



SESSION 12: AMBROSE THROUGH AUGUSTINE – READINGS

(for session 13: from On the Holy Spirit, by Basil the Great)

The Holy Spirit is not subordinate: “They say that it is not suitable to rank the Holy Spirit with the Father and the Son, because He is different in nature and inferior in dignity from them. But it is fitting for us to respond to them with the apostles’ words: ‘We must obey God rather than men.’ When the Lord established the baptism of salvation, did He not clearly command his disciples to baptize all nations ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’? He did not disdain his fellowship with the Holy Spirit, but these men say that we should not rank Him with the Father and the Son. Are they not openly disregarding God’s commandment? If they will not admit that this arrangement of Father, Son, and Spirit testifies to their union and fellowship, let them explain to us why we should agree with their opinion. How could Father, Son, and Spirit be united in a different or more suitable way? If indeed the Lord did *not* speak of Himself, the Father, and the Spirit as being united in baptism, then let our opponents blame us for having invented this doctrine. But no one is so shameless that he will deny the obvious meaning of the words which clearly say the Spirit *is* one with the Father and the Son. So let our opponents be silent; as for us, we shall follow the words of Scripture.”

The Holy Spirit was and is present in all time: “But when we speak of the plan of salvation for man, accomplished in God’s goodness by our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who would deny that it was all made possible through the grace of the Spirit? Whether you wish to examine the Old Testament – the blessings of the patriarchs, the help given through the law, the types, the prophecies, the victories in battle, the miracles performed through righteous men – or everything that happened since the Lord’s coming in the flesh, it all comes to pass through the Spirit who would henceforth be inseparably united to His very flesh, as it is written, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is He who...is my beloved Son,’ and ‘God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit.’ After His baptism, the Holy Spirit was present in every action He performed. He was there when the Lord was tempted by the devil: ‘Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted.’ The Spirit was united with Jesus when He performed miracles: ‘But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons...’ Nor did the Spirit leave Him after His resurrection from the dead. When the Lord renewed mankind by breathing into His apostles’ faces, (thus restoring the grace which Adam had lost, which God breathed into him in the beginning) what did He say? ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’ Is it not indisputably clear that the Church is set in order by the Holy Spirit? ‘God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.’ This order is established according to different gifts distributed by the Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit is beyond prioritization: “When the Lord taught us the doctrine of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, He did not make arithmetic a part of this gift! He did not say, ‘In the first, the second, and the third,’ or ‘In one, two, and three.’ He blessed us with the knowledge given us by faith, by means of holy Names. We are saved through faith; numbers have been invented as symbols of quantity. These

men bring ruin on themselves through every possible source; they have even turned man's ability to count against the faith! Numbers cannot change the nature of anything, yet these men honor arithmetic more than the divine nature, lest they give the Paraclete more honor than He is due! But the Unapproachable One is beyond numbers, wisest sirs; imitate the reverence shown by the Hebrews of old to the unutterable name of God. Count if you must, but do not malign the truth. Either honor Him Who cannot be described with your silence, or number holy things in accord with true religion. There is one God and Father, one Only-Begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit. We declare each Person to be unique, and if we must use numbers, we will not let stupid arithmetic lead us astray to the idea of many gods."

The condition of the Church: "To what can I compare our present condition? It is like a naval battle, kindled by old quarrels, fought by men who love war, who cultivate hatred for one another, and have long experience in naval warfare. Look at the fearful picture I am painting for you; see the rival fleets rushing against each other on both sides, and finally they converge in a burst of desperate fury. Imagine, if you will, the ships driven into confusion by a raging tempest, while thick darkness falls from the clouds and blackens the entire scene, so that signals cannot be recognized, and one can no longer distinguish between friend and foe. To add more details to this picture, imagine the sea swollen and whirling up from the deeps, while torrents of rain pour from the clouds and the terrible waves rise higher and higher. All four winds meet together and dash one fleet against the other. Meanwhile some of the combatants are betraying each other; some are deserting in the middle of the battle; others at the same time are compelled, while the wind drives them on, to urge their boats forward against the enemy. The men become jealous of those in higher authority, and lusting for power among themselves, they split into factions and begin to slaughter each other. Think of the confused and unintelligible din raging over the entire sea, from the howling winds, the splintering of ships, the boiling surf, the cries of the warriors as they give vent to their passions with every kind of noise, so that not a single word from the admiral or pilot can be heard. The disorder and confusion is beyond description, but the worst evil of all soon raises its head: once men despair of their lives, they claim license for every sort of wickedness. Suppose they are stricken with the incurable sickness of megalomania; then they will not cease their efforts to defeat one another even as their ships sink into the abyss.

Now I ask you to turn from this fanciful description to the evil reality. When the Arian schism was first denounced as a sect opposed to the Church of God, did it not appear then to stand alone? But when the enemy's policy against us was changed from one of long and bitter contention to open warfare, then, as everyone knows, the war was split into a myriad of factions, so that all men succumbed to irreconcilable hatred, either through individual suspicion or party spirit. What storm at sea was ever so savage as this tempest of the Churches? It has moved every boundary established by the Fathers; every formulation, every established bulwark of doctrine has been shaken. Everything still remaining afloat is shaken by unsound teaching and thrown back into the abyss. We attack one another; we are overthrown by one another. If the enemy does not strike us first we are wounded by our comrade; if he is wounded and falls, he is trampled by his fellow soldier. Although we are united in our hatred of common foes, no sooner do they retreat, and we find enemies in each other. Who could even list all the casualties? Some have fallen in battle with the enemy; some have been treacherously betrayed by their allies; others are the victims of their leaders' incompetence. Entire churches are dashed and shattered on the sunken reefs of subtle heresy, while other enemies of the Spirit of salvation have seized the helm and made shipwreck of the faith. The tumults devised by the princes of this world have brought about the downfall of the people with violence surpassing hurricane or tornado. A darkness full of gloom and misery has descended upon the Churches: the lights of the world, established by God to enlighten the souls of the people, have been exiled. The terror of universal destruction already hangs over us, yet

they continue enjoying their rivalries, ignoring any sense of danger. Private enmities are more important to these men than the struggle of an entire people; they prefer the glory of subduing their opponents to securing the common welfare, and they love the immediate delights of worldly honor more than the rewards awaiting us in the age to come. So all men alike, depending on how much power each one has, rush upon each other with murderous hands. They fight against each other with harsh words; they nearly fill the Church with the meaningless cries and unintelligible shouts of their incessant clamor. They continually pervert the teachings of true religion, sometimes by adding to them, and other times by reducing them. On the one hand are those who confuse the Persons and revert to Judaism; on the other are those who oppose the natures, and are swept away into Greek polytheism. Inspired scripture is powerless to mediate between these two parties, nor can apostolic tradition offer them terms of reconciliation. One honest word and your friendship with them is finished; one disagreement with their opinions is sufficient pretext for a quarrel. No oath is so effective for holding a conspiracy together as common fellowship in error. Every man is a theologian; it does not matter that his soul is covered with more blemishes than can be counted. The result is that these innovators find an abundance of men to join their factions. So ambitious, self-elected men divide the government of the Churches among themselves, and reject the authority of the Holy Spirit. The ordinances of the Gospel have been thrown into confusion everywhere for lack of discipline; the jostling for high positions is incredible, as every ambitious man tries to thrust himself into high office. The result of this lust for power is that wild anarchy prevails among the people; the exhortations of those in authority are rendered utterly void and unprofitable, since every man in his arrogant delusion thinks that it is more his business to give orders to others than to obey anyone himself.

Since no human voice is powerful enough to be heard in such an uproar, I reckon that silence is more profitable than words. If the words of the Preacher are true: 'The words of the wise are heard in quiet,' then with the present state of affairs, any discussion of them at all is scarcely appropriate. Moreover, I am restrained by the prophet's words: 'Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time; for it is an evil time,' a time when some trip their neighbors, others kick a man already fallen, others applaud, but no one is sympathetic enough to lend a helping hand to the weary, even though the old law says 'if you see the beast of one who hates you lying under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it, but you shall help him to lift it up.' This is certainly not the case now. Why not? The love of many has grown cold; concord among brothers is no more; the very name of unity is ignored; Christian compassion or sympathetic tears cannot be found anywhere. There is no one to welcome someone weak in faith, but mutual hatred blazes so fiercely among brothers that a neighbor's fall brings them more joy than their own household's success. And just as a contagious disease spreads from the sick to the healthy during an epidemic, in these days we have become like everyone else: imitators of evil, carried away by this wicked rivalry possessing our souls. Those who judge the erring are merciless and bitter, while those judging the upright are unfair and hostile. This evil is so firmly rooted in us that we have become more brutish than the beasts: At least they herd together with their own kindred, but we reserve our most savage warfare for the members of our own household.

These are the reasons I should have kept quiet, but love pulled me in the opposite direction, the love that is not self-seeking, but desires to conquer every obstacle put in her way by time and circumstance. I learned from the example of the children in Babylon that when there is no one to support the true cause of religion, we must accomplish our duties alone. They sang a hymn to God from the midst of the flames, not thinking of the multitudes who rejected the truth, but content to have each other, though there were only three of them. Therefore the cloud of our enemies does not dismay us, but we place our trust in the Spirit's help, and boldly proclaim the truth. Otherwise it would be utterly miserable that the Spirit is blasphemed and true religion is wrecked so easily by these men, while we, having such a

mighty patron and protector, hesitate to defend a doctrine which has been maintained in unbroken sequence from the days of the fathers until now. The fervor of your sincere love and your quiet, serious disposition, also provided me with powerful encouragement. I know that you will refrain from divulging my words to all the world to see; not that they are not worth hearing, but to avoid casting pearls before swine. Now my task is finished. If you find that what I have said is satisfactory, let it end our discussion of these matters. If anything is unclear, do not hesitate to diligently seek an answer; you will add to your knowledge by asking questions while avoiding strife. Either through me or through others the Lord will provide a full answer for any remaining questions, since He gives knowledge to those He has chosen, by the Holy Spirit.”