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E320 Tuesday 6:15 PM  
Athanasius and the Trinity

During the middle decades of the Fourth Century, the church seemed to be very wishy-washy about the divinity of Christ. Emperor after emperor switched back and forth from Arianism to orthodoxy to semi-Arianism and back to orthodoxy. (3-pg 162) Arians believed the son of God, Jesus Christ, did not share in the being of the father and therefore does not share fully in the divine attributes. Athanasius, the Bishop of Alexandria was the first theologian to say that the Son and the Holy Spirit were co-equal with the Father. Athanasius' conception of the doctrine of the Trinity was created during the Arian controversy, as he argued for the Sons' full divinity in contradiction to Arian claims that the Son was not co-eternal with the Father. For Athanasius salvation, itself depends on the Son of God is God, and not merely a great creature "like" God and not resolving the divinity of Christ meant that salvation for mankind was at stake. Athanasius' fight for the preservation and protection of the gospel has become the foundation and the creation of the doctrine of the trinity. His theology has been an influence in the world 2000 years later and has helped Christians gain a better understanding of ourselves, the God we serve, and the basis of our salvation.

One line of the argument Athanasius used to defend the Sons' full deity was soteriological. Soteriology is the study of the doctrine of salvation. (3-p169) Athanasius' reasoning was, if the Son is not co-eternal with the Father, and if the Son of God is not truly God

in the same sense as the Father, then salvation as re-creation is impossible. Without receiving the salvation that puts the entire foundation of Christianity at stake. Athanasius would argue The gospel is about salvation through Jesus Christ, and If Jesus Christ was not God and only human, then he could not bring the two together. During the fourth century, there were arguments on the difference between homoousios and homoiousios. Homoousios affirms that God the Son and God the Father are of the same substance, the Son is God. While homoiousios means God, the Son was of similar, but not identical, a substance with God the Father. Arians would side with homoousios. Athanasius disproves homoousios by stating how the eternal substance of the Father is passed down to the Son. Specifically, what the word Father signifies is that God is the self-existent first principle, the source, and cause of all things, beyond which there can be nothing else. What the word Father tells us about God is that God is the source of all existence because he is Father of the Son. The Fathers' eternal being is the beginning of the Son and therefore the Son is then eternal. Athanasius then claims the language of Father, Son, and begetting signified that the Father-Son relation is one of being or substance by giving a common human experience. The relation a man has as the father of a son, by virtue of the former begetting the latter, is different from the relation a man as the builder of the house has with what he has made. A house is created from nothing by the will of the builder and is a possession that can be passed from one person to another. A father, by contrast, does not have a son as something external or foreign to himself. Rather, the Son is proper to the being of the Father and his exact image. The begetting of the Son is by nature and there is, therefore, an indelible natural continuity between them which cannot exist between a maker and a thing made. What the words Father and son are one of being, whereas the relation between God and the created order, which is external to God is one of will. It is because the Son is begotten and not made, and is of one

being with the Father that he can be seen to be co-equal with the Father. His co-equality with the Father, in turn, means that he shares in the divine attributes in the same way that the Father does. The eternal love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father issues in the divine acts both of creation and of redemption, which is two acts Athanasius closely links. Both are rooted in the eternal purpose of the godhead and reflect the fact that the Father has a son. This Athanasius think is attested in the words of Ephesians 1:3-5, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ Jesus with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love, having destined us to be his sons through Jesus Christ." (5-p468) In the same way, God the Father chose us in Jesus The Son of God, Jesus The Son of God was chosen in the Father. The son is able to save because he is divine in the same way that the Father is divine, and he shares fully in divine attributes. The identity and unity of the Godhead entailed in this mutual sharing in the divine attributes, Athanasius says, can be stated in the words of John 14:10 "I and the Father are one," John 10:38 "The Father is in me and I am in the father" and by John 14:9 "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." The son is able to reveal the Father because through his sharing in the Father's attributes he in himself makes immediately manifest who the Father is. (5-p469)

Athanasius defends the salvation of mankind by then explaining the Holy Spirit entity of the Trinity. In the First Letter to Serapion, Athanasius now takes care to show how the great biblical images for God also include the Spirit. It is the Spirit who enables us to drink living

water, to be enlightened by Christ, to become sons and daughters of God, to share in the Wisdom of God, to partake of divine line. It is noticeable that in each case he specifies the work of the Spirit at the point where creation participates in the life of God. The argument is that the Spirit can enable our creaturely participation in God only if the Spirit is truly divine, and one with the Father and the Word. (1-p50) So now, in defending the divinity of the Spirit, we find Athanasius "the direct translation from linguistic correlativity to ontological correlativity." The three cannot be separated one from the other: "Seeing that there is such an order and unity in the Holy Trinity, who could separate the Son from the Father, or the Spirit from the Son or from the Father himself? Who could be so audacious as to say that the trinity is unlike itself and different in nature? Or that the Son is foreign to the Father in substance? Or that the Spirit is estranged from the Son." Athanasius tells us that the Spirit "is given and sent" from the Son. Many scriptures prove the Holy Spirit not to be just a creature like God, but the Holy Spirit Is God. "The Father who remains in me does his works. Believe me, that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Otherwise, believe me, because of the works themselves." (John 14:10-11) For I will not dare to speak anything other than what Christ has worked through me to win obedience from the Gentiles, in word, and in deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Holy Spirit. " (Romans 15:18-19) These two scriptures show how the Father works, the Son does the works of the Father, and the works are accomplished in the Power of the Spirit. (1-p49)

All in all, the main message is that the Son is not a creature but is of one substance with the Father. For Athanasius, both the nature of God and the nature of the Christian life are only

explicable if the Spirit, as well as the Father and the Son, is fully a member of the Godhead. Only so is our salvation fully realized and guaranteed. It is on the inner divine basis, and not on any creaturely basis outside of God, that the life and work of Christ the Incarnate Son of God are to be understood as that of the Mediator between God and men, who is himself God and Man. The truth of the Gospel depends on the integrity of that consubstantial relation between Christ and God. Athanasius insisted that the union between the Incarnate Son and the Father, far from being merely a transient episode in time, is ontologically and eternally real in the Godhead. For Athanasius, then, homoousion provided the all-important point of reference for his understanding of God's self-revelation, from the father, through the Son and in the Spirit, and of the eternal Oneness of God in the Holy Trinity. It is on that ground and in that light that we are to understand the mission of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the gift of the Holy Spirit by the Son. (4-p399) According to Athanasius, the theology of the Trinity is not understood as an aspect of theology, but as an interpretation of the whole of the Christian life. His view of trinitarian deification is that by the grace of the indwelling Spirit, human beings are transformed in Christ, and assimilated to him in his relation to Father.

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