

## **“ATHANASIAN CREED: THE CONTROVERSY CONTINUES.”**

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**Scripture Texts: John 5:19-20; I Corinthians 15:27-28**

### **Introduction.**

Would you be willing to agree that what we think about God is the very highest hill on which we should be willing to die? In other words, our view of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is the most important battle we should ever fight?

Every other battle or debate or dispute is secondary to who God is and what He is like and what He does. History seems to bear this out because the biggest battles waged in the early church centered around the nature of God and the divinity and humanity of the Son of God.

There were other battles but none this big and none that had two major creeds written almost exclusively about them, the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds.

While we don't like conflict and battles in the church there are some battles that must be fought and far from hurting the church, they actually protect the church and make it stronger. They are like a refiner's fire, that purifies and clarifies and unities the church around the truth.

When humans take up the battle of clarifying who God is and what He is like we have to admit we are jumping into the deep end of the pool and we have to be careful and humble about what we are doing.

God as He is in Himself is a holy mystery. We are creatures and God is the Creator. His ways and His thoughts are as far above ours as the heavens are above the earth. God in His essence is utterly and absolutely incomprehensible and beyond all human senses and wisdom.

When we try to talk about the Trinity, our human language stains on the edges to explain this very great mystery. It is hard enough to grasp, and even harder to explain.

We understand and know in part, but not in whole. We cannot know Him fully and eternity will not be long enough to fathom the depths or scale the heights of God.

But while we cannot know Him fully or in His fullness, we can know Him and we can know Him truly. We can because God desires for us to know Him and He has gone to great lengths to make Himself known in creation and in the special revelation of Himself in His Son and in His Word.

From Scripture we can learn that God is one God in divine essence and three distinct persons. Furthermore we can learn that God in the three persons of His being is Father, Son and Holy Spirit and that the Father is unbegotten; the Son is begotten and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Our texts and many like them are some of the most difficult in Scripture. Let's see what we can take away from them.

### **John 5:19-20.**

**John 5:19-20a** So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. 20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.

**John 5:30** I can do nothing on my own. As I hear, I judge, and my judgment is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.

This text begins a long defense by Jesus of His unity with the Father, His divine commission and authority, and many proofs of His Messiahship, of who He is and what He came to do.

Jesus affirms there is one will in the Godhead, in the Trinity, not two wills. Jesus' will and the Father's will are one and the same. Jesus wills to do only the Father's will. Jesus never wills or acts independently of the Father. Nothing is willed by one that is not willed by the other.

Not only does this imply absolutely no inferiority, it actually implies complete divinity/deity.

Only one who is God could do whatever the Father does and wills. The Son does exactly as the Father does. Therefore the Son is eternal, omniscient, all powerful, all present, infinite, like God as He is God.

The love of the Father is seen in the Father constantly showing the Son all He does and wills.

The love of the Son is seen in the Son constantly perfectly obeying to the point of the cross.

The Father loving and showing the Son is in no way to be taken as the Father being over or superior to the Son, and the Son being in some way less than or inferior to the Father. They are one in essence, one in mind, one in will, one in purpose, though two distinct and different persons.

Jesus' complete submission to the Father means and even guarantees that everything He says and does is in perfect harmony with the will of the Father.

Jesus reveals the Father to us because He is the perfect reflection of the Father's love and the Father's will. What we see and hear in Jesus is an exact imprint or reflection of God.

**Colossians 1:15, 19** He is the image of the invisible God, ... 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell

**Hebrews 1:3** He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.

When the Father shows the Son or speaks to the Son or teaches the Son, it never means there was a time when the Son didn't see or hear or know something. As the Son is eternally begotten from the Father, so the Son is eternally seeing and hearing and knowing from the Father.

What I am saying may sound true to you, but it is not without controversy.

### **The Trinity controversy continues today.**

A couple of years ago there was a great Trinitarian Debate. The first rumblings were felt in 2015 and then in the summer of 2016 the volcano erupted with a vigorous on-line debate. One man helpfully cataloged all the internet posts made back and forth in this debate and just the timeline is 37 pages long.

This was a battle fought on the highest hill as pastors and scholars struggling mightily to understand and rightly divide the truth and clarify doctrine. The refiner's fire still burns hot.

The controversy centers around the issue of the "eternal submission of the Son to the Father" or the "eternal authority of the Father with respect to the Son."

Is the Father eternally a father and is the Son eternally a son? And if the Son is eternally a son and eternally submitted to the authority of the Father, does that mean the Son is in some way inferior to or less than the Father?

What makes this controversy harder to navigate is there was a heresy back in the time of Arius and around the time of the Council of Niceae called subordinationism. Subordinationism said that the Son and the Holy Spirit were inferior to and subordinate to the Father in their very nature and being, in their essence. The Son and the Holy Spirit were of a different nature than the Father.

This heresy still exists today in Unitarian circles.

You hear in the Nicene Creed and in the Athanasian Creed a clear rebuttal and denial of this view.

Nothing in this trinity is before or after,  
nothing is greater or smaller;  
in their entirety the three persons  
are coeternal and coequal with each other.

But subordinationism should not be confused with the submission of the Son to the Father in terms of their role or relationship in the Trinity. To avoid the confusion with the ancient heresy it is probably beneficial to use a different term.

So some speak of the eternal functional or economic submission of the Son to the Father. These are strange words to us. They are trying to get at the role or function or work of the three members of the eternal Godhead.

The Son is submitted to the Father and the Spirit to the Father and the Son. Neither the Son nor the Spirit do anything outside of the will of the Father. “Thy will be done.”

The submission is of function and role, not of essence or equality or divine attributes.

All through Scripture you see each of the persons described with divine attributes and each receives worship which is only reserved for God. And we see each of the distinct members of the Trinity have differing functions or roles.

God the Father initiates, creates, sends, commands, commissions, grants, gives.  
God the Son redeems, responds, goes, receives authority, obeys, performs the Father’s will.

God the Holy Spirit applies redemption and sanctifies.

“Notice that the Father elects us in the Son (Eph. 1:4-5), creates the world through the Son (John 1:2, 1 Cor. 8:6, Heb. 1:2), sends the Son into the world (John 3:16), and delegates judgment to the Son (Rev 2:27), while the Son after his Ascension sits at the

right hand of the Father (Acts 2:32-35), receives from the Father the authority to pour forth the Holy Spirit in New Covenant fullness (Matt 28:18; Acts 2:33), makes intercession before the Father (Heb. 7:25), receives revelation from the Father to give to the church (Rev. 1:1), and will eternally be subject to the Father (1 Cor. 15:26-28)” (Wayne Grudem, <https://cbmw.org/public-square/whose-position-on-the-trinity-is-really-new> ).

“These relationships between the Father and the Son are never reversed, not once in the entire Bible. The Son does not predestine us in the Father. The Son does not create through the Father. The Son does not send his only Father into the world. The Father does not come and obey the Son’s will. The Father does not sit at the Son’s right hand. The Father does not pray to the Son or intercede for his people before the Son. The Father does not, at “the end” of the age, subject himself to the Son” (Wayne Grudem, <http://www.waynegrudem.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Biblical-evidence-for-the-eternal-submission-of-the-Son-to-the-Father-2.pdf> ).

## **Implications and application.**

*The Trinity is a model for all relationships where there is any authority.*

This is true whether we are talking about politics, military, business, workplace, school, church, home and family. We are all in relationships where there is authority and submission. Life could not function without it. Without authority and submission we would have some like Somalia. And of course on the other extreme where there is an abuse of authority we would have something like North Korea.

All authority and submission relationships are about role and function, not about the essence of our humanity. We are all equal in personhood, created equally in the image of God. But we all have different roles and relationships. All of us are at times in the role of one with authority and at other times in the role of the one under authority.

I am a man under authority to my government, to the state, to the IRS and DMV, to the police, to the classis and our elders. I have been as a son, as a student, and as an employee.

As the **church** we submit to those God places over us and we can also submit to one another and serve one another, humbly submitting to the needs of other. We can have unity in the midst of diversity without chaos.

We will see this dramatically in action in the church, the body of Christ.

Some use their gifts of creativity, some use their gifts of leading or administering or serving. Some exercise their gifts of generosity and giving. There are those who are like the Holy Spirit, working unseen behind the scenes, making the work easier, encouraging

others, bringing out the best in others, quietly doing what needs to be done. The body of Christ working together, diversity in unity.

As **families** we are encouraged to imitate the love of the Godhead in their relationships. The Son submits joyfully to the Father and the Spirit to the Father and the Son. Husband and wives can be secure in the knowledge of total equality in personhood, humanity and God-like image, each can do their part, play their role carry out their responsibility without fear or concern for inferiority or superiority. A complex unity of one flesh, equal but different.

Men and women are absolutely equal in essence and there is no hint of superiority or inferiority between them. They are mentally, emotionally, spiritually equal.

Yet there is an order in the sexes. In the home the husband is head of his wife and in the church men are to lead. Completely equal in essence, different in roles and responsibilities and it has nothing to do with superiority or inferiority. It's not about culture, it's about creation and being created in the image of God.

It is God-like for wives to submit to their husbands; it is God-like for children to obey their parents.

Feminists absolutely oppose this. They don't believe there can be an equality of essence and a difference of order, yet the Trinity proves it. This is why feminists in the church oppose the Scriptural Trinitarian formula, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They replace it with Parent, Child, Spirit; or Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier; or even the more radical Mother, Child, Womb.

Christ's supreme joy, His absolute delight, the thing He loves to do more than anything else, is to do the will of His Father. It is what He lives for, it's what He wakes up every morning thinking about. He loves the Father with a pure, holy, absolute love and that love expresses itself in absolute, unconditional obedience to the Father's will.

As the Son does perfectly and completely so it should be our desire and aim and pleasure to always do the Father's will and to please the Father in all things.

In this humility we learn how to be humble in all our human relationships.

Glory be to God for His perfect and pure nature as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and for the revelation of Himself to us for His glory and our blessing and benefit.