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MICHAEL JOHN OVEY (1958–2017)

Mark Thompson

On the evening of Saturday 7 January 2017, one of evangelicalism's foremost theologians and theological educators, Rev Dr Mike Ovey of Oak Hill Theological College, was suddenly called home to be with the Lord. It is a great personal loss to many. However, it is hard not to see this also as a serious loss to the cause of Christ worldwide. Through the humble yet diligent use of the gifts which God had given him, Mike was exercising a powerfully effective ministry not just in the United Kingdom but around the world. His influence for good was on the rise and the number of lives he touched was multiplying exponentially. Yet while we find it difficult to understand why he should be taken from us at this time, God's providence is unfailingly good and right. God never abandoned our brother throughout his 58 years of earthly life and he has not abandoned us who remain either.

In the days and weeks since his death, the word most often used to describe Mike Ovey the man has been "kind". Mike was kind towards all—family, friends, colleagues, students, and even those who opposed or mistreated him. He was generous with his time, gentle and understanding in his conversation, wise and insightful in his advice. A predisposition towards kindness was something he no doubt inherited from his parents, especially his mother, but it was also a work of the Spirit of God and something he saw as a necessary consequence of the gospel. Personal relationships mattered to Mike because they matter to God, as is evident in the gospel of salvation. Each one of us on this side of the Creator-creature divide is a fragile, broken sinner in need of grace and this simple realisation must make a difference to the way we treat those around us, believers and unbelievers alike. Mike was convinced that theology is for living and is not something merely abstract. Life and doctrine stand or fall together. In Mike this was manifest in his genuine kindness. Those of us who knew him and experienced his many acts of kindness have a great deal for which to thank God as we remember him.

Others have repeatedly spoken of Mike's "towering intellect". Mike was involved in an astonishing array of ministries and to each of them he brought an extraordinary intellectual ability. He possessed a deep understanding of theology and western thought more generally. He read widely and the range of his interests was astonishing. Time and again he would deliver a penetrating analysis of an issue, with a clear sense

of the consequences of ideas and a demonstration of rich integrative thinking, and topped off with an apt illustration from history, literature or current affairs. However, his reference point was always the teaching of Scripture. He certainly read, understood and made use of the work of the church fathers alongside the reformers and their heirs, and he knew well the contributions of a wide range of modern theologians. Yet these were all merely aids to think more deeply about what God has made known about himself and his purposes in the words of Scripture. He valued the creeds and confessions but he was always first a Bible man, because only the Bible is the word of the living God. This was the approach he had employed in his postgraduate research both at masters and doctoral level. His Masters thesis (Australian College of Theology) was entitled “The Theological and Christological contributions of the *aletheia* word-group to the Gospel of John” and his doctoral thesis (King’s College, London) was entitled “The eternal relation between the Father and the Son and its handling by selected patristic theologians, with particular reference to John’s Gospel.” This appeal to Scripture as the ultimate authority for the Christian was what he modelled and taught with clarity and confidence in a wide range of settings around the world. So those of us who have heard him teach or read what he has written have a great deal for which to thank God as we remember Mike.

Mike made telling contributions to the public debates about penal substitution, federal vision theology, human sexuality, gender and ministry, the nature of God’s trinitarian relations, and the place of theology in the public sphere. He was a delegate to GAFCON (2008) and GAFCON II (2013) and was a founding member of its Theological Commission. His legal background was put to remarkable use as he gave time and energy to the Lawyers Christian Fellowship and to Christian Concern. His insight into the contemporary context of Christian mission in the West, and what was needed for an effective defence of the faith once for all delivered to the saints in that context, was evident in a series of opinion pieces for the journal *Themelios* and most of all in his celebrated address to GAFCON II entitled “The Grace of God or the World of the West?” Each of these pieces are worth reading and rereading, or hearing and rehearing. We have been served well by Matthew Barrett’s collection of some of them at <http://www.credomag.com/mike-ovey/>. Evangelicals around the world have a great deal for which to thank God as we remember Mike.

However, theological education was the key work to which Mike Ovey gave himself unstintingly for almost a quarter of a century. In 1995, Mike travelled to Australia in order to spend three years teaching doctrine

at Moore Theological College in Sydney. He went at the invitation of Peter Jensen, urged on by key evangelical leaders in the UK who saw Mike's potential, and he taught Christian doctrine alongside Peter during those years. Moore College has a rich heritage of biblical theology, an emphasis on the biblical languages, and the importance of theologically shaped and driven ministry practice. Upon returning to the UK in 1998, he joined the faculty of Oak Hill College. Oak Hill was then entering a new era, with a serious uplift in academic standards, the gathering of a young, well-qualified and gifted faculty, and a new vision for reaching Britain and the world with the gospel of Christ. It was and is different from Moore College—a British college, rather than an Australian one, and attuned to the particular context, challenges and opportunities facing evangelical ministry in the UK in the twenty-first century. Yet their core theological commitments are held in common. After nine years on the faculty, Mike was appointed the Principal of Oak Hill College in 2007. He brought to his role as Principal experience of Anglican theological education in two continents, as well as a comprehensive vision of what theological education could and should be. Under his leadership, the College has grown and established itself as the leading Anglican theological college in Britain.

Mike held very deep convictions about the vital importance of serious theological education for the health of the churches. He had experienced first-hand the way a poor theological education could demoralise students and leave them ill-prepared for the rigours of Christian ministry. His own study at Ridley Hall, Cambridge had been a deeply distressing experience. Yet unlike some of his contemporaries, he did not conclude that a theological education was an unnecessary obstacle to ministry that just had to be endured. He saw the need in the churches for leaders who could teach the truth and refute error with clarity and depth. He saw how Christian congregations were left confused when their leaders had no answer to the challenges of a liberal institution seeking to impose insincere notions of “breadth” and “theological tolerance” upon the churches. He saw the dangerous arrogance of the view that we don't need to learn from others who have read the Bible before us or alongside us. If Christian ministers are to be the blessing God intended for the churches, then they need to be prepared as thoroughly as possible for this high calling.

A critical part of Mike Ovey's legacy is that in his own example and in his teaching he demonstrated the value of a clearly evangelical theological education. Such an education aims at building confidence in the written word of God, rather than undermining it in the interests of the

contemporary cultural consensus. It seeks to deepen Christian convictions, rather than dragging them into the shallow water of relativism or deriding them as lacking intellectual credibility. It is committed to shaping Christian character in line with the gospel of grace and the example of the Saviour who laid down his life for us, rather than seeking ways to excuse behaviour which the Bible tells us is contrary to the will of God. It works hard at building competence in living and proclaiming the gospel of the crucified and risen Saviour to a lost world. When a theological education has these characteristics, as that provided by Oak Hill College under Mike Ovey undoubtedly had, it is not only worthwhile but a wonderful gift of our generous heavenly Father.

The loss of Mike Ovey is and will be keenly felt, not least by those he loved most: his wife Heather, and their children, Charlie, Harry and Ana. He delighted above all in being a husband and father. Yet while we cannot understand why a man such as this, with his gifts and character and vision, should be taken from us at a time such as this, we know that our God is good and his ways are higher than our ways. Mike is safe in the arms of the Saviour and the same Saviour continues to provide for his people. The challenge for us is to learn from what God gave Mike to teach us.

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