remember that Jesus Christ himself, gathering up the testimony of Scripture, says, “It is written, thou shall worship the [Matthew 5:10] Lord thy God, and him only shall thou serve.” But we have seen that the highest worship and service on earth, and in heaven, is rendered to the Son. Therefore, he is the Lord our God.

As we contemplate the glory of the risen Lord may I end by wishing you all a blessed Easter.

**Points for praise:**

* For the return of a family of 6 and a recently converted Muslim who had been absent for several months;
* For encouragements in the English Classes which we have started advertising as an opportunity to learn about the Bible;
* Continued faithful attendance at early morning prayer meetings.

**Points for prayer:**

* That an ex-alcoholic would continue to be alcohol free and put away harmful behaviour and put on Christ;
* That the Lord would send workers to help with door to door visitation and street evangelism;
* That those who have returned would grow in grace and in faithful attendance;
* That G would grow in his understanding and choose baptism;
* That E would commit himself more fully to the meetings;
* That the two teenage boys at the church would be born again.

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1. Expository Thoughts on the Gospels, St John. Vol 1 published by Robert Carter & Bros. 530 Broadway, New York in 1874 at P286 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ibid, p284 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Taken from Matthew Henry’s commentary published by E-Sword as downloadable software. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Trinity by Edward Henry Bickersteth, published 1892 from the pdf edition downloaded from [www.thebibleproject.com](http://www.thebibleproject.com) at p42 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ibid p37 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Downloadable from http://www.wordmp3.com/ets-recordings [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Published by Latimer Studies (Biblical Truth for Today’s Church) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Your Will be Done” at p142 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid at p40 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.fourthcentury.com/second-creed-of-sirmium-or-the-blasphemy-of-sirmium/ [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid at p41 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid at p57 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Expository Thoughts, St John, Volume III at p91 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.john-stevens.com/2016/06/are-we-all-heretics-now-reflections-on.html [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Psalm 61:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. The Trinity at p43 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)