

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	38		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Hebrews 1:1-14		
Date:	April 8, 2018 (a.m.)		

THE ETERNAL SON

Athanasius (296-373) was not the most likeable of people, or the most gracious Christian, but he was certainly a great theologian. While still in his early twenties he wrote *The Incarnation*, a profound study of how God became man in Jesus of Nazareth. In 325, he attended the Council of Nicea as the secretary to Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, succeeding him as bishop in 328. Five times his theological and political opponents saw him exiled from Alexandria. He was the most important, most consistent, and possibly the most able opponent of “Arianism.” Between 339 and 359, he wrote a series of works defending the faith of Nicea and opposing Arianism in any form, the most significant being his “Discourses Against the Arians,” traditionally given as four in number, but critical scholars today think he wrote only the first three himself. What characterizes his writings is a constant appeal to Scripture and a complete rejection of any suggestion whatsoever that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father in being, work, or authority. Athanasius stands out head and shoulders over most other theologians because of his numerous innovative and breathtaking theological insights.¹ Athanasius clearly saw that to depict the Son of God as a creature meant he could not perfectly reveal the Father because he was not of the same divine *being* as the Father; he could not save, because only an omnipotent God can save, and he should not be worshiped because only God is to be worshiped. The importance of what was at stake in this sharp division over the Christian doctrine of God cannot be overestimated. The question was, Is Jesus Christ a god created in time, a subordinate God, or is he the eternally begotten Son of the Father, “true God from true God,” one in being and power with the Father? Athanasius’s reply to Arius’s argument that the Son was created in time and thus contingent and subordinate God is both logical and profound. In his *Discourses Against the Arians* he argues as follows.

- “The God revealed in the Bible is not a monad who becomes a triad but is an eternal triad.
- “To call God ‘the eternal Father’ implies an eternal Son – no one can be called father without a child. In other words, the names, ‘Father’ and ‘Son’ are correlate terms that indicate an eternal act of self-differentiation within the one God.
- “Fathers beget children of the same nature or being, thus the Son has the same divine nature, or being, as the Father. The Father and the Son are ‘one in being’ (*homoousios*). Thus to dishonor the Son by arguing he is other than the Father in being is to dishonor the Father (John 5:23).
- “It is impossible to separate and divide the Father from the Son. The Father cannot be separated from his ‘image,’ or ‘Word and Wisdom,’ any more than the sun can be separated from its radiance or a spring from its water.
- “The eternal Father-Son self-distinction is best understood in terms of an eternal begetting, an eternal noncontingent generative act *within* the life of God. It is not an act of ‘will’ that produces something ‘external’ to God.

- “Scripture confirms that this act of divine self-differentiation is rightly designated an eternal begetting because it speaks of God as begetting a royal son and divine Wisdom before creation, both identified with the Son in the New Testament.
- “However, human language is inadequate in understanding divine begetting. It is an ‘ineffable’ act best likened to ‘light from light.’
- “Because the Father and the Son perfectly share one divine nature, the following rule applies: the same things can be ‘said of the Son which are said of the Father except for calling him Father.’
- “Nevertheless the Father and the Son are not to be identified together: one is eternally the Father, one eternally the Son; the Father begets, and the Son is begotten.”²

I. **ETERNAL SONSHIP.** F. F. Bruce points out from this passage seven facts about the Son of God, “which bring out his greatness and show why the revelation given in Him is the highest that God can give:

1. **“God appointed him ‘heir of all things’ (vs. 2).** This recalls Psalm 2:8: ‘Ask of me, and I will give thee the nations for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.’ Like Philippians 2:10, his possession includes all things: in heaven, on earth, and under the earth.
2. **“Through Him, God ‘made the worlds’ (vs. 2).** The Greek word for ‘worlds’ (*tous aiōnas*) can mean ‘the ages’ (as translated in Heb. 11:3), but also includes the entire universe of space and time. As John 1:3 demonstrates, the Logos was the agent of creation. Although Jesus is introduced as the divine Son (v. 2a), the functions attributed to him are those of the Wisdom of God; he is the mediator of revelation, the agent and sustainer of creation, and the reconciler of others to God. Each of these Christological affirmations echoes declarations concerning the role of divine Wisdom in the Wisdom of Solomon.
3. **“He is the ‘effulgence (apaugasma) of God’s Glory’ (v. 3);** that is, the brightness and outshining of who God essentially is. Christ is not merely a reflection of God, but he is the true radiance of the eternal light. As we confess in the Nicene Creed, he is ‘light from light.’ The writer [of Hebrews] appears to have borrowed a word employed in the LXX to describe the relationship between Wisdom and the eternal, divine light . . . to express the relationship he believed existed between God and the Son. Lane adds: ‘If the formulation of v. 3a owes something to the vocabulary and concepts of Alexandrian Judaism, it has been thoroughly assimilated and refashioned by a distinctly Christian thinker . . .’ Athanasius stated that as God is eternal light, so his Son is the eternal radiance of God. This means that Christ himself is eternally light, without beginning or end.
4. **“He is the true image of God: ‘the express image of his person . . .’ (vs. 3).** The Greek word *charakter* is used only here in the New Testament. It implies the hard impression made in a soft substance, like a metal ring impressed into wax, so that it shows the substance of who God really is. To see Christ is to see the Father’s true character. Athanasius makes the same point: ‘. . . he [Christ] is the express image of the Father’s *hypostasis* and light of light, and true power and image of the being of the Father.’ John Calvin writes: ‘. . . [God] has in him [Christ] stamped for us the likeness [cf. Heb. 1:3] to which he would have us conform.’
5. **“He upholds all things ‘by the word of his power’ (v. 3).** “The creative utterance which called the universe into being requires as its complement that sustaining utterance by which it is maintained in being.’ As Paul says of Christ: ‘In him all things consist (or hold together)’ (Col. 1:17). John Calvin sees the divinity of Christ set forth in Hebrews 1:3: ‘. . . to govern the universe with providence and power, and to regulate all things by the command of his own power [Heb. 1:3], deeds that the

apostle ascribes to Christ, [which are] the function of the Creator alone. And he not only participates in the task of governing the world with the Father; but he carries out also other individual offices, which cannot be communicated to the creatures.'

6. **"He has made purification of sins (*katharismos ton hamarton*), v. 3c.** This statement is different from the Wisdom tradition: 'There is no association of divine Wisdom with sacrifice in order to procure cleansing from sin . . . The source of this solitary reference to the accomplishment of Jesus' earthly life in the exordium is thus not the wisdom tradition but reflection on the incarnation and the cross. Lane comments further that 'The purification of the people was . . . achieved by blood in an act of expiation (cf. Lev. 16:30) . . . That the writer to the Hebrews draws upon this conceptual framework for interpreting the death of Christ is confirmed by chaps. 9 and 10, where the categories of defilement and purgation are foundational to the argumentation.' Athanasius teaches that Christ as both Son and High Priest offers himself as a propitiatory sacrifice for us. Gregory Nazianzus emphasizes the necessity of the Son being *homoousios* ('of the same substance') with the Father so that he was thus able to bear away in himself all our evil, crucifying our sins with himself.
7. **"He sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high (v. 3d).** 'Each of the participial clauses of v. 3 is dependent upon the finite *ekathisen*, which grammatically provides the main assertion of vv. 3-4 . . . it establishes that the acts of purifying and sitting down were temporarily sequential . . .' The fact that only the final High Priest could at last 'sit down' after he purged our sins is reflected in the furniture in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle. In that sparse inner sanctum, there was no chair; no seat for the High Priest to take after finishing his work on the yearly Day of Atonement. That is because his work was not finished. It would have to be repeated the next year, and the morning and evening sacrifices would carry on day by day. But when Christ, the Great High Priest, purged our sins, he 'sat down;' all was finished, 'once for all' and hence, forever. But Christ did not take his seat in the Temple of Jerusalem (although by the earthquake at his crucifixion, the veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the outer courts was split down the middle, from top to bottom, thus giving access to the holy presence for all believers). Rather, he took his seat 'at the right hand of the Majesty on high.' This recalls Psalm 110:1, which is the only other biblical reference to someone being seated on the Throne of God. This seat is the place of supreme Lordship: that of 'the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.'"³

CONCLUSION: John Calvin terms this miraculous transaction 'the wonderful exchange' (*mirifica commutation*): "This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself (which oppressed us), he has clothed us with his righteousness."⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Kevin Giles, *Jesus and The Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent The Doctrine of The Trinity* (Zondervan, 2006), p. 83.

² Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of The Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (IVP, 2012), p. 105.

³ This section is adapted from Douglas Kelly, one of my former professors, from his *Systematic Theology II* (Mentor, 2014), pp. 168-171.

⁴ As cited by Kelly, p. 170.