

Are we really heretics and who cares?

Mark D. Thompson

Address given at the Annual General Meeting of the Anglican Church League, Sydney, Thursday 19th August 2004

It is not often that theological debates hit the secular newspapers. This is even less likely when the doctrine being debated is as foreign to the average pagan's thinking as the doctrine of the Trinity. However, as most of you will know, earlier this year such a thing did indeed happen here in secular, anti-religious, modern Sydney. The charge that the Anglican Diocese of Sydney is unorthodox in its doctrine of God, a charge made in two recent books and a few articles was aired, in a rather provocative way, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 28 May. To use the opening words of that article,

The Anglican Diocese of Sydney, already considered out of touch with much of the modern church, now stands accused of holding beliefs which put it outside any Christian faith.

As a matter of fact, both books and the *Herald* article mentioned the heresy associated with Arius, an elder in the Alexandrian church who was condemned in the early fourth century. The conclusion we were meant to draw was that Anglicans in twenty-first century Sydney were repeating, perhaps unwittingly, perhaps not, the monstrous error of a universally recognised false teacher in the early church. Driven by our own ecclesiastical agenda we are supposed to have cast doubt over the full divinity of Jesus Christ — and you just don't get a more serious challenge to the Christian gospel than that!

What are we to make of this turn of events? Can we really just shrug it off with something like 'Any publicity is better than no publicity'? Or should we rather take the matter very seriously indeed? Should we just ignore it and move on or should we take the time to answer our critics in detail? But there is a more important question, isn't there? Is it just possible that there is something in the charge that is being made—with varying degrees of seriousness it must be said—by a few people who are not happy with us? Have we stepped over the line from Christian orthodoxy into heresy? Without ever having wanted to, have we called into question that most fundamental of Christian convictions: that Jesus of Nazareth really is the Christ, and more than that, that Jesus of Nazareth is God in the flesh — every bit as much God as the Father? After all, if we have really done that, then we need to repent immediately.

1. What's the issue?

How did we get to this point? What precisely is the issue? It centres around a report of our Doctrine Commission tabled in Sydney Synod in October 1999. The report was entitled *The Doctrine of the Trinity and its bearing on the Relationship of Men and Women*.

In the long debates that have convulsed our denomination over the ordination of women, one question kept resurfacing. This was the question of whether full equality between men and women could coexist with any sense of permanent order between them. How equal are we really if our roles and relationships are not interchangeable? In answer to this question, both sides had appealed to the nature of God. In some sense human being and human relationships are patterned on God's own existence and relationships. We are, after all, created in the image of God. Does the way the Son relates to the Father give us any clues as to whether equality and order are mutually exclusive or not? Different, indeed contradictory, answers had been given to these questions, so in 1998 the Sydney Synod charged the Diocesan Doctrine Commission with the task of investigating them and preparing a report.

The report of the Diocesan Doctrine Commission concluded that 'unity, equality *and* subordination characterise the life of the Trinity'. The Son freely and willingly obeys the Father while always remaining one with Him and equal to Him. The Father and the Son are perfectly equal, one in the most profound sense possible, and yet not interchangeable. Very importantly, it went on to say that 'The Son's obedience to the Father arises from the very nature of his being as Son'.

The Doctrine Commission certainly recognised that the use of the word 'subordination' is not without its problems. First, left on its own, the word is open to misunderstanding. To some it suggests force and compulsion: one person is *made* subordinate to the other. Yet that can never be the case when we talk of the relation of the Father and the Son within the Trinity. As the Commission's report said, 'the Son delights to please the Father'. The Father is not a tyrant and the Son is not oppressed. We can speak about the Son's free and willing subordination to the Father. Yet we need to understand that, again to quote the report, 'his freedom consists in doing what is natural to him'. In that sense the Son's submission to the Father is not something arbitrary. To choose otherwise would be to deny who he is.

Again, the word 'subordination' is often taken to mean that one person is somehow less than the other. In this particular case, some suggest the word implies a 'subordination of being', that the Son is somehow placed below the Father *in being*. In other words, he is not as fully God as the Father is. This is indeed the ancient heresy of Arius and those who advocate this view clearly stand outside the orthodox Christian tradition. Yet there is another way of speaking about 'subordination': to refer to a

difference in function between the Father and the Son. This is 'functional subordination' and it is very different from the suggestion that the Son is somehow less God than the Father. Far from being a false reduction of the Son's divine nature, this way of speaking emphasises both a sameness of nature or being and a difference in function. The Doctrine Commission's report makes clear repeatedly that it is using the word 'subordination' in this second way. It explicitly and repeatedly denies a 'subordination of being'.

Recognising both these dangers associated with the word 'subordination', the Report maintained that it is still appropriate when understood properly. In the sense in which it is used in the Report it safeguards the truth that while the Son is every bit as much God as the Father, they are not interchangeable. The Father sends the Son but the Son does not send the Father. The Son obeys the Father but the Father does not obey the Son. There is a difference of function and this difference of function is not something external or unimportant. It is an important feature of their relationship as Father and Son and this relationship is neither an optional extra nor something detachable from the heart of who they are. Since the Father and the Son (along with the Spirit) actually exist in relationship to each other it is the denial of order—the denial of the Father's headship or the Son's submission—that is the real assault upon God's being.

It is here that it is particularly easy to end up in hot water. 'Functional subordination' does not quite say enough and yet we must guard against saying anything that implies a 'subordination of being'. What we want to highlight is an eternal feature of the relationship between the Father and the Son, recognising that this relationship itself is what constitutes their being. The Father is always the Father and the Son is always the Son; what is more, to be the Father has always involved headship while to be the Son has always involved submission and obedience. Once again it is important to remember that we are not talking about coercion or servitude. This is part of God's perfection where the Father and the Son act willingly and lovingly according to their nature. Perfect freedom and perfect equality are not undermined by headship and submission; in fact the truth is quite the opposite.

2. So, are we heretics after all?

If I have correctly described the argument of the Doctrine Commission report, the question remains whether it is right. Does it represent orthodox Christian teaching or are we heretics after all? There might be many ways to secure an answer to this question. For instance, we could investigate whether this is the way orthodox Christians of the past have spoken about the relationship of the Father and the Son. Yet for evangelical Christians the ultimate answer is only to be found by looking at the evidence of the Bible. Does the Bible teach both equality and subordination as features of the relationship between the Father and the Son? More specifically, does the Bible teach that Jesus' earthly

obedience was in fact an instance of the eternal obedience of the Son to the Father? In other words, does the Bible teach 'an eternal subordination of role' which reinforces rather than undermines a perfect equality of being?

People have written at great length on this subject. Books are being published by theologians of all shapes and sizes. Yet tonight perhaps I can provide just an outline of a response to these questions by briefly showing that the Bible affirms five key truths.

1. *The Bible teaches that Jesus of Nazareth is in fact the incarnate Son of God.*

Passage after passage testifies to the true divinity of Jesus. He is both a man born of a woman at a particular point of time *and* the Son of God eternally related to the Father as Son. The opening of John's Gospel is crystal clear, as it unfolds one step at a time:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ...

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth ...

For the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ ...

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

When we deal with Jesus, then, we are dealing directly with God. We don't look behind Jesus in some way to find the Son. He *is* the eternal Son of the Father, the one who explains to us what the Father is really like. As a matter of fact, Jesus often described himself as 'the Son' in an unqualified way, especially in John's Gospel. The apostle Paul, likewise, could refer to the Lord Jesus as 'the Son', both in reference to his earthly ministry and his present heavenly existence. In the present debate, no-one seriously doubts that Jesus of Nazareth is the eternal Son of God.

2. *The Bible teaches the perfect obedience of Jesus to his heavenly Father.*

There is ample evidence too that Jesus sought to be, and in fact was, consistently obedient to his heavenly Father. The pattern was set by the temptation in the wilderness after his baptism by John the Baptist. His response to each of the three challenges put to him by the Satan was 'it is written'. He would live in conscious dependence upon God's word unlike the first man and woman who were tempted in the Garden. Jesus himself would put it this way: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work'. In the Garden of Gethsemane he would pray, 'not my will but yours be done'. The apostle Paul testified that such obedience was indeed a characteristic of Jesus' entire earthly life in the famous poem of Philippians 2:

Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being

found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Once again there is little dispute on this point. Throughout his earthly life Jesus demonstrated a consistent and unqualified obedience to his heavenly Father. It is in this connection that the writer to the Hebrews can speak of Jesus 'learning obedience through what he suffered' and 'being made perfect'.

3. *The Bible teaches that Jesus' obedience is the obedience of the Son to the Father.*

This is critical in the current debate. Was the undoubted obedience of the earthly Jesus to his heavenly Father really an instance of the eternal Son's obedience to the eternal Father? As a matter of fact, the New Testament does not make the neat distinction between the relation of the Father and the Son in eternity and the relation of the earthly Jesus and his heavenly Father. Precisely because Jesus is in fact the eternal Son—now sharing our human nature but in no sense less God than he was from eternity—that distinction is a false one. That is why the behaviour of Jesus during his earthly ministry is connected so seamlessly in the New Testament to the eternal stance of the Son before the Father.

Once again it is John's Gospel where the clearest statements of this connection are to be found. The words I have already quoted from John 4, Jesus' own statement that 'my food is to do the will of him who sent me', point beyond merely the earthly life of Jesus to the sending authority of the Father. The Father has sent the Son and this sending gives Jesus' words and actions in first century Palestine a particular character. They are instances of the Son's faithfulness, his obedience to the charge given to him by his Father. Jesus makes this explicit in John 10:

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge [*ἐπιτολίη* = charge or command] I have received from my Father.

The same idea is found in John 12:

The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment [*ἐπιτολίη*]— what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.

Jesus' own words give us licence to move from his earthly obedience to his heavenly Father to an eternal obedience of the Son to the Father. Unlike other facets of Jesus' earthly life such as his tiredness, hunger, and susceptibility to death, his obedience during those thirty-three years was not simply part of being genuinely human. It is not simply a result of the self-emptying or 'kenosis' that Paul talks about in Philippians 2. Instead it is a window into the eternal relationship of profound

other-person-centredness where the Son delights to do the will of his Father.

4. *The Bible teaches an eternal submission of the Son to the Father.*

Jesus' earthly obedience is an instance of the Son's obedience to the Father. This willing and natural obedience of the Son to the Father characterises their eternal relationship. We are forced to this conclusion by the teaching of the New Testament itself. 'I *always* do what is pleasing to him', Jesus says of his Father in John 8:29. Elsewhere in John's Gospel he highlights 'the will of him who sent me' as the purpose for his coming: 'I came down from heaven *not in order to do my will* but [*in order to do*] the will of him who sent me'. In other words, he is not just obedient as a consequence of the incarnation. His obedience is the reason for the incarnation. This is an eternal characteristic of the relationship the Son has with the Father. In this light, Jesus' statement 'the Father is greater than I' is not simply a comment about the state of affairs during his earthly life; it refers to the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son.

The teaching of the apostle Paul fits perfectly with these words of Jesus. In 1 Corinthians 11:3 he says that the head of Christ is God — not *was* but *is*! Four chapters later he speaks of the final acts of submission in the universe: when all things are submitted to the Son and then the Son himself is submitted to the one who has submitted all else to him. When all glory on heaven and on earth is handed over to the Son, according to Philippians 2:10–11, this all serves to draw attention to the glory of God the Father.

5. *The Bible teaches the perfect equality and unity of the Son and the Father.*

All of this biblical teaching exists side by side with strong statements about the equality and unity of the Father and the Son. The sending of the Son by the Father and the submission to the Father by the Son does not jeopardise their unity and does not call into question their equality. The same Gospel which speaks so much of the Father sending the Son and in which Jesus says 'the Father is greater than I' begins with the bold statement 'and the Word was with God, and the Word was God'. A few pages later Jesus declares 'I and the Father are one'. The unity and equality of the Son and the Father is such that the way you treat Jesus is the way you treat the Father. Indeed, as Jesus tells Philip, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. Why? Because, to use Jesus own words again, 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me'.

Perfect unity and equality is affirmed in the pages of Scripture alongside an order in this relationship of Father and Son. There is not the slightest hint of tension between these three elements of the Bible's picture of the relationship between the persons. Equality, unity and subordination belong together.

They actually reinforce each other rather than compromise each other.

3. Does it really matter?

Nothing I have said so far should be taken to mean that the report of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission in 1999 is perfect. I am convinced it is a good report, one which is true to the teaching of the Bible and helpful in teasing out the theological implications. It does *not* represent a departure into heresy but is instead an expression of what is true and what has been recognised as true in the mainstream of the Christian tradition down through the ages. Yet of course the report is imperfect and at points it could have been clearer. But the debate that has erupted in the last twelve months is not about whether the report could have been clearer or better written. The debate has been about whether or not the report is orthodox, whether the views it presents are within the bounds of orthodox Christian teaching.

But does all this really matter in the end? Is orthodoxy really all that important? Does anyone really care? I, for one, think it does matter and that we should all care. You don't have to read far into the pastoral epistles — Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus — before you discover how concerned Paul was for what he called 'sound doctrine' or 'healthy teaching'. Again and again he charges his young protégés, and through them those they will involve in gospel ministry alongside them, with living and proclaiming the healthy teaching they received. He is convinced that the truth will nourish the people of God. It will build them up. But false teaching, error when it comes to God and his purposes, will have the opposite effect.

It ought to matter to us when someone suggests we have departed from this healthy teaching. It ought to send us back to our Bibles to see if we are indeed holding firm to the truth God has revealed about himself and his purposes or if instead we have succumbed to one of the devil's lies. When we are honest with ourselves, if ever we are honest with ourselves, we know that succumbing would be all too easy. We are not infallible. We are not beyond error. And yet we know that God's truth is a treasure we cannot afford to leave behind. The challenge of others — those who are happy with us and even those who are not — may in some cases turn out to be a means of bringing us back into line with God's truth.

It ought to matter to us too because departure from the healthy teaching found in Scripture will harm those we serve as well as ourselves. In the debates about the Trinity in the early church, men like Athanasius of Alexandria realised that more was at stake than abstract ideas and speculations. Our knowledge of God and indeed our salvation is at stake in the question of whether Jesus is as much God as the Father is. Only God can make God known to men and women like us and so if Jesus is not

really God we are, in a very important sense, left in the dark about God. Only God can save us and so if Jesus is not really God then we would be foolish to trust him with our lives and with our futures. But since he is indeed every bit as much God as the Father is, and precisely because he consistently and unreservedly did the will of his Father, we know God and we have been rescued.

'Unity, equality *and* subordination characterise the life of the Trinity.' That is the teaching of the Scriptures. That is the testimony of faithful Christian teachers throughout the past two thousand years. It is true. It is a vital part of the healthy teaching which nourishes Christian faith and life. Don't be fooled by the attempt to damn this teaching by associating it with the errors of Arius so long ago. And don't be fooled into thinking that being equal must mean being the same or being interchangeable.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.