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The Parish Paper

OF
ST. JOHN'S CHURCH
SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Vol.36 No.40

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

09/04/05

THE BIBLE AND YOU PART I

When I was a graduate student at Oxford, I met W.J. Hankey, who would later become a mentor and friend. Only a decade older, he was far more advanced in his learning, indeed so much so that I would never catch up. It was not just his better training and harder work, there was (and is) a gift in him to know, a mind made for Philosophy and Theology, which was not widely distributed among us.

We got into all sorts of fierce arguments. And whenever he won, which was always, he would find a way to leave the room gracefully, having, as he put it, "pulled the rug out" from under me. One of the first lessons he taught me was the most valuable. It was simply this: you cannot read the Bible and understand it truly without the teaching of the Church.

What he meant, which I would later appreciate, was that in the history of Christian thought, in the growth of the Church, and in the development of Theology, reason had the place of taking the biblical revelation and giving it a form for understanding. In other words, the church was the rational womb in which doctrine was conceived and grew to full term.

I believed, and still do believe, in the supreme authority of the Bible. It is in the words of the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, "God's Word written." But what I did not fully comprehend at the time of our friendly, but serious, arguments was that the biblical revelation needed reason, and not just any reason, but the best reason which divine providence had given – that of the Greeks.

And so, for instance, when the great controversy known as Arianism appeared within the church, she was able to think her way through the crisis, and leave for all generations to come a form of understanding, known to us as the Nicene Creed.

The conflict unfolded in this way. A priest, Arius of Alexandria, was a student of the Holy Scriptures, a powerful preacher and devoted ascetic. He framed his theology on the basis of the Scriptures. It was his considered opinion that the Old Testament Scriptures and the New Testament writings of the Apostles taught that Jesus was subordinate in being to God the Father, related to him as the greatest of God's creatures. Arius concluded that there was a time when the Son of God was not. In other words, for Arius, the Son of God, the greatest of the Father's creation, was not eternal and equal to the Father, but rather

appeared with the actuality of time and space.

With the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., Athanasius refuted the teaching of Arius. Athanasius contended that the Old Testament Scriptures and the writings of the Apostles taught otherwise. There was not a time when the Son was not. The Son was and is coeternal and equal in being to the Father.

Athanasius used a word, not found in the New Testament, to define in what way the Son is equal to the Father. The word was *homoousios*, which is translated accurately in the Nicene Creed as "being of one substance" with the Father. This word provided the church with a way of speaking about the mystery of the Godhead, how the Father and the Son were one and yet distinct. It would take another century, through the work of the great theologians of the East and West to see fully how the relations and unity of the Father and the Son and the Spirit are the one life of God.

With the word, *homoousios*, Athanasius began the articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine had no doubt been there in an implicit form in the biblical writings, and in the liturgical formula of the church used for baptism, but the understanding of how this was so took centuries to discern. And so the necessity of an understanding, beyond biblical revelation and liturgical usage, became clear with the controversy of Arius, and later in different theological issues, with others, like Apollinaris, Nestorius, and Eutyches, to mention only the greater figures.

What is crucial to my point is the fact that Athanasius used a word current in the Neoplatonist doctrines of Plotinus and his great pupil, Porphyry. Athanasius took from the Greek philosophical tradition. The understanding of the Scriptures needed reason, and in the providence of God such reason was present in the Greek philosophical tradition.

The church would improve on this, taking this thought and further thinking upon it, until she could fully clarify which of pagan philosophical terms were true of the Blessed Trinity and which were not. She did this by constant reference to the teaching of the Scriptures. And so a dialectic resulted, with the supreme authority of the Scriptures as the beginning, and the clarity of reason brought to it. It cannot be doubted that the thought of the Greeks had to be baptized, as it were, but the biblical teaching would not have been understood without it. And to understand, to know, what the Scriptures mean is necessary, because with such knowledge comes eternal life (John 17:3).

So then, how do we hold the supremacy of Holy Scripture together with the defining and clarifying role of reason? The answer is found in the history itself. God speaks in the wonder and beauty of the biblical revelation, and we meditate upon it. Reason allows us to do this, and not just our individual reason, but reason, as it were, baptized in the Church, which gathers up the whole of God's truth from whatever source it may come, and thinks, by grace, upon God's glory.

This lesson that I learned from my mentor and friend was invaluable to my later thinking about the usefulness of Theology in general and the efficacy of the Prayer Book in particular. It may have taken "the rug being pulled out" from underneath, but it enabled me afterwards to

stand upon the shoulders of faithful giants. It is not just a matter of the Bible and me or you. It is a matter of the Bible understood truly through the teaching of the Church.

(to be continued)

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