

AGAINST THE SABELLIANS

by Dionysius

Dionysius of Alexandria's refutation of Sabellianism, the heresy that denied the distinct persons of the Trinity by teaching that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely different names for one divine person manifesting in different modes.

4 Chapters

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Against The Sabellians

INTRODUCTORY NOTICE TO DIONYSIUS, BISHOP OF ROME.

[a.d.259-269.] Dionysius is no exception to the rule that Latin Christianity had no place in Rome till after the Nicene Council. He was a Greek by birth, and reflects the spirit and orthodoxy of the Greek Fathers; and what we have from him is written in the Greek language. We find it in Athanasius, where, remarks Waterland, [2333] its genuineness cannot be suspected, because "Athanasius did not entirely approve of it, and would certainly never have forged an interpretation different from his own." He concurred with the Easterns in the discipline of Paul of Samosata. Waterland says of the following fragment: "It is of admirable use for showing the doctrine of the Trinity as professed by the Church of Christ at that time."The purely receptive character of the Roman See during the Ante-Nicene period must be sufficiently apparent to the possessors of the volumes of this series. Until after the Council of Nice, as a Roman pontiff has testified, she was unfelt in the churches as a teaching church. [2334] Irenæus has justly stated her case: as the focus of the empire, she was the natural center of exchange and social commerce among all nations. Thither all Christians converged, and there at all times might be found representatives of all the churches, -- those of Gaul and Britain; those of Asia Minor and Syria; those of Alexandria and Egypt; those of North Africa, where Latin Christianity had begun to exist, and where it had reached a vigorous maturity at the Nicene period. Hence, from all these churches came into Rome a Catholic testimony, which was thus preserved at the metropolis by the pressure from without. This is the fact which gives importance to the earliest dogmatic testimony proceeding from the See of Rome. [2335] Dionysius has the great distinction of sustaining the orthodoxy which Hippolytus and other comprovincial bishops had established against the heresy of two of his predecessors; and this little essay, embedded in the works of Athanasius, comes forth as a genuine "bee" out of his precious amber, sweet with the honey of truth, and pungent with the sting of an acute and piercing testimony against error. For the necessary preface to this essay or synodical letter, the reader must turn to the history of Dionysius of Alexandria, surnamed the Great, and to the letters he wrote to his namesake of Rome. [2336] For a complete view of the whole matter, and for the originals of both these great prelates, the student will not fail to consult Routh. [2337] Athanasius, the touchstone of orthodoxy, does not altogether commend the idioms of either; but he sustains the essential orthodoxy of both with that vast sweep of genius which could insist upon Nicene idioms after the council, but sustain those who, in defective language, fought previously for essential truth. For a just view of Novatian and of the orthodoxy of Rome in the times of Dionysius, as that unhappy but competent witness sets it forth, the reader would do well to consult Dr. Waterland. [2338] For a vindication of the Alexandrian Dionysius, to whom his contemporaries gave the surname Magnus, see the same lucid expounder of antiquity. [2339] For a sententious statement of the subordination of the Son, on which so much hinges in these inquiries, consult the same theologian. [2340] I might have suffixed this essay to the works of the great Dionysius but for several important considerations: (1) I was glad to give due prominence to this exceptional voice from old Rome, and to place Dionysius with due dignity before the reader; (2) as the Bishop of Rome was without a hearing at Nicæa, I was anxious to show what good Sylvester would have said had he been able to attend the council; (3) I was not willing, therefore,

to hide this writer's light under the bushel of the pages devoted to the Alexandrian school; (4) I was anxious to close this important volume by a just exhibition of the Ante-Nicene doctrine, previous to the compilation of the Great Symbol; (5) I considered it judicious to elucidate Dionysius by the doctrines of Athanasius, to whom we owe the preservation of the fragment itself; and (6) I felt that here was the place to record the "Athanasian Confession" (so called), which, apocryphal though it be, as a "creed" under his name is allowed to embody the principles for which the whole life of Athanasius was a contest unparalleled in the history of Christianity.

Against the Sabellians.

1 Now truly it would be just to dispute against those who, by dividing and rending the monarchy, which is the most august announcement of the Church of God, into, as it were, three powers, and distinct substances (hypostases), and three deities, destroy it. [2342] For I have heard that some who preach and teach the word of God among you are teachers of this opinion, who indeed diametrically, so to speak, are opposed to the opinion of Sabellius. For he blasphemes in saying that the Son Himself is the Father, and vice versa; but these in a certain manner announce three gods, in that they divide the holy unity into three different substances, absolutely separated from one another. For it is essential that the Divine Word should be united to the God of all, and that the Holy Spirit should abide and dwell in God; and thus that the Divine Trinity should be reduced and gathered into one, as if into a certain head -- that is, into the omnipotent God of all. For the doctrine of the foolish Marcion, which cuts and divides the monarchy into three elements, is assuredly of the devil, and is not of Christ's true disciples, or of those to whom the Saviour's teaching is agreeable. For these indeed rightly know that the Trinity is declared in the divine Scripture, but that the doctrine that there are three gods is neither taught in the Old nor in the New Testament. 2 But neither are they less to be blamed who think that the Son was a creation, and decided that the Lord was made just as one of those things which really were made; whereas the divine declarations testify that He was begotten, as is fitting and proper, but not that He was created or made. It is therefore not a trifling, but a very great impiety, to say that the Lord was in any wise made with hands. For if the Son was made, there was a time when He was not; but He always was, if, as He Himself declares, [2343] He is undoubtedly in the Father. And if Christ is the Word, the Wisdom, and the Power, -- for the divine writings tell us that Christ is these, as ye yourselves know, -- assuredly these are powers of God. Wherefore, if the Son was made, there was a time when these were not in existence; [2344] and thus there was a time when God was without these things, which is utterly absurd. But why should I discourse at greater length to you about these matters, since ye are men filled with the Spirit, and especially understanding what absurd results follow from the opinion which asserts that the Son was made? The leaders of this view seem to me to have given very little heed to these things, and for that reason to have strayed absolutely, by explaining the passage otherwise than as the divine and prophetic Scripture demands. "The Lord created me the beginning of His ways." [2345] For, as ye know, there is more than one signification of the word "created;" and in this place "created" is the same as "set over" the works made by Himself -- made, I say, by the Son Himself. But this "created" is not to be understood in the same manner as "made." For to make and to create are different from one another. "Is not He Himself thy Father, that hath possessed thee and created thee?" [2346] says Moses in the great song of Deuteronomy. And thus might any one reasonably convict these men. Oh reckless and rash men! was then "the first-born of every creature" [2347] something made? -- "He who was begotten from the womb before the morning star?" [2348] -- He who in the person of Wisdom says, "Before all the hills He begot me?" [2349] Finally, any one may read in many parts of the divine utterances that the Son is said to have been begotten, but never that He was made. From which considerations, they who dare to say that His divine and inexplicable generation was a

creation, are openly convicted of thinking that which is false concerning the generation of the Lord. 3 That admirable and divine unity, therefore, must neither be separated into three divinities, nor must the dignity and eminent greatness of the Lord be diminished by having applied to it the name of creation, but we must believe on God the Father Omnipotent, and on Christ Jesus His Son, and on the Holy Spirit. Moreover, that the Word is united to the God of all, because He says, "I and the Father are one;" [2350] and, "I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me." [2351] Thus doubtless will be maintained in its integrity the doctrine of the divine Trinity, and the sacred announcement of the monarchy.

elucidations.

I. The Confession, improperly called the "Creed of Athanasius," is acknowledged to embody the (Athanasian) doctrine of the Nicene Council; and I append it here as an index to the state of theology at the period which is the limit of our series. Nothing is properly a "creed" which has never been accepted as such by the whole Church, and the Greeks knew no other creed than that called Nicene. The Anglo-American Church has ceased to recite this Confession in public worship, but does not depart from it as doctrine. The "Reformed" communion in America [2352] retains it among her liturgical forms, and I suppose the same is true of the Lutherans. It is a Western Confession, and, like the Te Deum, is a hymn rather than a symbol, though breathing the spirit of the Creed. Usher adopts a.d.447 as its date, and Beveridge assigns it to the fourth century. Dupin gives it a later origin than Usher, and a considerable number of eminent authorities agree with him in the date a.d.484. What are called the anathemas are the enacting clauses (so to speak), and, like the same in the Nicene Creed, may be regarded as no part of the Confession itself. If they have disappeared from the Great Symbol itself, as unsuitable to liturgical recitation, why not apply the same rule here? confession of our christian faith, commonly called the creed of st. athanasius. Quicumque vult. ¶ Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholick Faith. Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. i. And the Catholick Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the God-head of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father un-create, the Son un-create: and the Holy Ghost un-create. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal, the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals: but one eternal. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three un-created: but one un-created, and one incomprehensible. So likewise the Father is Almighty, the Son Almighty: and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almightyes: but one Almighty. So the Father is God, the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods: but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord: and the Holy Ghost is Lord. And yet not three Lords: but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity: to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord; So we are forbidden by the Catholick Religion: to say, there be three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created, but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: [2353] neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons: one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is afore, or after other: none is greater, or less than another; But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together: and co-equal. So that in all things, as is aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. ¶ He therefore that will be saved: must thus think of the Trinity. ii. Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation: that he also believe rightly the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus

Christ. For the right Faith is, that we believe and confess; that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man; God, of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and Man, of the Substance of His Mother, born in the world; Perfect God, and perfect Man: of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting; Equal to the Father, as touching His God-head: and inferior to the Father, as touching His Manhood. Who although He be God and Man: yet He is not two, but one Christ; One; not by conversion of the God-head into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God; One altogether; not by confusion of Substance: but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man: so God and Man is one Christ; Who suffered for our Salvation: descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead. He ascended into heaven, He sitteth on the right hand of the Father, God Almighty: from whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies: and shall give account for their own works. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting: and they that have done evil into everlasting fire. ¶ This is the Catholick Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved. ii. It is with regret that I am forced to take exception to the most useful Ecclesiastical History of the learned Professor Schaff, in this connection. I quote from that work [2354] as follows: -- "He, Dionysius, maintained distinctly, in (a) controversy with Dionysius of Alexandria, at once the unity of essence and the real personal distinction, etc., . . . and avoided tritheism, Sabellianism, and (b) subordination, with the instinct of orthodoxy, and also with the art of anathematizing, (c) already familiar to (d) the popes." Such a paragraph must convey to the youthful student a great confusion of ideas; all the greater, because the same valuable work elsewhere invites him to conclusions quite the reverse. Thus, (a) there was no controversy whatever between the two Dionysii; with a holy jealousy they entered into fraternal explanations of the same truth, held by each, but by neither very technically elucidated. The mere reader would probably infer that the greater of the two was guilty of tritheism or Sabellianism, although that is not the meaning of these unguarded expressions. But (b) the "subordinationism" which he repudiated was the doctrine of the subjection of the Son, not of the subordination, which orthodoxy has always maintained. Again, (c) I see no such "anathematizing" in the letter of Dionysius as is here charged; indeed, it contains no anathema [2355] whatever, much less the artificial cursing of the Papacy which is thus assumed. And last, (d) what can be meant by the expression, "already familiar to the popes?" The learned pages of the same author sufficiently prove that there were no such things [2356] as "popes" till a much later period of history; and, as to the "art of anathematizing," if it existed at all in those days, we find it much more freely exemplified by the Greek Fathers than by bishops of Rome. I say, if it existed at all, because the primitive anathema was a purely scriptural enforcement of St. Paul's great canon (Gal. i.8, 9); while the "art of anathematizing," so justly credited to "the popes," was a vindictive and monstrous assertion, at a later date, of prerogatives which they impiously arrogated to themselves, against other churches.

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