

Doctrine – Spirituality

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Last week we began the process of looking at what the central doctrines of Christian orthodox teaching are, and how they developed. Recall, there were three doctrines that became central in the task of preserving the apostolic message commonly referred to as “the Gospel.” Those doctrines were:

- a) The Doctrine of God
- b) The Doctrine of the Incarnation
- c) The Doctrine of Grace.

The origins of these doctrines were the experience of the first eyewitnesses to Jesus’ resurrection. The accounts of these persons are the documents that make up the new Testament. Also, the apostles and teachers who wrote those documents interpreted their experience using the Hebrew Bible. The version used was the Greek translation known as the “Septuagint.”

The intellectual tools needed in order to convey the meaning of the Gospel to a world shaped by Hellenistic culture came from classical Greek philosophy, primarily that of Plato and the Stoics. Plato’s understanding of reality in his “metaphysics,” which included both the world we see around us and the eternal, spiritual world upon which this world is based, gave the first Christian theologians the concepts they needed to translate the meaning of the gospel and its Hebrew world-view into the Doctrines of the Christian church. The Stoic school gave the Church an ethical perspective that helped clarify its own position on morality and what constitutes the goal of human life.

The intellectual challenge before the first Christian theologians was:

- a) How to define an understanding of God that was based on the notion of one God who revealed himself in three distinct persons--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- b) How to understand the proclamation that God had come to our world as a human being in Jesus of Nazareth. How could one person be both divine and human at the same time?
- c) How are we to understand ourselves and our relationship to God on the basis of our need for God with respect to overcoming the problems of evil and death?

The other thing we want to keep in mind here is that this endeavor was not primarily or only an intellectual challenge. It was at bottom a spiritual challenge. The Gospel’s purpose is not to give us a world-view or an intellectual model through which we can understand ourselves, the world, and God. Rather, the Gospel is a message through which we are confronted with the living reality of God as God reaches out to us for the purpose of saving us from sin and death. The experience of those first apostles and those who came after them was definitive with respect to

how these doctrines were to be rightly understood. Their message was that the same person who had been crucified, who died, and who was buried—this person was no longer dead but had rather been raised up after three days and had come back to his disciples as their living and present redeemer. Through the gift of what they called “the Holy Spirit” he was now present in their lives as a “life-giving spirit,” (Paul) Moreover, through his presence, they were gifted with the right relationship with God (righteousness) and eternal life. That which had formerly been only divine attributes—eternal love, joy, and life—were now theirs in the power of the Spirit.

They could receive these divine gifts through faith as they heard the message proclaimed and received it sacramentally and through prayer. Therefore, central to this task was the spirituality of the message—what it gives us—and the practices by which we receive these spiritual blessings. The church does not become an academic institution. It is primarily a worshipping community. It gathers to pray, praise, and receive the means of grace—word and sacraments. This was later tied to the eastern orthodox concept of “divinization.”

This idea was designed to express what happens to a person when he or she receives the spiritual blessings conferred by the Holy Spirit in and through the spiritual practices of the means of grace and prayer. Put simply, it means that those things that formerly belonged only to God are now given to us. Divine joy, love, and life are the attributes conferred on us as we receive Christ in the Spirit. In fact, this defines what salvation means. It means that we receive divine love and life as the Spirit comes into our hearts through the word, sacraments and an open heart in prayer. (Contemplation) This defines the transformation originally proclaimed as “salvation,” and which was caused by the encounter people had with Jesus after he had been raised from the dead.

Finally, 1400 years later, Martin Luther comes along in the midst of a situation where the Christian Church had lost its bearings. It had wandered off from its own foundations, looking for ways to justify itself by means of its own activity: canned prayers, relics, saints, pilgrimages, and good works. For Luther, this did not work. He remained tortured by guilt, fear of judgment, and the nothingness of despair and death.

Luther found resolution by returning to the original proclamation of the apostles as it had been preserved in the documents of the New Testament. (And the Old Testament as well.) Having done this, one would expect Luther to have articulated the meaning of the Gospel message in a similar fashion as the Church Fathers had. He did. But rather than saying we are “divinized,” he said, “Christ is present in faith.” And so at the time of the Reformation, the original proclamation of the Apostles came to light once again. “Christ is present in Faith.” And because of that, we are saved “by faith through grace.”

Last week, we saw how the basic doctrines of Christianity were formulated, namely, through a process of not only trying to properly define what they meant, but also

through the process of saying what they did not mean. In other words, the church came to understand what is orthodox by rejecting what it is not. These ideas were referred to as “heresy.” I am going to refer back to only two of these because they make the true meaning of these doctrines more clear. They are a) Arianism, and b) Pelagianism.

Arianism. This teaching dates back to a fourth century presbyter by the name of Arius from Alexandria. Arius was keenly aware of how the church needed to protect its understanding of God as distinct from any created thing. As the book of Genesis makes clear, God is fully separate and distinct from creation. Only God is eternal, above time and space, and not subject to disintegration and death. God is not an object we can observe. His being is spiritual, not material. Moreover, using Greek philosophical perspectives, the church declared that God is perfect in every way, not subject to change, and everywhere present. Anything short of this falls into the category of a created object and no created object has divine attributes.

This being the case, how can we possibly say that Jesus, the Son of God, is equal with God in divinity? Would this not represent a confusion between the divine and the human? If God is eternal, how could he have been born in a moment of time? Such an idea gets us hopelessly bogged down in contradictions.

Therefore, Arius thought, it would be much better to say that Jesus, the Son of God, was created just like all of us. While he may have been someone who was much greater than we are, nevertheless, he was still a created person, not a person fully as divine as God the Father. He could not be thought of as eternally preexistent but rather—and this was the phrase Arius used—“There was a time when he was not.”

This idea led to the necessity of not only coming to a more fully developed Doctrine of the Incarnation, but also of the Doctrine of the Trinity. If the Son was not divine in the same sense as the Father, then God is not triune. The task of resolving the Arian crises in the church would fall to a council called together in 325 by the Emperor Constantine. The council would take place in the city of Nicaea and the document that resolved this crisis would be called the “Nicene Creed.” But before we get to that, I would like to talk about the church Father who did much to address the Arian heresy, namely the Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius.

Athanasius addressed Arius’ idea from two points of view, one theological and the other spiritual. From a theological point of view, Athanasius wanted to preserve both the divinity and humanity of Christ using an easy to understand image. Just as light comes from the sun, and just as both the light from the sun and the sun itself are co-existent, (You can’t have one without the other. They come into existence at the same time.) it is the same with the Father and the Son. The two cannot be separated. The Son proceeds from the Father just as light proceeds from the sun. Since this is the case, the Son is eternal just as the Father is eternal. There is not a time when the Son does not proceed from the Father just as there is not a time when

light does not proceed from the sun. The two are distinct in the sense that the light that comes from the sun is not the sun itself. Just so, the Father and the Son are separate and distinct.

Athanasius sums up the spiritual issue here by saying, "God became man in order that man may become God." That is to say, God became human in order to give us his attributes of eternal life and love. Jesus is as we are intended to become: a union between the human and the divine. Not that we can become divine by nature as he is. Rather, it was so that we might be reunited with God and thereby blessed with the eternal fellowship with God that gives eternal life. This union between God and us that is made possible by the Incarnation is our salvation, what Athanasius also called our "divinization."

The spiritual issue here can be expressed by asking the question, "What changes for us when we receive Jesus Christ through faith?" How does our life change after we come into fellowship with him through the gift of the Holy Spirit? The answer is that we receive the eternal life he came to give us. We are not immortal by nature. We came into existence in a moment of time, and we will go out of existence in a moment of time. We are mortal because we are created out of the same elements as everything else. The created order is perishable, changeable, imperfect, and temporal. It is not eternal or perfect. In order to become perfect, and in order to have eternal life, we must first receive that which can give us these things. Only God can do that. Therefore, God had to become man so that God could give us what only he has.

Were Arius correct, if it were the case that Jesus was not co-eternal with the Father--if Arius was right in his understanding of the Incarnation--then neither could Jesus have saved us from sin and death. Only because he was equally divine with the Father was he also capable of saving us for eternal life. Therefore, when we receive the presence of Christ into our hearts through faith, and in the power of the Spirit, we also receive the eternal life that only he has as confirmed in his resurrection from the dead. As the Spirit opens our hearts to the living presence of Jesus, and as this happens through the means of grace and in prayer, we receive also the blessings that are his nature to give. This is why spiritual practices are so important. Through them the Holy Spirit conveys the presence of Christ into our hearts.

Thus, Athanasius is able to counter the seemingly reasonable perspective of Arius and thereby preserve the integrity of the gospel message from both a theological and spiritual perspective. The spiritual perspective is foundational because it is not possible to maintain that the gospel message is a message that results in human salvation unless we can show how the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ affects freedom from sin, evil, and death. This is the whole point of the Christian faith. The church spreads its message—the good news of Jesus Christ—precisely because we desire others to experience the salvation this message effects in our lives. We are not pushing a world-view. We are not peddling doctrines for the sake of doing so as if we were invested in having others believe as we do for self-centered reasons. We

are spreading a message that can bring people into a living relationship with God and thereby their redemption from sin and death. Arius' theology could not do that. The heart of the gospel, not to mention the heart of those who believe it, was at stake. A man named Cyril summed up the theology of the Doctrine of the Incarnation well in this simple formulation: "Remaining what he was, he assumed what he was not."

This brings us to the related Doctrine of Grace. This doctrine is meant to answer the question of what it means to be human. It gets at this by describing what the existential conflict is that faces human life, and also by describing how God addresses that conflict. If the gospel message is one of salvation, then the question is, "What are we being saved from?" Moreover, a related question is, "How are we saved?"

The heresy that gave rise to a more detailed answer to this question is called "the Pelagian heresy." Named after a fourth century British monk named Pelagius, this heresy resulted in the detailed theological anthropology of Saint Augustine, the single most influential theologian in the western (Latin speaking) church.

Pelagius taught that human salvation was primarily our work, not that of God. While grace was certainly necessary in some sense, we are perfectly capable of obeying all of God's commands, and thereby earning the merit we need to be welcomed into God's Kingdom on our own. We have free will. God has told us what he expects from us in scripture. In fact, he would not have gone to the trouble of doing so if we were incapable of obeying him in the first place. Moreover, too much emphasis on grace, mercy, and forgiveness leads to moral laxity. Pelagius observed that the laziness of Christians at the time was the result of believing we are saved by an act of God, that we can't do anything to effect our salvations, and therefore, we might as well do as we please.

This was intolerable. For Pelagius, the Christian faith was intended to lead to moral reform. The church cannot encourage people to become more "righteous" unless it is clear on the fact that their salvation depends on it.

Just as the Arian heresy threatened the substance of the gospel message, so to did that of Pelagius. The gospel message preached by the apostles was that salvation came to us in Christ. The apostles did not refer primarily to Jesus' teaching—that Jesus taught us to do this or that. They referred to his death and resurrection. Through the death and resurrection of Christ we are made right with God, and because of that, we are gifted with the Holy Spirit who breathes new life into our hearts. This is how we are forgiven. This is how we receive the divine gifts of love and life. And this is how we receive the power to live a sanctified life. This work of God—not us—is received through faith.

Augustine clearly perceived that Pelagius' ideas were not consistent with the apostolic message. He therefore worked out a very detailed understanding of the problems of the human condition, and of how grace resolves them.

A summary looks something like this. First, Pelagius' idea that we can live a sinless life is out of the question for the simple reason that we are born in sin. This doctrine came to be called "original sin." While Augustine traces this back to the disobedience of Adam, suffice it to say that our separation from God, and therefore also our disobedience of God's commands, is a state into which we are born. It is precisely because we are creatures born into a state of alienation from God that we need grace. Contrary to Pelagius, we are not capable of obeying God's commands because these commands presuppose a state of grace. Therefore, as Paul said, these commands confront us with our need for grace. They point us back to our origin in God so that we can recognize exactly what our problem is. The function of the commandments is not to save us. It is to unmask our need for God.

Therefore, along comes the Gospel--the message that, in Christ, God reconciles us to himself. God takes on our nature as creatures who live in separation from himself, as creatures who are incapable of obeying him because of this, and as creatures who therefore live with the consequences of guilt and death.

This describes the human condition. It's not only obvious from a Christian point of view. It's obvious for anyone who cares to be honest with what we can see for ourselves. Guilt, despair, and death are not theoretical problems. They are existential problems. We live with these problems. In fact, our own attempts to solve these problems only lead us further into them. That is, we are slaves to sin and death. We cannot free ourselves from this existential crisis and so we need "grace."

Grace means "gift." Because we can't extricate ourselves from our own existential problems, God came to us so as to do it for us. God's grace is like the helping hand of a lifeguard. A person who can't swim will drown unless a person who can swim pulls him out of the water.

That would be Jesus. Only a human—someone in the water with us—who is also divine--a person with the ability to pull us out, can save us from perishing. This is grace. An accurate account of the human condition leads us straight to an accurate account of the Doctrine of the Incarnation.

Moreover, just as the human condition is not a theoretical problem but rather one we are faced with every day of our lives, just so also is the reality of grace. Here we are right back to spirituality. God's grace is not a theoretical answer to our problem. It points to the very thing the apostles experienced at the dawn of the Christian faith, namely, the appearance of their living Lord and the outpouring of the Spirit who brought Jesus into their hearts. Because he was both divine and human, he broke through the barrier between ourselves and God—between our perishable, mortal life and his eternal and divine life--and he reunited us to God. As we receive the gospel in word and sacrament, and as we cultivate our life in the Spirit through prayer, we too receive the living presence of Christ into our hearts. The assurance

of this comes from how this message enables us to live in faith, hope, and love. In other words, a vital and healthy spiritual life is a lived experience, not a theoretical one about which we can only dream. Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit and in the means of grace, lives in our hearts now.

The Church Fathers called this “divinization.” Luther expressed this by saying, “Christ is present in faith.” Thus, doctrine and spirituality go hand in hand. The two developed together because Doctrine is an intellectual expression for lived, spiritual experiences.