

[These are rough notes, originally written with shorthand notation frequent.]

The Trinity

I Athanasius

The basis of the Christian Faith is the doctrine of the trinity. Nothing is more fundamental. The Atonement, which always is central in our preaching, gains significance only from the Person who made atonement. Divergent views concerning that Person completely alter the nature and value of his work on Calvary. The doctrine of the Triune God therefore is basic. And, while the complete doctrine of the Trinity involves much more, the crux of this doctrine is found in the Deity of Christ. When we understand the implications of the Deity of Christ, we shall be forced to recognize the wisdom and truth of the saying, “upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Not only does a logical analysis of the Scriptures reveal the fundamental position of the doctrine of the Trinity, but also, in conformity with Scripture, the history of the Church confirms it. The Trinity, and in particular the nature of the second Person of the Trinity, was the first doctrine that the Church had to define. And of the human instrument God used in this important work, of the great champion of orthodoxy, Athanasius, some mention must be made.

Life of Athanasius

Born at Alexandria 293 – 373.

Not known whether his parents were Christians.

Secretary to Bishop Alexander, who died in 326.

Consecrated bishop 326.

Egypt had been troubled by a previous schisms and Athanasius decided to stand vs. the Arians and made enemies.

After the Nicene Council: -

The emperor demanded the readmission of Arius into the church. Athanasius refused. Sent and the storm broke. He was falsely charged with “sabotage” of grain expected and it required a long case to prove his innocence. Then he was charged with murder and using the bones of his victim for magic. The investigation found the supposed victim alive.

The council of Tyre condemned him and he proved to the emperor the illegality of the Council. And the emperor considered him an obstacle to peace and banished him to Treves 335. The emperor died 337 and then ended Athanasius first exile.

His enemies then accused him of graft; then cleared of a synod of Constantius exiled him in 339. He was permitted to return in 345.

Duke Syrianus with 5000 soldiers attempted to arrest him in his church. 356. He escaped and began his third exile. Arians were appointed to many important posts.

Julian the Apostate recalled all the exiles, hoping to throw the church the more + fus. Athanasius returned 362.

Then Athanasius was too powerful to suit Julian and he was again exiled. 362. This 4th exile ended 364 by Emperor Jovian.

Valens reversed Julians general recall of exiled bishops and a mob broke in to Athanasius' church and he had to flee. And the people now began to demand the return of Athanasius and Valens brought him back in 366 and he had the last 7 years of his life in peace.

Before proceeding with the doctrine at the basis of this turbulent life, it is possible to learn some lessons from the struggle. In the first place, there are always men who want peace and flee trouble. Some of them make it a principle never to oppose anyone. In contrast, Athanasius is honored because he stood against something. He opposed somebody. And, let one ask, how can a man stand for something unless he stands against something. If we are true to Christ, we must make enemies, because Christ has enemies. Let us live peaceably with all men so far as in us lies, but it does not lie in a true Christian to tolerate attacks on or indifference to fundamental doctrines.

A second observation to be made is that there would have been no Nicene creed, had there been no heresy. God has brought good out of evil: the enemies of the true faith unwittingly taught the sincere believers the true meaning of the Scriptures. And likewise for us today as well, we can best understand the trinity, or any other doctrine, by seeing what the doctrine denies. Contrast is always a good teacher.

And in the third place, we may thank and praise God for the victory he gave to his own. Most of the eastern church was Arian; the emperors consistently favored Arianism and persecuted Athanasius; all the missionary endeavor among the barbarians was Arians – the Arian missionaries were well supported and gained huge success; nevertheless, although their barbarian converts persecuted the orthodox for many year after Athanasius died, not all their power could prevail against the Church of God. He could not prevail, because this same Son of God, very God of very God, had promised that on this rock he would build his Church.

II The Doctrine.

Who then is this Son of God? What do we mean by Son?

Eph. Of S. Athanasius, Archbishop of Alexandria

In Defense of the Nicene Definition

= De Decretis =

I

1. The Arians object that “of the substance” and “one in substance” are not scriptural terms.
2. They are like the Jews, who, in the face of Christ's miracles, say, “What sign doest thou, that we may see and believe thee.
3. Denying the λογος of God, they have become irrational.

II.

1. Their legal position is like that of a condemned criminal objecting to the decision of the judge.
2. In the council the 300 Bishops saw the Arians vary in their arguments and there lapse into embarrassed silence. When the council decided upon the decree, all submitted to it, even the Arians. They should not now object.
3. The orthodox do not vary in their doctrine.
4. both in doctrine and in conduct the Arians show themselves diabolical.

III.

1. The Arians hold that the Father was not always Father, for the Son was not before his generation – he came to be from nothing. The Word is a creature and a work, unlike the Father in substance. The Son is not the Father's only and true wisdom, and a strong figure is called Son. The Son is not true God.
2. [The controversy turns on] the meaning of the word Son. Is Jesus Son as all Christians are sons of God – cf. Deut 13:18 + 14:1 or Jn. 1:12. Or as Isaac is Son of Abr?
3. If moral sonship is meant, then Christ does not differ from us, and would not be only begotten.
4. They say Christ is only begotten because he came into being from the Father alone, and all others are begotten of the Father through the Son.

And God did not need an agent in creation p fear of getting tired cf Isa 40:28 Nor was God too proud to create without an agent [Creation does not degrade God.]

We cannot distinguish between what the Father did in creation and what the Son did. The Son is more that Hand of God in creation, rather than an agent or instrument. cf. Isa. 66:2 and I Cor. 8:6.

5. To assume that transcendence requires an instrument for creation makes impossible the creation of the first mediator, i.e. there would be needed an infinite regression of mediators.
6. z.B. Adam may have a prerogative of honor, because he was the first man, but not a prerogative of nature: we are all men. Similarly Christ would be first in time, but no different in nature from other creatures.
7. If Christ is first and we follow through him, then we are Sons of Christ, instead of Sons of God. Christ would separate us from God rather than unite us to God.
8. Therefore Christ is Son of God as Isaac was son of Abr. - not a moral but a natural sonship. Anthropomorphisms will trouble no one who attends to the meaning rather than the mere words of the doctrine.
9. Being, Creation, Genera, et. al. Are ascribed both to God and man, but in dif. Senses.

10.

11. Prov. 8:22 “The Lord hath created me a beginning of his ways . . .” Thus the Arians argue that Christ is a creature. But we have already shown that the Son is not a creation — if a creature, not a son, — hence another interpretation of this text must be found, in conformity with Gen 1:1 Ps. 110: 3 Ps 2:7 k.t.λ.

12. Prov. 8:22 really refers to the Incarnation and his human nature in which he suffered.

IV.

1. Scripture calls the Son Word and Wisdom also. Baruch 3:12 calls God the Fountain of wisdom. The Arians do not dare to say though they privately viz. that the Father was one Wordless + Wisdomless.

2. They say “Word” + “Wisdom” are names only. If so, is Christ higher than these names? But this would be an inappropriate use of names. And if lower than the names, they must have been given him because of his advance in perfection. But the doctrine of “advancement” is extremely irreligious, for he said, I and my Father are one.”

3. Next they say. “God spoke many words; which then is the Son?” This is to conceive God as a man, one word reversing a prior word, just as if the first word were not sufficient for all creation and providence. Many words implies feebleness. One word shows the favor of God and also the perfection of the Word.

4. If God produces words at all he is a Father. They therefore make him a Father of many. Yet they refuse to say there is no Word. And if the Word is begotten, he is Son. And there are not many words. [All titles of the Word are considered among themselves, + refer to the same person - Scripture references Isa 48;13 51:16 Ps 104:24 Prov 3:19 Jn 1:1 + Col 1:12-17.

V

1. What is the tradition behind the Arian phrases, “out of nothing,” “He was not before his generation,” “once he was not,” etc.?

2. Since these are unscriptural phrases, why do they complain if the orthodox use non-scriptural phrases? It is not the words but the sense that counts.

3. A non Scriptural phrase was forced on the orthodox, because the Arians insisted on the phrase “From God” in the sense that all are from God. I Cor. 8:6 and 2 Cor. 5:17-18. Therefore the Father said “from the substance of God.” The purpose of this addition is to distinguish between the Son and human beings. I Cor. 8:6 explicitly distinguishes Christ from “all things” which are from God.

4. The Phrases, like the Father, Power and Image of the Father, always, can be understood of man, and hence the Arians were willing to accept them. I Cor 11:7 says man is the image and glory of God. II Cor 4:11 applies always to man. In Him is in Acts 17:28. We are unalterable be nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ = Rom 8: etc. Therefore the orthodox used the phrase, “on in substance with the Father.” This avoids the ambiguity of like, which can refer to vague similarity.

5. The Son is closer to the Father than Enoch was to Adam, though Enoch was the image of Adam. The

council expressly repudiates from nothing, created, separable, work.

6. It is foolish to complain of the terminology. Everyone who accepts the sense will also accept the terminology.

7. The creed may not use Scriptural language but it expresses Scriptural doctrine. “I in the Father and the Father in me” is the equivalent “I am from my Father and inseparable from Him.”

8. God is not a compound of substance and attribute = $\sigma\mu\mu\beta\epsilon\beta\eta\kappa\omicron\varsigma$. Nor is he enveloped as if something about him completes his substance. The words God and Father indicate the very substance. Those who deny that make God material. From God and from the substance of God mean the same thing.

9. Christ is the Radiance of God.

10. The Son is not like the Father as tin is like silver — an external and particular resemblance. The Son and Father are one in substance.

VI Even the expression used in the Nice Creed are not new. See the writings of several. Let the Arians produce the tradition behind their phrases!

VII The Arians use the pious term unoriginate of the Father to disguise their heretical belief that the Son is originated. The term itself is unscriptural and if one wishes to distinguish between the 1st and 2nd Persons of the Trinity, Father is the term to use of the 1st, not unorigin.

III Conclusion: why bother about metaphysics and theology? Forget all this theoretical stuff and be practical!

First: we have a gospel to preach. The gospel is good news and we are under obligation to tell the news truthfully. We have no authority to alter the news. This good news involves the statement that a man died in Palestine 1900 yrs ago. But if it only a man who died, the statement is not good news, but merely useless information. If we say an archangel died, we are not spreading news, but falsehood. To tell the good news correctly, we must know the Person who died. For the nature of the Person fixes the value of his death. Hence if one wishes to preach the gospel, the gospel which alone can save from sin, one must preach the Deity of Christ and Triune Godhead.

In the second place: we must not only preach good news to others, but we ourselves must grow in grace and we must in ever increasing degree worship God in spirit and in truth. The purest form of worship is to think correctly about God. Meditation is worship. Now a man may be ignorant, i.e. think nothing about God. Surely this is not a desirable condition. Perhaps a new convert may know very little, but no one can seriously maintain that he should remain ignorant. Or a man may think falsely about God. But this is an offense against God. It is sin. We want to know God, to know him as he is. To know him as he isn't, is to worship a false god. People who are doctrinally indifferent, people who condone ignorance and excuse falsity, are blind leaders of the blind. Of course we can't know everything now; we can't spend all our time studying; and our progress is slow. But between a desire to know God, although hindered by the daily duties of life, and an indifference or antagonism to the truth, between these there is a great gulf fixed. The true Christian desire to know God as he is and longs for the day when he shall know even as he is known.

Notes on Relation of Father to Son.

Esp. what is Eternal Generation?

Hodge Vol I on eternal generation quote Turretin as opposing the eternal generation of the essence of Christ, and concludes that therefore Turretin opposed the Nicene Fathers. Hodge wrong because the Athanasian creed “excludes every kind of subordinationism of essence” - cf. Schaff Creeds of Christendom I p. 37 The Creed “states clearly and unmistakably [both] the absolute unity of the divine being or essence . . .”

Shedd, Hist of Christian Doctrine, Vol I P. 316 speaks of the essence as that which is one, the Persons three. Thus persons may be generated, but not the essence. Shedd also p. 317 remarks that eternal generation is necessary but creation depends entirely upon arbitrary will. Apparently this denial of the generation of the essence is compatible with the expression: the Father communicates the one eternal essence to the Son. By communicate probably is meant something like Platonic participation and raises the question whether Gregory of Nyssa was correct in saying that the relations of the Persons to the Godhead was the same as that of individuals to their Idea.

The generation therefore is of a Person by a Person. As Calvin I xiii 10 says: “we justly represent him as originating from the Father.”

Shedd, op cit. p. 323 “Hence the Nicene theologians harmonized the doctrine of eternal generation with that of unity of essence by teaching the necessity of this generation.”

The doctrine of eternal generation, instead of implying generation of essence, is the best method of defending the Trinity vs. Arianism.