

DON'T CONFUSE ATHANASIUS - OR GOD

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1) The chapel planners have suggested we use this morning's service to commemorate Athanasius, the fourth century bishop of Alexandria who figured prominently at the Council of Nicaea and who, after many near-defeats, helped steer Nicene orthodoxy to eventual victory at the Council of Constantinople, 381. Without Athanasius it is not likely we would have today that majestic confession of faith which we've come to call the Nicene Creed. But you know all that already from your first courses in church-history and in the classical Christian creeds.

2) Whenever one speaks of Athanasius it seems to be necessary to remind ourselves not to confuse him with someone else. For one, don't confuse him with that other Athanasius - also a "saint" - who was a 10th century monk and later the abbot general of the monasteries on Mt. Athos. Also, don't confuse him with still another Athanasius, who appears in the Roman martyrology, a 5th century deacon of Jerusalem. Above all, don't confuse Athanasius - our Athanasius - with the author of the so-called "Athanasian Creed", the Quicumque vult salus esse. That confusion was perpetuated for over a 1000 years before it was finally corrected.

3) To confuse St. Athanasius with all the wrong people is not only inaccurate. It's unfair. For if there is anything that Athanasius was not it's confused. Occasionally mistaken, or even down right wrong? Yes. But not confused. A bit of a wheeler-dealer and an accomodationist, no doubt. But confused? No. For that reason, namely, his remarkable freedom from confusion, I'd suggest we remember him today not in his role as a "saint" but belonging to that other category which LBW has also, thoughtfully included,

"Theologians." And those two categories, "saints" and "theologians", are not necessarily identical. But theologians, given the mysteries of the faith they are supposed to talk about, need especially to guard against confusion. For as the apostle Paul reminds us, "Our God is a God not of confusion but of peace."

4) Which brings me to the so-called Athanasian Creed, which we just read together. Granted, that statement was not composed by Athanasius and was in fact composed well after his death, and in a different language from his own. But like Athanasius that creed has a very healthy Christian abhorrence for "confusion." At one point it says,

Now this is the catholic faith:
We worship one God in trinity
and the Trinity in unity,
neither confusing the persons
nor dividing the divine being.

Later the creed says of "our Lord Jesus Christ",

He is completely one
in the unity of his person
without confusing his natures.

It is bad theology but, worse, it is bad faith to "confuse" the Father with the Son or with the Holy Spirit, or to "confuse" Christ's humanity with his deity.

5) Usually we are more concerned with the opposite caution, to keep things together: to remember (as well we should) that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all one and the same God, or to remember (as well we should) that Jesus our Lord is one and the same person. What we have traditionally been much more careless about, perhaps because that is harder to do, is to keep the three persons of the Trinity or the two natures of Christ distinct, unconfused. For different they are, and that they are makes a difference!

6) Why is that so? Why is it, as the Quicumque vult says, each person of the one Godhead is "distinct"? Why is it that

The Father was neither made

nor created nor begotten;
the Son was neither made nor created
but was alone begotten of the Father;
the Spirit was neither made nor created
- but is proceeding
from the Father and the Son?

And why is it, if our Lord Jesus Christ is one person, that his humanity and divinity must nevertheless not be confused? Why is that?

7) Well, there is a sense in which we cannot answer that question, why. Who can explain the Triune God? It has long been a joke among dogmaticians that the traditional doctrine of the Trinity

has five properties (or notions),
four relations,
three persons,
- two processions,
one divine nature,
and no explanation.

And I certainly don't presume now to improve on that state of affairs.

8) On the other hand, there is a sense in which we can explain why the Father, the Son and the Spirit differ from one another. It is like being asked by your grandson, "Grandpa, why does it have to snow," and you have to admit to him that you don't really know why. But then you take a different tack with him and you say: "But aren't you glad it does snow? For suppose there were no snow. Just think, the ground and the grass would not be protected in winter, the dark mountains would never turn white, kids couldn't make snowmen, there would be no sledding or skiing, and Christmas would not be the same. That's what would happen if snow got confused with rain. They're not the same, you know. And aren't you glad they're not?"

9) Similarly, the question arises, Why is it that God - Father, Son or Holy Spirit - "was neither made nor created," and that God the Father was not even "begotten" by one of the other two, let alone "proceeds" from them? Answer: I don't know why, really. But aren't you glad that God is "neither made nor created"? For what if he were? What if God were, as we and all other things are, the handiwork of some Maker? What if the Triune God, whom we worship, were the product of some creative process or force other than Godself, say, the sum-total outcome of world history or of a cosmic evolution? But then the Triune God to whom we have entrusted our destinies, to whom we commend our dear ones, into whose Name we have been drowned in Baptism and raised up all new - that God would not really be the One who ultimately is in control of our destinies or even in control of God's own destiny. Then, for all the promises we have had from God, he would be in no sure position to deliver on any of them. So aren't you glad that God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - "was neither made nor created" and thus depends for his being on no one else, so that we may so depend?

10) And why is it that, within the one God, there is a Son who is begotten by a Father, a Child begotten by a Parent - not made by the Parent as a thing, not created by the Parent as some human creature but begotten by the Parent, of the Parent-God's own being and yet dependent on God as a Child? Why is that? I don't finally know why. But aren't you glad that the Son, who is neither made nor created, was nevertheless "alone begotten of the Father?" For what if God in no way depended? What if God in no way depended for God's being the way a child depends for her being on her parents? What if God were only like a Parent and never like a child, only begetting but never begotten? But aren't you delighted that God is also like a Child, a dependent? For those are not the same relationships: being depended upon and depending upon. They are quite different. But aren't you glad that God, the same God, is both those different "persons," God's own Parent and yet also God's own Child, simultaneously and forever?

11) That way, when God became one of us, Jesus, it wasn't only as a human that he was a dependent child, as we are. No, his childlike dependency went all the way back into his very Godness. True, dependent isn't all that God is. But aren't you glad God is that, too?

Otherwise our kind of dependency, which Jesus made us proud of, would not have the great, great dignity it has. Dependency would not then be the Godlike thing it is - if Godself were not a Child as well as a Parent.

12) And why is it that God, the same single God, is also a third Someone, a Sharer - God the Spirit? Why does God, on whom everything and everyone depends but who is simultaneously a childlike dependent - why is that same God so outgoing, so "proceeding" as to share Godself with the likes of us? Why does God share not only his good things with us (his galaxies and winds and atoms, his people and histories and languages and wisdom and all his millions and millions of other creatures) but share Godself with us, both as our Parent and as our Brother? Why is God also that third, a Self-Communicator and Sharer? I don't know why, ultimately. But aren't you glad she is? For if God were not such a Sharer, we could not live off her life but only off our own. We could not enjoy with God's joy but merely with our own. Without her sharing we could not die the Son's kind of death but only our own kind, our terminal and guilty kind. We could not sing with the Spirit's sounds but only with our own. Without the Spirit's recreating, we could not regain the Father's spit and image, the Son's cruciform and Eastered image, through which we are coming to resemble God, our Parent and Brother, but could merely go on looking more and more like ourselves.

13) So aren't you glad that in addition to being a Parent, in addition to being a Child, this God, the one God, is something else besides, namely, a "proceeding" Spirit? Why she is that, I don't know. All I know, and you do too, is that there is no point in looking a gift horse in the mouth, and there is every point in quitting when you're ahead. Beggars can't be grumblers, not when they are treated like junior deities.

14) Don't confuse Athanasius - or God. Be glad not only for the unity but for the three-ness as well.

Morning chapel, Seminex

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