**Michael J. Ovey’s doctrine of the Trinity; the eternal ‘superordination and submission’ of God the Father and God the Son is orthodoxy. (3-8-2015)**

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In a recently published symposium of essays,[[1]](#footnote-1) mainly written by Southern Baptists, that argue for the eternal subordination of the Son, I was surprised and disappointed to find an essay by the principal of Oak Hill Theological College London, Dr. Michael J. Ovey.[[2]](#footnote-2) Oak Hill is the most famous and prestigious evangelical Anglican theological training college in England. James Packer was once the principal. Michael quite explicitly argues for hierarchical ordering in the life of God, which is the very thing most patristic scholars see as the chief error of Arianism in its differing expressions.[[3]](#footnote-3) For Michael, the Father rules over the Son as a human father rules over his son, and for him this divine ordering in heaven prescribes the male-female relationship on earth. This argument in part fuels Michael Ovey’s well known strident opposition to the ordination of women and their consecration to the episcopate. He believes passionately that God has given ‘headship’ to God the Father and to men. Leadership is male. For three years he was on the staff of Moore Theological College, Sydney, my *alma mata*, where virtually the same views on the Trinity and women that he holds prevail.

In his essay by Michael Ovey, arguing for the ‘superordination of the Father’ and as its corollary the *eternal* submission/subjection/subordination, and ‘obedience’ of the Son.[[4]](#footnote-4) He is sharply critical of me and my writings on the Trinity. He thinks I misrepresent historic orthodoxy by arguing that evangelicals who teach the eternal subordination of the Son have breached the creedal and confessional faith of the church. In particular, he accuses me of implying that those who teach this doctrine are ‘not Christians at all’.[[5]](#footnote-5) This is very emotive language. I certainly do not think that my brother or sister evangelicals who believe in hierarchical ordering in divine life are not Christians. Rather, I think of them as theologically mistaken Christians; as evangelicals who in their zeal to maintain male ‘headship’ have read their hierarchical view of the sexes back into the Trinity and thereby corrupted the primary doctrine of the Christian faith.

I argue against the doctrine of the eternal subordination or submission of the Son because I am convinced that this is a denial of the basic Christian confession, ‘Jesus Christ is Lord’; it is to contradict what the Nicene and Athanasian creeds teach, and for an Anglican, it is to oppose what Article 1 of the Anglican 39 Articles clearly affirms. It is not historic orthodoxy.The fact that I argue against hierarchical ordering in divine life should not be taken to imply that I think a co-equal Trinity would support the equality of the sexes. For me, the Trinity does not set a social agenda; it is our Christian doctrine of God. It is not the basis for the hierarchical ordering of the sexes or their co-equality. In any case there can be no direct analogical correlation between a divine Father-Son relationship, and the threefold trinitarian relationship in heaven, with a *twofold male-female* relationship on earth. The logical connexion is missing

I argue against the permanent subordination of women because in creation God gave the same dignity and same authority to man and woman (Gen. 1:26-28), whereas the subordination of woman is entirely a consequence of the Fall (Gen. 3:16), and it is this God-given creational view of the sexes that Jesus endorses.[[6]](#footnote-6) I do not believe that one proof-text, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which in every verse says something with no parallel in the rest of the Bible, and in many verses says something that seems to contradict other clearer passages in scripture, can be the basis for subordination of half the human race. More generally, I argue against the ‘complementarian’[[7]](#footnote-7) doctrines of the permanent subordination of women and the eternal subordination of the Son because the former demeans the Son of God and the later demeans women.

Only when ‘complementarians’ agree that the doctrine of the Trinity has nothing to say for or against the permanent subordination of women will they be able to hear what their evangelical friends are crying out to them, ‘Go back, you are going the wrong way’. Only then will they be free to embrace the creedal and confessional doctrine of the Trinity, fundamental to the Christian faith.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In response to Michael Ovey’s essay on the Trinity, I first briefly outline and then in some detail critically evaluate his arguments for the eternal subordination/submission/subjection of the Son to the Father. He appeals to four sources to establish that the historic Nicene doctrine of the Trinity includes the idea that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father.

1. A number of Synodal creeds from the middle of the fourth century.
2. A short quote from Basil of Ancyra.
3. Athanasius’ understanding of the Father-Son relationship.
4. Hilary of Poitiers, *De Synodis*.

He outlines his thesis succinctly and clearly.

The creedal and confessional material we will examine shows that overall, Arian, Nicene, and non-Nicene sources alike commonly held to the submission of the Son outside the incarnation. However the material also shows that the Son’s submission may be grounded differently, with Arian versions of submission being associated with the Son as a creature, while the others stress the Son’s submission arises from his sonship and not from him being a creature. [[9]](#footnote-9)

Ovey is unambiguous; the Arian and pro-Nicene fathers both ‘held to the submission of the Son outside the incarnation’. They only differed on what is the basis for this submission or subordination of the Son. For all those called ‘Arians’, the Son is subordinate because he is a creature, not truly God. In contrast, for all the pro-Nicenes the Son is God yet subordinate because he is ‘the Son’; like all sons, he is set under his Father’s authority. This is the position Michael Ovey himself and other ‘complementarians embrace.

This commendably clear articulation of his thesis raises four questions that demand answering. They are:-

1. Do all the sources Ovey appeals to accurately reflect pro-Nicene orthodoxy?
2. Do all the various versions of what is called fourth century ‘Arianism’ teach that *the Son is subordinate because he is a creature,* and it is this one specific error that the pro-Nicene fathers opposed?
3. Do the pro-Nicene fathers make the eternal subordination of the Son for any reason the essence of the error they call ‘Arianism’?
4. Do the Nicene fathers teach that because Jesus Christ is called ‘the Son’ he is set under his Father and must obey him just like a human son must?

**Fourth century ‘Arianism’.**

Before considering the evidence to which Michael Ovey appeals, we must immediately respond to his claim listed first above that there was a common Arian doctrine that *the Son is subordinate because he is a creature.* This is simply not true.[[10]](#footnote-10) Arius certainly believed this but many whom the Nicene fathers designated ‘Arians’ did not. In the middle of the fourth century there were certainly theologians Athanasius called ‘Arians’ who confessed the Son to be God and the creator of all things and yet understood him to be eternally subordinate to the Father, as we will see from several of thecreeds from which Ovey quotes. Khaled Anatolios makes this point explicitly. He says ‘in the 350s’ there were theologians whose doctrine was ‘Arius-like in its subordinationism, even though its proponents rejected both the label “Arian” and the doctrine that the Son was created from “nothing”.’[[11]](#footnote-11) This is an insurmountable problem for Ovey’s primary thesis but it gets worse. Not only do none of the pro-Nicene church fathers make the creaturely status of the Son the chief error of what they pejoratively call ‘Arianism’, but also none of the contemporary scholarly books on the fourth century debates over the Trinity make this the chief error of fourth century Arianism in its various forms.

Proof that those designated ‘Arians could affirm both that the Son is God and the creator *and* that he is eternally subordinated to the Father is demonstrated by Ovey’s own appeal to the second Sirmium Creed of 357, which he agrees is an Arian creed. In this creed the Son is confessed as ‘God from God’ and ‘maker of all things’ and subordinate to the Father. Turning to the contemporary scholarly discussions of the fourth century debates on the Trinity we find that they are in basis agreement that the chief error of all so-called fourth century ‘Arianism’ in all its forms was the insistence that the Father has unrivalled priority in the Godhead. He is pre-eminently and supremely God; the Son is subordinate God. This closely reflects Ovey’s own position. J. A. McGuckin says that despite its ‘shifting expressions, fourth century Arianism’, with one voice attributed ‘an inferior *status* … to the Son of God’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Lewis Ayres reaches much the same conclusion. He says all the so-called Arians of the fourth century emphasised the ‘difference between Father and Son … mak[ing] use of relational language, frequently of a hierarchical nature’.[[13]](#footnote-13)Letham makes the same point even more starkly. He says that what was common for fourth century ‘Arians of all shapes [was that they] froze the triad into a hierarchy;’[[14]](#footnote-14) they all held that ‘the Son was of a lesser rank or status than the Father.’[[15]](#footnote-15) *None of these well-informed scholars identify the creaturely status of the Son as the primary error of the so-called forth century ‘Arians’.*

**1. The Synodal evidence.**

The creeds which Michal Ovey quotes must first be placed in historical and theological context. They were all composed between 340 and 357 when most bishops, especially in the East, were not supportive of the creed of Nicea and were hostile to Athanasius. In this period the key issues raised by Arius had not been resolved. The bishops were looking for a middle way between the threat of Sabellianism at one extreme and the teaching of Arius on the other. They could not endorse the use of the term *homoousios* (one in being) because they feared it opened the door to Sabellianism*.* And they could not endorse doctrines popularised by Arius that had been anathematised at the Council of Nicea, especially that Jesus was a creature, made in time.Their solution was to confess that the Son is begotten of the Father, true God and the creator of all things and yet subordinate to the Father. In the Second Sirmium creed of 357, to which Ovey appeals, this teaching came into focus and is named by modern patristic scholars, ‘*Homoian* Arianism’.[[16]](#footnote-16) The *Homoians* confessed the Son to be God and the creator of all things, but they could not confess him as ‘one in being’ (*homoousios*) with the Father. Instead, they spoke of the Son as ‘like’ (*homoios*) the Father. This term, Ayres says, had for them ‘a clear subordination emphasis’.[[17]](#footnote-17) Hanson sees their insistence on the superordination of the Father and the subordination of the Son as the primary and central feature of their theology. He says, ‘the keynote’ of this form of Arianism was ‘a drastic subordination of the Son to the Father’.[[18]](#footnote-18)

What we note in reading these creeds and their appended anathemas is that the creeds themselves are close to the Nicene faith in affirming the Son to be ‘God from God’ and the creator, and if clearly subordinationist comments are made they are as a general rule in the anathemas that follow.[[19]](#footnote-19) What this means is that in each case these documents contain a strange amalgam of what might be called a ‘soft’ expression of the Nicene faith and a soft or hard - in the case of the Second Sirmium Creed of 357 - expression of Arian subordinationism. All without exception are attempts to reword the creed of Nicea of 325. They were compiled by bishops with very differing views and they reflect just this reality. They are like the proverbial camel, a horse designed by a committee. I for one do not think they are a consistent witness to any coherent theological position, let alone the faith of Nicea. It is primarily on these documents that Michael Ovey builds his case.

These creeds and their appended anathemas to which Michael Ovey appeals can be found in the collection of Athanasius’ writings in the *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, volume 4, in his work titled, ‘Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia’ (Latin, *De Synodis*), pages 448-480.[[20]](#footnote-20) In this document Athanasius outlines what took place at the council of Nicea and, the opposition that followed, and then he quotes very fully from the creeds he thinks are ‘blasphemous’. Finally, he outlines why he disagrees with the theology these creeds enunciate. To make it plain what is from the pen of Athanasius and what is from these ‘Arian’ writings, Newman in his English translation uses different scripts.

1. **The Second Sirmium Creed (the Blasphemia), 357.**

First, Michael Ovey draws our attention to the second creed of Sirmium of 357, which he notes both Athanasius and Hilary of Poitiers denounce as ‘blasphemous’. He concedes this is ‘an Arian creed’.[[21]](#footnote-21) He says it ‘unquestionably sees the Son as [eternally] subject to the Father.’[[22]](#footnote-22) But, he asks, is this strong affirmation of the eternal submission of the Son what made this creed ‘obnoxious to the anti-Arians?’[[23]](#footnote-23) Before answering this question he asks us to consider other creedal material from this period. I give the creeds he appeals to as he lists them.

1. ‘T**he Second Antioch Creed (the Dedication Creed), 341’.**

Ovey then moves to a creed drawn up in Antioch in 341 when about ninety Eastern Bishops gathered in that city for the dedication of a new church by the emperor, Constantius. This gave them the opportunity to meet in synod to seek agreement on what they believed about the Trinity. From this synod and its immediate aftermath four doctrinal formularies emerged. The first of these begins by insisting that ‘we bishops’ are not followers of Arius or his teachings. The second, the so-called ‘Dedication Creed’, is what Michael Ovey focuses on. In this creed the Son is confessed as ‘begotten from the Father, before ages, God from God, whole from whole, sole from sole, perfect from perfect, King from King, Lord from Lord, by whom all things were made’.[[24]](#footnote-24) These words directly contradict the teaching of Arius on the key issues of the Son’s divine status and work in creation.[[25]](#footnote-25) In this creed, the Son is fully God and the co-creator of all things, not a creature, and yet Athanasius denounces this creed as ‘Arian’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Ovey does not comment on this confession of the Son as God ‘by whom all things were made’ possibly because it completely undermines his thesis that for the pro-Nicene fathers depicting the Son as a creature is primarily what is ‘obnoxious’ to them in Arianism. It seems it is not. What he does draw attention to is the comment on the words that come immediately after a reference to the great commission, Matthew 28:19,

The Father who is truly Father, and clearly of a Son who is truly Son and the Holy Ghost who is truly a Holy Ghost, these words not being set forth idly and without meaning, but carefully signifying the Person, and order [translating ordo in Hilary, *De Synodis* 29 and *taxis* in Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 23] and glory each of those who are named, to teach that they are three Persons, but in agreement one.[[27]](#footnote-27)

For Ovey, the declaration that the Father is ‘truly Father’ and the Son ‘truly Son’ are hugely significant. They imply the ‘superordination of the Father’ and ‘the subordination of the Son’.[[28]](#footnote-28) One of the key arguments in his essay is that to speak of ‘the Father’ by necessity implies by human analogy the subordination of the Son. But this is not the intent of these words in this creed. This affirmation that one divine person is the Father, one the Son, and one the Spirit is given as an attempt to exclude Sabellianism. The divine persons are differentiated by their personal identities. The Nicene doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son establishes divine differentiation and oneness in being in a much better way.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The second part of the given quote, however, does unquestionably speak of the superordination of the Father and subordination of the Son and Spirit - hierarchical ordering in divine life. Hanson says, ‘true-blue Arians’ would have ‘welcomed the admission that the names of the Three signify the particular order and glory of each, because these terms would allow a graduated or subordinated Trinity.’[[30]](#footnote-30)

Thus what we have in this creed is a clear affirmation that the one God is eternally three divine persons and that the Son is true God, the creator of all things, and yet subordinate to the Father. It is this affirmation of the Son’s subordination in particular that sets it in opposition to the faith of Nicea. Hanson says, ‘this creed appears as one undoubtedly intended to replace N’ (the creed of Nicea, 325),[[31]](#footnote-31) and he adds, it is not ‘compatible with it’.[[32]](#footnote-32) The reason Athanasius calls this creed ‘Arian’[[33]](#footnote-33) is clearly not because it speaks of the creaturely status of the Son. This creed unambiguously confesses the Son to be ‘God from God’, ‘by whom all things were made’. Athanasius denounces this creed as ‘Arian’ because it explicitly subordinates the Son to the Father.

**iii. ‘The Serdica Encyclical, 343’.**

Ovey moves next to ‘the Serdica Encyclical’ but gives it no context or explanation.This document is one of a number of writings mostly produced by ninety Western bishops who had failed to meet in council with eighty Eastern bishops who the Emperor Constans had summoned to Serdica to resolve the theological tensions in the church.[[34]](#footnote-34) The document from which Ovey quotes is one of the eight that the Western Bishops produced after the Eastern Bishops left. Hanson names it in English, ‘A Synodical Letter to all the Churches, including a profession of faith’.[[35]](#footnote-35) He gives the text in full. This ‘profession of faith’ is a long list of rambling affirmations and denials not worthy of the title ‘creed’, which Ovey gives it. The document shows how little comprehension the Western bishops who complied it had of the issues that so troubled the Eastern bishops. In this profession of faith the Son is unambiguously confessed as ‘true God’, not a creature, but not much more can be said positively about it. It opens the door to Arian subordinationism, does not adequately close the door to Sabellian modalism and does not even have a word for what would later be called a divine ‘person’.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Ovey quotes two passages from this profession of faith.

First,

We do not say that the Father is Son, nor the Son Father. But the Father is Father and the Son is Son of the Father …

These words certainly identify Jesus Christ as ‘the Son’ and the Father as ‘the Father’. However, the wording is not used to imply the subordination of the Son but rather to exclude ‘modalistic Sabellianism’.[[37]](#footnote-37) The point being made is that both divine persons have for all eternity their own personal identity, one is ‘the Father’, one ‘the Son’. Ovey’s claim that because the Father is named Father and the Son Son, the Son is to be understood as subordinate on the basis that human fathers always rule over sons. This argument has absolutely no merit. This premise is to be rejected. The creaturely words ‘father’ and ‘son’ do not define the divine Father-Son relationship, as Ovey would have us believe. To presume that human words can be applied to God literally, that is, ‘univocally’, is to make a profound theological mistake. We will return to this matter.

The second quote:

None (of us) ever denies the statement: ‘The Father is greater than I’ [John 14:28] - but that does not apply to another hypostasis or any difference but (only) because the name Father is in itself greater than that of Son.

Ovey tells us he took this isolated quote from the little book by Franz Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity.*[[38]](#footnote-38)If he had consulted the best preserved text in the Greek, or the full text in translation by Hanson, he would have been better informed. The Greek text is more accurately translated ‘the Father is *somehow* (*pote*) greater than the Son’.[[39]](#footnote-39) And with the full text before us we note that immediately after the words Michael quotes, this rambling statement of faith adds,

This is their blasphemous and corrupt interpretation: they contend he said [Jn 10:30] because of the agreement and harmony. We who are catholics condemn this silly and wretched idea of theirs.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Putting together all that is said in this wordy collectively drafted statement of faith is well-nigh impossible. The reference to John 14:28 is not at all surprising. This text was difficult for those opposed to Arius’ stark subordinationism, such as these Western bishops, and for the pro-Nicene fathers, not only because it says the Father is greater than the Son, but also because it is hard to see how these words can be reconciled with what John 10:30 says, ‘The Father and I are one’. The Western bishops at Serdica as men who held a high view of scripture naturally accepted this text and sought to explain it, not deny it. They are ‘not very clear’ in what they are saying, says Hanson,[[41]](#footnote-41) when they give the explanation that the Father is only greater ‘because the name Father is itself greater than that of Son.’ I think Ovey overstates his case when he claims that we clearly have here ‘some species of superordination of the Father precisely in the eternal relationship’.[[42]](#footnote-42) I agree, nevertheless, that there is incipient subordinationism in this section of the ‘Encyclical’. In the writings of the consistently pro-Nicene fathers one of two safer interpretations of John 14:28 are given. For some, the Father is only greater because he is the originator of the Son;[[43]](#footnote-43) for others, notably Augustine, the Father is only greater than the Son in his incarnation when he took the form of a servant.[[44]](#footnote-44) For none of them is he greater in authority. The Father and the Son are one in being and power. Basil of Caesarea spends some time in specifically refuting the idea that the Father is greater than the Son because he has superior authority.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This convoluted and confusing document has no theological weight. It was ratified by no council. Why Ovey would appeal to it to establish Nicene orthodoxy and his hotly contested idea of the ‘superordination’ of the Father and the ‘subordination’ of the Son completely escapes me. Why not appeal to the Nicene Creed, the weightiest witness to the Nicene faith? Ovey never mentions this creed or the fuller and more explicit later Athanasian Creed which sums up the patristic doctrine of the Trinity.

**iv.** ‘**The Macrostich (‘Long-Lined’ Creed), 345.**

Ovey says that because ‘the Serdica Encyclical was not universally accepted’ the need was seen for a creed that could gain wider support in the East and the West.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The creed to which he now draws our attention is known as the ‘Macrostich’, or ‘long lined’ creed. It was drawn up in a council of Eastern bishops in Antioch and taken to a council of bishops in Milan. The wording of this creed is almost identical to the wording to the Dedication Creed. It likewise speaks of the Son as generated ‘before the ages’, as fully God, and ‘through whom are all things’. He is the co-creator not a creature. Yet as Ovey notes, this creed also speaks ‘very strikingly of the Son’s subordination’.[[47]](#footnote-47) I give the key phrase in the quote he gives with the italics he adds.

For we acknowledge, that *though he* [the Son] *be subordinate to His Father and God*, yet, being before ages begotten God. He is perfect in nature and true, and not first man and then God, but first God and then becoming man for us, and never having been deprived of being’.[[48]](#footnote-48)

I agree, the subordination of the Son is clearly affirmed in this quote. I note, however, that some of the things that the historic Arius taught are denied by what is said here. Arius could not confess that the Son is begotten before ages, or that ‘he is perfect in [divine] nature’ and ‘never having been deprived of being’ or that through him all things were created. This observation makes the point that what Arius taught should not be taken to be uniformly endorsed by later theologians whom the pro-Nicene fathers called ‘Arians’ and that that these later ‘Arians’ did not think of the Son as a creature.

The second quote Ovey gives is also found in the anathemas that follow the creed. I quote what he gives in part with his added italics.

Believing then in an All-perfect Triad … [where there is] one exact harmony of dominion, *the Father alone being Head over the whole universe, wholly, and over the Son Himself, and the Son subordinated to the Father* … For such is the account of the divine Monarchy towards Christ … .[[49]](#footnote-49)

Ovey’s first comment on this quote is, ‘we should note how central divine cosmic monarchy is. For Athanasius there is no real God without divine cosmic monarchy’.[[50]](#footnote-50) To support this assertion Ovey gives a reference to Athanasius’ *Contra Gentes* 6, but this reference does not use the word *monarchia,* nor suggest that the Father alone rules over the whole universe, let alone over the Son. For Athanasius divine rule is always triune. The one God, who rules over all, is the three persons. The idea that God the Father alone exercises the *monarchia* is an Arian idea.[[51]](#footnote-51) This whole clause consistently reflects Arian subordinationism. Ovey is again correct in his assessment. The so-called Macrostich Creed ‘develops and intensifies the subjection themes of the Dedication and Serdica Creeds’.[[52]](#footnote-52) And, ‘It is far from easy to reconcile the Macrostich statements with the idea that the Son’s subjection is purely for the incarnation, or is without authoritative content.’[[53]](#footnote-53)

The problem for Michael Ovey, however, is this: Athanasius and modern patristic scholars take such comments as a denial of the Nicene faith. This creed, Ayres says, is ‘far from later pro-Nicene orthodoxy’. [[54]](#footnote-54)It depicts the three divine persons in ‘hierarchical’ order.[[55]](#footnote-55) Hanson says in this creed, ‘the subordination of the Son is strongly affirmed.’[[56]](#footnote-56) Again for Athanasius, this is an ‘Arian’ creed.[[57]](#footnote-57)

**v.** **‘The First Creed of Sirmium, 351.’**

Next, Ovey appeals to the ‘First Creed of Sirmium’ to prove that the Nicene faith teaches the full divinity of the Son *and* his subordination in authority. In this creed we find virtually the same confession of the Son as we have seen in the Dedication and Macrostich creeds. He is ‘begotten of the Father’ ‘before all ages’ and is ‘God from God’, ‘by whom all things were made’.[[58]](#footnote-58) He is the co-creator not a creature. Nevertheless in anathema 18 we read these words as Ovey points out. I include his added italics.

If any man says the Lord and the Lord, the Father and the Son are two Gods, because of the aforesaid words: let them be anathema. *For we do not make the Son the equal or peer of the Father, but understand the Son to be subject*. For he did not come down to Sodom without the Father’s will, nor rain from Himself but from the Lord, to wit by the Father’s authority; nor does He sit at the Father’s right hand by His own authority, but He hears the Father saying, *Sit thou on my right hand*.’[[59]](#footnote-59)

Ovey rightly notes, ‘the Son’s subjection is explicit’ in this quote. ‘The subjection of the Son cannot be restricted to the incarnation’. [[60]](#footnote-60) He thinks confirmation of this is found in the reference to Genesis 19:24. This text speaks of the destructive ‘rain’ of sulphur and fire from the Lord on Sodom and Gomorrah that was pre incarnational’.[[61]](#footnote-61) His argument is that the compilers of this anathema would have identified ‘the Lord’ in this quote with the Son.

Where Ovey and I come to opposite conclusions is that he believes this teaching perfectly reflects pro-Nicene orthodoxy; I believe this subordinationistic teaching reflects perfectly Arian theology in the middle of the fourth century, and as such, to use his word, is ‘obnoxious’ to the pro-Nicene fathers. Hanson draws much the same conclusion. He says this creed ‘reflects sharply anti-Nicene doctrine’ and that it is ‘in opposition to the opinions of Athanasius’.[[62]](#footnote-62)

(Again) **The Second Sirmium Creed (the Blasphemia), 357.’**

At this point in his essay Ovey returns to the Second Sirmium Creed, the so-called ‘Blasphemia’; the point where he began his discussion of the mid fourth century creeds. He acknowledges, as noted earlier, that this creed is virtually unanimously judged to be Arian in theology. What he does not note is that this creed like the others he has quoted confesses the Son to be ‘begotten of the Father’ …‘before all ages…, God from God, Light from Light, *by whom all things were made*.[[63]](#footnote-63) To miss this last affirmation is inexcusable. It is to pass over evidence that counts against his primary thesis, which is that for the pro-Nicene fathers what was most ‘obnoxious’ for them was the common Arian idea that the Son is subordinate to the Father *because he is not the Creator but a creature*. This agreed ‘Arian’ creed completely disproves Ovey’s thesis.

The one quote Ovey gives from the anathemas following the ‘Blasphemia’ creed is as follows (I keep his italics).

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.*

Ovey argues that what is Arian in this quote is seen in the words, ‘the Son is subordinated to the Father together with all things’. This phrase, he claims, place the Son ‘on the side of the creatures: the classic Arian position’.[[64]](#footnote-64) This cannot be the case, because the creed itself explicitly confesses the Son to be ‘God from God’ ‘by whom all things were made’. What the words, ‘together with all things’, refer to is the common Arian belief that all things including the Son are subordinate to the Father. The Father is the *monarchia*, the sole ruler rather than the Trinity as the Nicene fathers taught, a matter I have already discussed.

Ovey thinks this quote just given above reflects perfectly the Nicene faith, what is ‘orthodox’, namely that, ‘the subordination of the Son (if) [is] based on the Father-Son relationship’.[[65]](#footnote-65) ‘Filial submission is a natural consequence of true sonship’.[[66]](#footnote-66) The insurmountable problem with this argument, as we will see when we turn to Athanasius, is that he and the other pro-Nicene fathers never subordinate the Son on the basis that he is like a human son. They categorically reject this ‘Arian’ argument.

This creed is denounced as ‘Arian’ and ‘blasphemous’ by Athanasius not because it depicts the Son as a creature – it does not- but because the ‘keynote’ of this doctrinal statement is ‘the drastic subordination of the Son to the Father.’[[67]](#footnote-67) More than any of the other creeds to which Ovey appeals, this creed is a denial of the Nicene faith on this central issue. What Hanson says on it should be carefully noted. He writes,

It makes no concessions at all to the pro-Nicenes. It is certainly not meant to take the place of N [the creed of Nicea] but it attacks N, no longer covertly, but directly and openly … .It is the manifesto of a party, of the party that stood in the tradition of Arius *though it did not precisely reproduce his doctrine*. … This is an Arian creed. Those who support it are Arians. Those who are repelled by it are not.[[68]](#footnote-68)

This quote is catastrophic for Ovey’s position and that of all ‘complementarians’ who are of one mind with him on the Trinity. Hanson says that those who support what this creed teaches, I take it then and now, are ‘Arians’! What this means is that Ovey has, in this section of his essay on middle of the fourth century creeds, conclusively shown that there were many theologians who implicitly or explicitly *in opposition to* Arius argued that the Son is begotten by the Father ‘before time’, he is ‘true God from true God’ and the creator of all things, while arguing *with* Arius that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father in authority. This is exactly what Ovey tells us that he and other so-called ‘complementarians’ believe. Their doctrine of the Trinity is not the Nicene faith. The Nicene faith allows for no subordination in the eternal life of God; the title ‘the Son’ speaks of the divine status of Jesus Christ not his subordination. The divine three persons are one in divine being and thus each fully God in all might, majesty and power.

In any quest to understand the fourth century debates about the Trinity, the second creed of Sirmium is hugely important. This creed marks the point where those opposed to Nicea splintered into two groups who today are usually designated *Homoians* and *Heteroousians.* For Hanson, the Second Sirmium Creed of 357 is the first clear declaration of *Homoian* Arianism’.[[69]](#footnote-69) The *Homoians* prided themselves on their appeal to scripture. They thus could confess the Son to be God through whom all things were made (Jn 1:1-3) but they would not use either the words *homoousios* or *ousia* because they argued they are not found in the Bible. For them, the Son is simply ‘like’ (Gk *homoios*) the Father. This difference in terminology may sound innocuous but it resulted, says Hanson, in ‘a drastic subordination of the Son to the Father.’[[70]](#footnote-70) Thus to call them by the old designation, ‘semi-Arians’ is inaccurate and unhelpful. If fourth century Arianism is broadly defined as the error of sub-ordering the Son under the Father, or in trinitarian terms, the hierarchical ordering of the divine three persons, then the *Homoians* were definitely guilty of the error later called ‘subordinationism’[[71]](#footnote-71) as were their precursors who drafted the other creeds to which Ovey appeals

*In conclusion I draw attention to the self-defeating nature of Michael Ovey’s appeal to these creeds. In seeking to show that his and other ‘complementarians’’ hierarchical doctrine of the Trinity is the Nicene faith he selectively quotes from four creeds compiled by Bishops with no sympathy with or opposed to the Creed of Nicea (325); creeds that were later rejected at the Council of Constantinople in 381 when the creed of Nicea with a few minor word changes was reaffirmed. This is the Nicene Creed that now unites Western and Eastern Christians and is binding on all those who confess it, including all Anglicans. Thus what Ovey demonstrates is that his doctrine of the Trinity and that of his fellow ‘complementarians’, in which the Son is confessed as God and the creator of all things and also eternally subordinate to the Father, cannot be reconciled with the Nicene faith. In contrast to what is said unambiguously and starkly on the eternal subordination of the Son in these creeds, to which Michael appeals, the Nicene fathers stand strongly opposed. In particular, they oppose the ‘Arian’ idea that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father because he is designated a ‘son’. The pro-Nicene fathers with one voice reject the belief that creaturely words such as ‘father’, ‘son’, and ‘begotten’ can define divine relations.*

**2. Basil of Ancyra.**

As his second strand of evidence in support of his thesis that the Nicene faith both affirms the full divinity of the Son and his eternal subordination Michael Ovey appeals to Basil of Ancyra, whom Letham describes as a theologian who ‘stressed the subordination of the Son to the Father’.[[72]](#footnote-72)

Ovey only gives one quote from Basil of Ancyra, taken from Epiphanius of Salamis’ *Panarion,* [[73]](#footnote-73) commonly known as ‘the refutation of all heresies’. Epiphanius is a pro-Nicene theologian who is very critical of Basil’s theology. He says Basil ‘repudiates his (Arius’) name but adopts the man and his heresy’. [[74]](#footnote-74) How Ovey found this isolated quote from a seldom read very large book would be interesting to know. And why he thinks this quote reflects pro-Nicene theology is another interesting question.[[75]](#footnote-75) The quote he gives reads,

And if anyone says that the Father is the Father of the only begotten Son by authority only, and not the Father of the only begotten Son by authority and essence alike – thus accepting only the authority, equating the Son with any creature, and denying that he is actually the true Son of the Father – let him be anathema.

What this quote in a secondary source without a context exactly means is not at all clear to me. Michael nevertheless is in no doubt as to what Basil is saying. He says he is teaching that,

there is authority in the Father-Son relation, but also a fatherhood based on essence, in which the Son is like in essence to his father. To assert authority *only*, without the likeness of essence, would be to reduce the Son to a creature.

I am not convinced. True, Basil says the Father and the Son are like in essence but I see no mention in this quote of the Father ruling over the Son or of the Son being a creature. I suspect Basil is speaking about the Son’s origination. He is arguing that the Son was not brought into existence solely by the authority of the Father. It was not an act of will like that of a human father who decides to have a child, a ‘creature’, an idea Arius promulgated. Rather the Father by an act of will and a bestowal of his essence generated a ‘true Son’, one *like* him in essence.

Whatever the answer, the fundamental problem remains; Basil of Ancyra is not a pro-Nicene theologian. Epiphanius quotes this text from Basil’s pen because he sees him as an Arian, ‘defective’ in his theology.[[76]](#footnote-76) If Ovey’s theology of the Trinity reflects that of Basil of Ancyra then it cannot be reconciled with the faith of Nicea and it too is ‘defective’.

*To sum up, I cannot see how this quote from the Arian Basil in a secondary source that is unclear in its wording can give support for Michael Ovey’s primary thesis that the Nicene Faith teaches that the Son is God, not a creature, and yet eternally subordinated in authority to the Father.*

**3. Athanasius.**

The third body of evidence Ovey offers in support for his thesis that Nicene orthodoxy teaches the ‘superordination-submission between the Father and the Son’, he finds in Athanasius’ understanding of the terms ‘servant’ and ‘son’ used of Jesus Christ. This appeal to Athanasius is very surprising. Only someone who had not read or properly understood Athanasius would make such a move. No one is more opposed to the eternal subordination of the Son in being and authority than Athanasius.[[77]](#footnote-77) The learned German theologian W. Pannenberg sums up scholarly opinion when he writes, ‘Athanasius vanquished subordinationism’.[[78]](#footnote-78) Ovey does not appeal to what Athanasius actually says on the Father-Son relationship but rather to the fact that he speaks of the Son as a ‘servant’ and as a ‘son’. His argument is predicated on the premise that ‘the Son’s submission arises from his sonship’.[[79]](#footnote-79) Like a human son he is set under his father and must obey him like a servant. He repeatedly makes this claim in his essay.

Ovey notes correctly that Athanasius allows that a father can rightly call his son a servant. This indicates, be believes, that Athanasius held that the divine Father has authority over the son as he would over a servant. He says, ‘Athanasius’ argument turns precisely on the parallel between human and divine father-son relations on this point of paternal authority.’[[80]](#footnote-80) In other words, human family relations on earth of authority define divine relations in heaven.

There are three insurmountable problems with this argument. The first I mention in passing as I will develop this point in considering Ovey’s specific appeal to the title ‘Son’ as proof that the Son is subordinate to his Father like all sons. In making this argument Michael is presupposing that creaturely words like ‘son’ or ‘servant’ should be understood as they are in fallen existence. This is a profound mistake for any theologian to make.

The second monumental problem for Michael Ovey is that in the section of Athanasius’ ‘Discourses Against the Arians’,[[81]](#footnote-81) to which he appeals to prove that the great Alexandrian theologian believed that to call the Son a ‘servant’ implies his eternal subordination is simply not true. Arius certainly believed this but not Athanasius. For Athanasius, to call the Son a servant in no way implies his eternal subordination. Because the Son is eternally begotten, not created, he shares the same divine nature and power as the Father. For Athanasius, the Son is,

The expression of the Father’s person, and light from light, and power, very image of the Father’s essence. For this too the Lord [Jesus] said, ‘He that has seen me has seen the Father’.[[82]](#footnote-82)

What this means is that Ovey draws exactly the opposite conclusion to that of Athanasius. For him, the Son may be called a ‘servant’ but this in no way detracts from his status and power as God. We will now see why this is so for Athanasius.

The third major problem with this argument is that Ovey completely misses the theological explanation that Athanasius gives as to why the Son is called a servant in his earthy ministry. Central to Athanasius’ argument for the oneness in being and power of the Son, his unqualified divinity, is that his subordination and obedience is limited to his earthly ministry in the economy (history) when he took ‘the form of a servant’. He argues that in scripture there is a ‘double account of the Saviour’,[[83]](#footnote-83) one as he is ‘in the form of God’ and one as he is ‘in the form of a servant’ in his incarnation.[[84]](#footnote-84) This ‘double account, of the Saviour’ Athanasius finds clearly taught in Philippians 2:4-11, a text he repeatedly quotes. It is on the basis of this ‘double account of the Saviour’ that Athanasius reads the Bible. For him, all texts that imply the Son’s subordination or speak of him as obedient or ignorant or frail refer to his earthly ministry, in ‘the form of a servant’.[[85]](#footnote-85) In contrast, all texts that speak of him as God, reigning in all might, majesty and authority, ruling over all creation, speak of him ‘in the form of God’.

Augustine calls Athanasius’ ‘double account’ hermeneutic a ‘canonical rule’ for reading scripture rightly on the Son. This rule, he says, is ‘laid down for us in this one passage’, Philippians 2:4-11, where the apostle makes a contrast between the Son ‘in the form of God’ and the Son in ‘the form of a servant’.[[86]](#footnote-86) He, and all other catholic theologians following, have used this rule for their theological interpretation of scripture in enunciating the doctrine of the Trinity. To find that Ovey does not appear even know of this hermeneutical rule for the right interpretation of scripture on the Trinity is very worrying.

Michael Ovey says that I am quite wrong to argue that the Son, for Paul, Athanasius and the other pro-Nicene fathers, is only a servant in his incarnation. To do this he says ‘leaves the Arian argument intact’.[[87]](#footnote-87) ‘Sadly Giles’ strategy leaves orthodoxy exposed to exactly the Arian challenge that so exercises him.’[[88]](#footnote-88) These comments make no sense at all to me. To limit Jesus’ servant status and obedience to the Father to his incarnation in the economy, as I do and as the Nicene fathers do, excludes the common Arian idea that the Son is eternally under the Father’s authority. It is a denial that the Son is *eternally* the obedient servant. Somehow Ovey seems to miss this point altogether. I am also completely perplexed as to why at an earlier point he accuses me of distorting and disfiguring ‘the eternal love between the Father and the Son’.[[89]](#footnote-89) He claims that I cannot accept that love and authority can co-exist. This is an assertion without substance. I certainly think, as a father of four and a grandfather of ten, that they can. What is more I believe that love and authority are both attributes of our one triune God. I only differ with Ovey on this matter in that I refuse to define the Father-Son relationship in terms of my creaturely experience of family life. I do not believe the Father has authority over the Son on the basis of scripture. In scripture both the Father and the Son are confessed as ‘Lord’. This means one does not rule over the other.

I now turn to ‘son’ language.[[90]](#footnote-90) Ovey argues that not only ‘servant’ language but also ‘son’ language used of Jesus Christ is ‘real’.[[91]](#footnote-91) By this he means that the divine Son is just like a ‘real’ son of a human father; that the term ‘son’ has the same meaning when used of a child of a human father as it does when used of the Son of the divine Father. Because human sons must obey their father, so the divine Son must obey his Father. He says, Athanasius argument that the Son must eternally obey his Father,

turns precisely on the parallel between human and divine father-son relations on this point of paternal authority. It is vital to grasp this.[[92]](#footnote-92)

This is *not* what Athanasius believes. He does not teach that the Son must obey the Father and he will *not* allow a ‘parallel between human and divine father-son relations’. For him, human relations and creaturely words cannot be used to speak accurately about divine life. To do this is dangerous. Listen to what he says,

Let every corporeal inference be banished on this subject; and transcending every imagination of sense, let us, with pure understanding and with mind alone, apprehend the genuine relation of Son to Father, and the Word’s proper relation towards God … for the words ‘Offspring’ and ‘Son’, are meant to bear, no human sense, but one suitable to God.[[93]](#footnote-93)

God is not a man, nor must we think humanly of him.[[94]](#footnote-94)

But if God be not as man, as he is not, we must not impute to him the attributes of man.’[[95]](#footnote-95)

However, Athanasius does allow one direct correlation between the human and the divine because scripture reveals this correlation. In the eternal generation of the Son the Father perfectly communicates his divine nature. As the Nicene Creed says because he is eternally begotten he is ‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God’. Likewise ‘Scripture emphatically teaches that the Son is God (Jn1:1, 20:28, Phil. 2:4-11, etc.), and thus by inference shares perfectly in the one divine nature/essence/being. He is *unlike* all human sons for Athanasius because he is ‘the fullness of the Godhead’ without any qualifications.[[96]](#footnote-96) To drive home this point he says time and time again, ‘All that can be said of the Father can be said of the Son, except for calling him Father’.[[97]](#footnote-97) As far as Athanasius is concerned, the Son is co-equal God.

What Ovey does not understand is that all human language used of God is analogical. It is not to be taken literally, or to use the technical term, ‘univocally’. Our creaturely language used of the Creator may convey truth but exactly what this truth is must be revealed by scripture. Much of the Fourth century debate on the Trinity was on this very issue. Athanasius and all the pro-Nicene fathers would not allow that creaturely words such as ‘father’, ‘son’, ‘begetting’ or ‘sending’ should be understood literally when used of the divine persons. The Arians of all kinds were of the opposite opinion. Like Ovey, they assumed that creaturely human language defined divine life. For the Arians, the language of ‘begetting’ proved the point. If the Son is ‘begotten’ by the Father, as the Nicene fathers insisted, then they reasoned that the Father must be before the Son in time and set over him in authority. A human son is begotten in time and set under his father. Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers will have none of this. They are adamant; ‘the Son’ is not like any human son. As God he has no mother, he is not conceived as other sons, he has no beginning in time, he did not grow from a baby to adulthood, and so on.[[98]](#footnote-98)

Athanasius never wavers; he will not allow that to call Jesus Christ ‘the Son’ implies his subordination in either being or authority. Specifically on the question of the Son’s power and authority he says.

[The Son] is seated upon the same throne as the Father.[[99]](#footnote-99)

He is Lord and King everlasting.[[100]](#footnote-100)

For he ever was and is Lord and sovereign of all, being like in all things to the Father.[[101]](#footnote-101)

He is Lord of all because he is one with the Father’s Lordship.[[102]](#footnote-102)

What the evidence we have given shows is that on Athanasius, Ovey is quite wrong. He claims that ‘for Athanasius a true son is a good son, over whom a father has legitimate authority because of the paternal relationship’.[[103]](#footnote-103) To hear this Athanasius would, I think ‘turn in his grave’. It was Arius who argued that because the Son is a son he is subordinate to the Father. For Athanasius and all the pro-Nicene theologians, the Father and the Son are both true God, and for this reason they must be understood to share the one divine nature/being and thus be one in power/authority. In contrast, for the Arians’, because the Father and the Son are *not* one in nature/being they are not one in power/authority. When Ovey argues that Athanasius teaches that the Father and the Son are one in nature but *not* one in authority he contradicts Athanasius and he breaks sharply with the consistent pro-Nicene tradition.

What his means should be carefully noted. Ovey and other ‘complementarians’ reject the logic of the pro-Nicene theology, namely that if the three persons are one in nature/being they are one in power/authority. They choose to believe instead that the Father and the Son are one in being/nature but *not* one in power/authority. This position is incoherent. If the Son is truly God, *one in being with the Father*, then he is almighty, subject to no one.

One final matter before we leave the title ‘the Son’. [[104]](#footnote-104) In Michael Ovey’s essay there is very little appeal to scripture. When it comes to the title ‘the Son’ used of Jesus Christ he does not seek the meaning of this title in scripture, as one might think he would as an evangelical, but rather by appeal to fallen human relations on earth. This is a very bad mistake for an evangelical theologian to make. Scripture should be the primary basis for theology. For the New Testament writers the title ‘Son’ when given to Jesus Christ indicates not his subordination but rather his Kingly status. He is identified as the Son of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who rules on the one throne with his Father (Rev. 7:10-12, 11:15). For the apostolic writers the title, ‘the Son’, speaks of Jesus Christ’s ruling authority, not his subservience. Here ‘complementarians’ need to be reminded that Jesus Christ is not only confessed as the Son of God but also as ‘the Lord’. He is in this confession identified with Yahweh, the Lord God omnipotent. The Reformed theologian, John Frame, says, ‘scripture calls Jesus the Son of God in *a unique sense*’,[[105]](#footnote-105) and he adds,

There is a considerable overlap between the concepts of Lord and Son. Both indicate Jesus’ rule over his covenant people (as Son, he is the covenant King of Ps 2:27). Both [titles] indicate Jesus’ powers and prerogatives as God, especially over God’s people: in other words divine control, authority, and presence.[[106]](#footnote-106)

*To sum up, we can thank Michael Ovey for raising the issue of creaturely words used of God, especially father-son language, something on which he and other ‘complementarian’ theologians build so much of their case for the eternal subordination of the Son. He is, however, completely wrong in arguing that the pro-Nicene fathers believed that because ‘the Son’ is called ‘ Son’ he is subordinate to the Father. They are in fact totally opposed to such reasoning and so is scripture. The title Son in scripture and in the theological tradition implies not his subordination but his royal status and authority. To argue otherwise by appeal to the creaturely meaning of the human words, ‘father’ and ‘son’ is, as I hope I have shown, theologically disastrous. It opens the door to depicting God in creaturely terms.*

**Hilary of Poitiers (315-367).**

Michael Ovey’s fourth strand of evidence is the most challenging for me. Hilary is rightly seen as an opponent of Arianism and as such a pro-Nicene theologians, albeit of Western provenance.[[107]](#footnote-107) However, Hanson says ‘he can occasionally produce sentiments that are not strictly in accord with pro-Nicene theology’[[108]](#footnote-108) and inconsistently ‘admit a certain subordination of the Son to the Father.’[[109]](#footnote-109) Ovey appeals to one such passage from Hilary’s *De Synodis* where he speaks of the subordination and obedience of the Son. I only give the most significant words in the quote Ovey gives; the full quote makes the point emphatically.

The Son is not on a level with the Father and is not equal to him is chiefly shewn (*sic*) in the fact that he was subject to him to render obedience.[[110]](#footnote-110)

Further on in this quote Ovey notes that Hilary describes the Son’s submission as the ‘subordination of filial love’. This is true. Michael then adds that Hilary ‘heavily stresses names’; one is the Father, one is the Son. We would hope that he did this because the divine names are part of what differentiates the divine persons for all eternity. One is the Father, the other the Son. Ovey takes this highlighting of the different divine names in another way. He believes that in naming Jesus Christ, ‘the Son’, ‘Hilary indicates two things, first that the Son is fully divine, but, second that he has a relation of subjection to the Father.’[[111]](#footnote-111) If Hilary understood the title ‘Son’ to imply the Son’s subordination, which as far as I can see he does not, then he parts company with all the other pro-Nicene theologians. The names Father and Son for all the other Pro-Nicene fathers are *not* understood in a creaturely way as we have shown.

Well, what can I say about Hilary’s affirmation of both the full divinity of the Son and his subordination of the Son in authority?

First, I note that what Hilary says in this quote from *De Synodis* reflects the doctrine of the majority of Eastern bishops who compiled the creeds that Ovey refers to from th*e* middle of the fourth century. The Son is God and the co-creator, yet subject to the Father. It is a doctrine of God that is in opposition to the creed of Nicea (325) and excluded by the Nicene Creed ratified by the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Second, it is almost impossible to reconcile what Hilary says about the subordination of the Son in this quote with what he says on the ‘equality’ of the Father and the Son in many other paragraphs in this document, most explicitly in paragraphs 73 and74.[[112]](#footnote-112)

73. Therefore, beloved brethren, in declaring that the Son is like in all things to the [Father](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06608a.htm), we declare nothing else than that he is equal. Likeness means perfect equality, and this fact we may gather from the [Holy Scriptures](http://www.newadvent.org/bible/index.html). …

74. I am aware, dear brethren, that there are some who confess the likeness, but deny the equality. Let them speak as they will, and insert the poison of their [blasphemy](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02595a.htm)  into [ignorant](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07648a.htm) ears. If they say that there is a difference between likeness and equality, I ask whence equality can be obtained? If the Son is like the Father in [essence](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05543b.htm), might, [glory](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06585a.htm) and [eternity](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05551b.htm), I ask why they decline to say he is equal? … Likeness then is the sharing of what is one's own, the sharing of one's own is equality, and equality admits of no difference. Those things which do not differ at all are one. So the Father and the [Son](http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14142b.htm) are one, not by unity of Person but by equality of nature.

Ovey asks the question, ‘is Hilary’s position simply incoherent?’[[113]](#footnote-113) He thinks not, but I am of another opinion. I simply cannot see how some paragraphs in this document can be reconciled with others.

Third, we need to recognise that Hilary’s doctrine of the Trinity evolved. His later trinitarian theology, seen in *De Trinitate*, though not without its own contradictions, was far closer to what the Eastern pro-Nicenes fathers taught than some of what he says in *De Synodis*, written early in 359. Mark Weeden says,

Hilary’s thought developed. The theologian who returned from exile in 361 was not the same theologian who went into exile.[[114]](#footnote-114)

Finally, we should also note that some pro-Nicene fathers dismissed Hilary’ *De Synodis* and Athanasius ignored it. [[115]](#footnote-115) Later when Athanasius wrote his own *De Synodis,* he drew very different conclusions to Hilary. For him, the frequent affirmations of the Son’s subordination in the life of God by Eastern bishops in these various creeds were heresy to be rejected.

*I am not sure what help the quotes from Hilary’s De Synodis are for Michael Ovey’s thesis. I think they simply show that sometimes theologians can be contradictory in what they say and that over the years their thinking can evolve and improve. I for one would not see Hilary as a theologian of the calibre of Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers or Augustine who are far more consistent and far better thinkers.*

**Now back to the questions Michael Ovey’s primary thesis clearly raises.**

With our examination of Ovey’s cumulative argument that trinitarian ‘patristic theology’[[116]](#footnote-116) teaches that the Son is God yet eternally submissive or subordinate to the Father now complete, we can answer the four questions his thesis raises.

1. Do all the sources Ovey appeals to accurately reflect pro-Nicene orthodoxy? The answer is no. The creeds to which he appeals and the quote from Basil of Ancyra are all composed by those opposed to the faith of Nicea and Hilary of Poitiers is not a consistent witness. The Second Sirmium Creed is blatantly Arian.
2. Do all the various versions of what is called fourth century ‘Arianism’ teach that *the Son is subordinate because he is a creature* and is this one specific and primary error the pro-Nicene fathers opposed? Again the answer is a firm no. In the middle of the fourth ‘Arians’, as Ovey has conclusively demonstrated, confessed the Son to be God, the creator and his subordination.
3. Or, do the pro-Nicene fathers make the eternal subordination of the Son for any reason the essence of the error they call ‘Arianism’? To this question the answer is a firm yes. The pro-Nicene fathers rejected completely any suggestions that the Son is eternally subordinate to the Father in any way. What was totally ‘obnoxious’ for the pro-Nicene fathers was the idea that the Son is not God in the same sense as the Father; he is subordinate God. For them, those who spoke of the subordination of the Son, no matter how much they differed on other matters, were ‘Arians’.
4. Do the Nicene fathers teach that because Jesus Christ is called ‘the Son’ he is set under his Father and must obey him just like a human son must? No, they do not and they strongly reject this argument. Creaturely language and relationships cannot define three divine persons or their relationships.

**How to correctly determine the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.**

As an evangelical Anglican I would have hoped that the principal of an Anglican theological college, a prestigious one at that, would appeal first to the creeds and the Anglican Articles for guidance on how to rightly read the Bible on the primary doctrine of the Christian faith, the Trinity. Ovey takes another path with, I contend, nothing to commend it. The right approach for establishing the historic catholic doctrine of the Trinity is to study carefully what Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine, and possibly Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin as well, teach on the Trinity. These men are universally recognised as the authoritative voices in the articulation of trinitarian doctrinal tradition. The Nicene father’s doctrine of the Trinity is now codified in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds and for Anglicans the Reformation summary of this doctrine in Article 1 of the 39 Articles. To teach anything contrary to the creeds is to breach historic orthodoxy, the catholic faith, and for an Anglican to contradict the 39 Articles is untenable.

In the Nicene Creed confessed by Western and Eastern Christians the Son is said to be ‘eternally begotten of the Father’, and for this reason ‘God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten not made, one in being with the Father’. No words could more strongly assert that the Son is God without any caveats, the omnipotent God. When Ovey asserts that ‘just as begottenness entails the Son’s full deity, so it entails his subjection,’[[117]](#footnote-117) he could not be more wrong.[[118]](#footnote-118) The eternal begetting of the Son is the doctrine that absolutely guarantees both the indelible distinction between the Father and the Son and their complete oneness in divine being and power. Later in this creed we told the Son’s ‘Kingdom will have no end’. He is now the King and he will continue as King for ever. He is subordinate to no one.

In the so-called Athanasian creed composed in about AD 500, what is basically Augustine’s teaching on the Trinity is identified as ‘the catholic faith’. In this creed, binding on all Anglicans, the unity of the divine Trinity is to the fore, and any suggestion that the Son or Spirit is subordinated in being or authority is unambiguously excluded. Three clauses specifically deny that the Son is less than the Father in authority. ‘So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet there are not three almighties but one almighty’. ‘So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord and the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet not three Lords but one Lord’. ‘In this Trinity none is afore or after another: none is greater or less than another … all are co-equal’ – in other words, there is no hierarchal ordering within the Trinity. Nothing could be plainer. The Athanasian Creed is emphatic. The Father, Son, and Spirit are ‘co-eternal’ God, and indivisible in power and authority. Thus it is asserted, ‘Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit’. To argue that the divine three persons are ordered hierarchically in any way directly contradicts this creed. In this statement of faith the divine three are differentiated only by differing identity – one is Father, one is Son and one is Spirit – and in origination – the Father is God ‘unbegotten’, the Son is God ‘begotten’ and the Holy Spirit is the God who ‘proceeds’. They are never differentiated in authority, an idea explicitly proscribed. Each is ‘almighty’ and ‘Lord’. J. N. D. Kelly, in his definitive study of this creed says, ‘the dominant idea [in the Athanasian Creed is] the perfect equality of the three persons.’[[119]](#footnote-119) Another Oxford scholar, Leonard Hodgson, is of very similar opinion. He says the Athanasian Creed, ‘expresses rejection … of all subordinationism.’[[120]](#footnote-120)

The very first Article of the Anglican confession of faith, The 39 Articles, declares that the divine three persons are ‘of one substance, power and eternity.’ All the Reformation and post Reformation confessions say much the same on the Trinity. If Father, Son and Spirit are one in substance/being/essence and power/authority and all are eternal, one does not rule over the others. They are alike omnipotent. In everyday speech the terms ‘power’ and ‘authority’ are commonly used synonymously and in reference to God they are synonymous words. If the divine three persons are one in power then they are one in authority. In any case, both words speak of divine attributes, and orthodoxy with one voice teaches that all three divine persons have the same attributes. Anglicans should also note carefully what Article 21 says on church councils. Church councils ‘may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God’, that is on the Trinity. Ovey ignores this warning.

**Conclusion.**

Michael Ovey has by his own work disproved the key elements of his thesis. He has conclusively shown that,

Arians in the middle of the fourth century confessed the Son as God, the maker of all things, *and* his eternal subordination.

By appealing to Athanasius he has led us to see that for the Athanasius and the other pro-Nicene fathers the Son is only subordinate to the Father by his own free choice while he was in ‘the form of a servant’ in the economy.

And that for Athanasius and the other pro-Nicene fathers the title ‘Son’ indicates not his subordinate status but rather that he God in the same sense as the Father; he is one in divine being with the Father, ‘God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God’. Athanasius and the other Nicene fathers are totally opposed to the idea that creaturely words such as ‘father’ and ‘son’ can inform our understanding of God and his trinitarian relationships.

What this means is that Ovey has demonstrated more conclusively than I have ever been able to do that the contemporary ‘complementarian’ doctrine of the Trinity, which he supports and promotes, stands far close to Arianism in the middle of the fourth century than it does to the Nicene faith. It is a doctrine of the Trinity which the later creeds and confessions of the church reject.

1. *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons, Implications for Life*, eds, B. Ware and J. Starke (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015). The essays by R. Letham and K.S. Oliphint, Reformed scholars committed to the Westminster Confession, are exceptional. They reflect historic orthodoxy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ‘True Sonship – where Dignity and Submission Meet’, in *One God*, 127-154. I twice emailed Michael asking if he would like to critically read my essay and comment on it before I made it public. He did not answer my emails. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I will say more on this, but at this point I simply quote in support R. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘True Sonship’, 128, note 6. The first three terms can all be used to translate the one Greek word *hypotasso*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘True Sonship’, 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For a full account of my egalitarian theology of the sexes see K. N. Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity, 2002), 141-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This is the self-chosen name for evangelicals who argue for the permanent subordination of women and the eternal subordination of the Son. That the sexes are ‘complementary’ is of course self-evident. Man and woman ‘complete’ what is means to be human. Thus this self-chosen designation does not distinguish those who use it. We are all ‘complementarians’. It is chosen for apologetic reasons because it sounds acceptable to the modern ear. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here it should be carefully noted that ‘complementarians’ introduced and have pushed the Trinity argument to support their belief in the permanent subordination of women. This argument has played virtually no part in the evangelical egalitarian argument. See K. N. Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ‘True Sonship’, 130-131. He restates his thesis again on page 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The definitive study of fourth century Arianism is R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Retrieving Nicea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *The* *Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Louisville: John Knox, 2004), 30. Italics added to the word ‘status’. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Nicea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004),42, see also 16, and 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *The Holy Trinity,* 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *The Holy Trinity*, 400. The Nicene fathers all affirmed *order* in divine life; consistency in how the divine three persons originate and operate which is not reversible but they rejected hierarchical ordering. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. On this see Hanson, *The Search,* 557-597. See also Ayres, *Nicea*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Nicea*, 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *The Search*, 567. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The possible exception is the creed given in the Serdica Encyclical. See my discussion on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1892). Henceforth quoted as *NPNF*. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ‘True Sonship’, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. See Athanasius, ‘On the Councils’, 23 (p. 461). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *The Search,* 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. So Ayres, *Nicea*, 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I give the quote less the first couple of lines as Michael Ovey gives it, ‘True Sonship, 132. For a better translation see Hanson, *The Search*, 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. ‘True Sonship’, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See on this, K. N. Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. *The Search*, 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 290. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ‘On the Councils, 31 (p. 467). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Hanson tells the story in some detail, *The Search*, 293-306. See also Athanasius, ‘On the Councils’, 28 (pp. 465-466).). [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 299. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See further, Hanson, ibid., 302-304 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. F. Dunzl, *A Brief History of the Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church* (London: T&T Clark2007), 82. ‘True Sonship’, 134, note 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. ‘True Sonship’, 134, note 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hanson, *The Search*, 302. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Ibid., 303 [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. ‘True Sonship’, 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. For example, Athanasius, *NPNF*, 4, ‘Discourses’, 1.13.58; Basil, *NPNF*, 8, ‘Letters’, 8, 5 (p. 118). [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. *St Augustine, The Trinity,* translated by E. Hill, (New York, New City, 1991), 1.3.15 (p. 75), 1.3.18 (p. 78). [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Giles, *The Eternal Generation*, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid., 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. For the quote in context see Athanasius, *NPNF*, 4, ‘Councils’, 26, anathema 4 (p. 463). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Ibid., 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. See further K. N. Giles, ‘The Father as the *mia arche*, the one originating source of the Son and the Spirit, and the Trinity as the *monarchia*, the one undivided sovereign ruler’, *Colloquim*, 46.2 (2014), 175-192. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. ‘True Sonship’, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Nicea,* 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. *The Search*, 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Athanasius, *NPNF*, 4, ‘Councils 27 (pp. 464). [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. *NPNF*, ibid., (pp. 464-465). [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. ‘True Sonship’, 138-139. Italics as given in the essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. *The Search*, 329. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. *NPNF*, 4, ‘On the Councils’, 27 (p. 464). Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. ‘True Sonship’, 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Ibid., 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Ibid., 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. *The Search*, 567. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid., 347. Italics added. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 567. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Ibid., 567. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. See K. N. Giles, “Defining Subordinationism’, *EQ*, LXXII.3 (2015), 207-224. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. *The Holy Trinity*, 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, books II and III, translated by F. Williams (Leiden: Brill, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., 443. Epiphanius lived between *circa* AD 315-403. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. ‘True Sonship’, 129, note 11. On page 141, n 68 Ovey notes that Epiphanius ‘views Basil as defective since he is a Semi-Arian’!! [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. As Michael Ovey notices. ‘True Sonship’, 141, note, 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. On Athanasius see T. Weinandy, Athanasius*: A Theological Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 19880; P. Leithart, *Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011); Letham, *The Trinity*, 127-145; Jesus *and the Father,* 134-144, 178-185, 216-220. M. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 147-148 is simply wrong to argue that Athanasius teaches the eternal subordination of the Son. On looking closely at the quotes from Athanasius that he gives in support we find that Erickson fails to see that in the first quote that Athanasius actually says the Lord is NOT subordinate to anyone. He misses completely the ‘not’. While in the case of the other quotes he gives he fails to see that Athanasius is quoting from the same creeds to which Ovey appeals. They reflect teaching that Athanasius bitterly opposes. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. *Systematic Theology*, I (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. ‘True Sonship’, 131, cf., 134, 141, 142-145, 147 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. One needs to read ‘Discourses’ book 2, chapters 1 to 10 (pp. 348-354), which are one ongoing diatribe against arguments that the Son is a ‘work’, someone created by the Father, and thus not true God.. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. *NPNF*, 4, ‘Discourses’, 3.9 (p. 311). Dozens of similar forceful affirmations of the Son’s full divinity and power could be given from Athanasius’ writings. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. *NPNF*, 4 ‘Discourses’, 326.29 (p. 409) [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., 23.6 (p. 396). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ibid., 26.30-41 (pp. 410-416). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. *The Trinity*, 2.14 (p. 74). [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. ‘True Sonship’, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid., 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. In more detail see Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 63-67, and Giles, *The Eternal Generation*, 23, 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. ‘True Sonship’, 142. I must acknowledge that Michael Ovey does say, ‘Athanasius obviously envisages differences between human sonship and divine sonship. For instance, divine sonship is incorporeal and without passion’ (True Sonship, 147). This limitation is not sufficient. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. ‘True Sonship’, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. *NPNF*, 4, ‘Defence of the Nicene Definition’, 5.24 (p. 166). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Ibid, “Discourses’, 1.28 (p. 323) [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Ibid., 6.21 (p. 319). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Ibid., 4.23.6 (p. 397). [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Ibid., 3.4 (p. 395), 3.5 (p. 395) see also 3.6 (p. 396); ‘Councils’, 3.49 (twice, p. 476). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. For Athanasius on just this matter see ‘Discourses’, 6.21-22 (p. 319) [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Ibid., 1.61 9 (p. 341). [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Ibid., 2.13 (p. 355). [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Ibid., 2.18 (p. 357). [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Ibid., 3.64 (p. 429). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. ‘True Sonship, 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. See further, D, Carson, *Jesus the Son of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 658. Italics added [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Ibid., 661. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. On Hilary see M. Weeden, *The Trinitarian Theology of Hilary of Poitiers* (Boston: Leiden, 2007), Carl Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers: From De Fide to De Trinitate* (Oxford: OUP, 2008),and especially Hanson, *The Search,* 459-506. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. *The Search*, 468. See also 473. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Ibid., 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. ‘True Sonship’, 146. The quote is from *De Synodis,* 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Ibid., 147. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. My text is taken from the internet, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3301.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. ‘True Sonship’, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. *The Trinitarian Theology,* 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Beckwith, *Hilary of Poitiers, 211.* [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. ‘True Sonship’, 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Ibid., 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. See further on this Giles, *Eternal Generation*, particularly pages 205-219. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. *The* *Athanasian Creed* (London: A. & C. Black, 1977), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet, 1955), 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)