



A MINISTRY SCHOOL OF THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF THE UPPER MIDWEST

The Gift We Do Not Want Yet Dare Not Ignore: Heresy *OR* In Defense (and Celebration) of Christmas

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I. The Trinity and the Church's Debt to Heresy

People commonly think that heresy has to do with attacks on the Christian faith made by those who are self-consciously non-Christian. *This isn't the case!* Heresy is a conception of the faith, or some aspect of the faith, propagated by certain Christians that the church deems to be so inadequate and erroneous as to distort, or even altogether denature, the apostolic confession once delivered to the saints. In other words, *heresy, by definition, always and invariably comes from inside the church.*

To be sure, heresy is always dangerous, and if left unchecked, positively destructive. But heresy is not worthless. In fact, heresy can be quite valuable. For when the church is confronted by conceptions of the faith that it suspects of being heretical, the church is forced to reexamine:

- Holy Scripture, the canon (measuring stick/straight edge) of the church's faith and life (the *norma normans*, or norm that norms).
- The inner connection between doctrine and doctrine.
- The connection between right doctrine and right worship, between the faith and faithful living, or between true knowledge of God and godliness, *which are inseparable.*

Thus erroneous, inadequate conceptions of the faith can serve to sanctify the church, forcing her to think better, clearer, and with more conviction about what she does believe and confess. As such, the church owes a considerable debt to heresy, as is evident regarding the doctrine of the Trinity



II. Confessing the Mystery: Three Affirmations on the Holy Trinity

- God is three persons.
- Each of these persons partakes fully, equally, and eternally in the triune life of God.
- There is one God.

One major difference between Christian orthodoxy and heresy is this: Christian orthodoxy seeks to articulate doctrine in a way that safeguards the mystery and wonder that must always retain a place in our thinking and speaking about God—if God is truly infinite and majestic. Heresy, on the other hand, does not seek to *safeguard* this mystery; it attempts to *solve* it. Here are the most important attempts in the early church to solve the mystery of God’s three-in-oneness:

III. Modalism

- Modalism is the early Christian heresy which taught that God is not really three persons, but rather one person who projects himself in different “modes” at different times.
- God projects himself *successively* as Father, Son, and Spirit. As Father, he is creator and lawgiver, as Son he is redeemer, and as Spirit he is the bestower of grace.
- Modalism is sometimes referred to as **Sebellianism** and/or **patripassianism**. It is called Sebellianism after the third-century Roman (North African) priest, Sebellius, who championed this view. And it is called patripassianism because modalists commonly maintained that it was the Father who became incarnate, was born of a virgin, and suffered and died on the cross.
- Modalism arose and spread (mainly in the Western/Latin church) as an effort to defend monotheism against what seemed to some to be tritheism (the belief in/worship of three gods). Thus modalism “solved” the mystery of God’s three-in-oneness by denying the personal distinctiveness of a divine Son and Spirit relative to God the Father.
- A couple of key texts for modalists were: “I [Jesus] and the Father are one” (John 10:30), and “He who has seen me [Jesus] has seen the Father” (John 14:9).
- Which of the three key affirmations listed above does modalism deny?
- Can you think of any modern parallels to modalism? (Oneness/Jesus Only Pentecostals).



IV. Adoptionism

- The heresy perpetuated in the second and third centuries, most often by Gnostics (esp. Theodotus of Byzantium) and Ebionites. It taught that Jesus was a mere man only, although a man who became God by way of adoption.
- Most adoptionists maintained that Jesus of Nazareth (not virgin born) was adopted as the Son of God as the result of his extraordinary piety. This adoption occurred at Jesus' baptism, when the Spirit descended upon him, thereby uniting him to God the Father (others believed Jesus became God only at his resurrection or ascension).
- Adoptionism was an effort to "solve" the mystery of how Christ could be divine and God could still be one.
- Which of the three key affirmations listed above does adoptionism deny?
- Can you think of any modern parallels to adoptionism? (Unitarianism/"Progressive" Prot.).

V. Arianism

- Arianism derives its name from Arius, a prominent priest in Alexandria, Egypt, in the early fourth century.
- Arius insisted that only the Father was eternal, and that the Son was a created being.
- Some key texts for Arianism were Proverbs 8:22, Colossians 1:15, and John 14:28.
- "There was a time when he [the Son] was not," said Arius. Therefore, the title of "God" was only honorific when applied to Jesus Christ. For Arius, in other words, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but not God the Son. Such is Arius' and his followers' attempt to "solve" the mystery of God's three-in-oneness.
- Can you think of any modern parallels to Arianism? (Jehovah's Witnesses).
- How might Arianism impact other core doctrines of the Christian faith?

VI. The Church's Response: Council of Nicaea and Nicene Creed

In the year 325 A.D. the church met for its first general council and produced this Creed, which is heartily accepted by all Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and historic Protestant Christians:

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.



We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us and our salvation he came down from heaven. By the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father (and the Son). With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

VII. The Word “*Homoousia*”

The underlined phrase “of one substance” in the Nicene Creed is the word **homoousia** in Greek. This word is of supreme importance, in that it confesses Jesus Christ is “of one substance” with the Father. What this means is that Christ is just as fully, equally, and eternally God as is the Father. The implications of this shall be explored below.

VIII. The “*Filioque*” Clause

The underlined, parenthetical clause “and the Son” is the word **filioque** in Latin. It was added to the text of the Nicene Creed by the Latin speaking Western church in the year 589. For the Latin West wished to affirm that the Holy Spirit proceeds from *both the Father and the Son, not from the Father alone*.

The Western church added **the filioque clause** because it was thought to safeguard the truth of Nicaea, namely, that the Son is consubstantial with, or of the same substance as, the Father. The Spirit is said to proceed from both the Father and the Son in Scripture, stated Western scholars, citing John 14:26, John 15:26, and John 16:7. To say otherwise, they thought, would divorce the Spirit from the Son, contradicting texts such as Romans 8:9 and Galatians 4:6.

Even so, the Eastern church denounced the filioque clause, and continues to reject it today. The addition of this clause, in fact, constituted an important doctrinal issue in the eventual rupture between East and West in the year 1054. This rupture is by no means fully healed at present.



IX. The Gospel Significance of “*Homoousia*”

Here we shall explore the gospel significance of “homoousia” by highlighting an all-important question—namely, what is implied if the Father and the Son are not of the same being, reality, or nature? At least the following:

~God is unknowable, as no mere creaturely being can mediate knowledge of God. “Revelation” could be nothing more than human religious fantasy projected onto “God.”

~The gospel could be neither the self-communication nor the self-bestowal of God—that is, God would reveal and bestow “something,” but not himself.

~In Jesus Christ, God has not condescended to us, and thus his love (so-called) has ultimately stopped short of rendering him one with us.

~There is no ontological—and thus no epistemological—connection between the love of Jesus Christ and the love of God. Thus the supreme mockery is that God is said to love us in Christ, but God is not actually that love in himself. God is love (1 John 4:8), but it is not this love that we know or possess in Christ.

~According to the apostles, to believe in Jesus Christ is what it means to believe in God himself, not merely in a truth about God. Yet without the “homoousia” there is necessarily an unknown and unknowable God behind the back of Christ. Thus we cannot confess that knowledge of the Father through the Son, and knowledge of the Son from the Father, is one and the same.

~The words and acts of Jesus Christ are not the words and acts of God, and thus there is no final authority and/or validity to anything Christ said or did for us.

~Grace is not the self-giving of God in the incarnate One, but only a created medium between God and man—an impersonal, dissoluble, detachable, “thing.”

~What Jesus Christ did for us from manger to cross is simply an exemplary and/or judicial transaction with no intrinsic connection to or bearing upon God. It is only a creature that suffered and died for us, not the Lord as man; only the life of a man that was offered for us, not the life of God as man.

~On the last day we shall be judged by a God who is arbitrary, in that he bears no inherent relation to Jesus Christ, his work, his promises, his teaching, etc.