



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Athanasius, c.296 – 373 A.D.

Of all the challenges that the Early Church faced, from state persecution to gnostic influences, there was perhaps no greater threat than Arianism. This heresy, while the product of synthesizing Christian doctrine with Greek cosmology, derives its name from a presbyter in Alexandria and was incredibly widespread, popular, and in some places up through the sixth century completely supplanted orthodox Christianity. There were many who rose to the defense of the Faith and helped define the nature of Christ, but among those there was none greater than Athanasius.

The Life of Athanasius

- Athanasius' exact place and time of birth are unknown. His parents were likely Coptic Christians and thus were probably lower class, though they had enough to provide a solid education for him.
- During his younger years he was very close to the desert monks, including the great St. Anthony, whom he would visit in the desert and wash the old man's hands. Athanasius later wrote one of his more famous works a biography on the saint, *The Life of Saint Anthony*. He learned from these monks the qualities that would later serve him well. For he was not a polished rhetorician, nor noted for his subtle power of persuasion. Athanasius was well connected with the people he lived among, he was disciplined, humble, devout, and possessed a fiery spirit and a profound and unshakeable conviction. He was a force to be reckoned with.
- As a young man Athanasius came to the attention of Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria, and was set upon a clerical path. He was ordained in 319 and ended up serving as Alexander's secretary at the Council of Nicaea in 325. His keen intellect and abilities lent themselves well to his calling. Even before the Arian controversy broke out (318), he had published two works, *Against the Gentiles*, and *On the Incarnation of the Word*.
- In 328 Alexander lay on his deathbed, and all assumed he would name Athanasius his successor. The latter, however, did not want to be bishop and fled into the desert. Only several weeks after Alexander died did Athanasius come out of hiding and against his wishes was elected Bishop. That same year, Emperor Constantine, under influence from Arian bishops, revoked the edict which had banished Arius shortly after the Council of Nicaea.
- These Arian clergy knew Athanasius to be one of their most formidable opponents and set out on a smear campaign, accusing him of dabbling in magic and a tyrannical bishop in Egypt. Given Athanasius' dark complexion and short stature, he was called "The Black Dwarf". The campaign was a success and Constantine summoned Athanasius to a synod at Tyre, where he was actually accused of killing a certain bishop Arsenius. When Athanasius was able to bring Arsenius to the trial he was free to go, but left a bitter taste in his opponents' mouths. The ire of Eusebius of Nicomedia was of particular concern – he was an Arian bishop in Constantinople who was close to the emperor.
- Eusebius (not to be confused with the noted Early Church historian Eusebius of Caesaria) succeeded in getting Athanasius exiled until Constantine died. The emperor's sons allowed all exiles to return. However, Alexandria was in the hands of a rival Arian bishop, Gregory, with whom the government sided. When Athanasius would not give Gregory possession of church buildings, Gregory took them by force, but the whole riot was blamed on Athanasius, who was smuggled out of the city to Rome.
- In Rome Athanasius was able to convince Julius, Bishop of Rome, of the Nicene position against the Arians. Recall that in the west, following Tertullian's Trinitarian theology, the Christological debates were not as heated or well known from the East. This 'victory' led to a synod which declared

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Athanasius the legitimate bishop of Alexandria and, with the support of the Western emperor, Constans, was able to return. Gregory has so badly mismanaged the church that Athanasius was given a hero's welcome. He remained trouble free for the next ten years and wrote a number of treatises against Arianism and strengthened the Nicene cause.

- Trouble arose again when Constans fell from power in the west, and his brother, Constantius in the East became sole emperor. Constantius was a devout Arian, and with his brother gone, launched an all out assault on Nicene Christians in general and Athanasius in particular. At first he tried to trick Athanasius into leaving, and finally sent troops in to capture him – but he escaped into the desert to be with the monks he knew so well. During this time the Nicene cause suffered severely. With imperial policy firmly in favor of Arian Christianity, many bishops and churches who disagreed with Arianism were forced to sign in favor of it. A council in Sirmium was convened which openly denounced Nicaea. The flood of persecution was only stopped when Constantius suddenly dies and his cousin, Julian (the Apostate) came to the throne in 361. Julian denounced Christianity and could care less about Christian controversy. He restores all exiled bishops, including Athanasius who once again returns to Alexandria.
- Athanasius was exiled again under Julian, who, although had restored Athanasius, saw him as an obstacle to reinstating the old pagan religions in Egypt. Once more Athanasius fled to the desert. Julian's successor, Jovian, was friendly to Athanasius, allowing his return. But he died soon after and his successor, Valens, was pro-Arian, and Athanasius pre-emptively left the city. However, Valens was not keen to tangle with the bishop who had bested two of his predecessors, and Athanasius for the final time returned to his city of Alexandria, where he remained until his death in 373.
- Athanasius never lived to see the fruit of his work. In 381 the Second Ecumenical Council was convened in Constantinople which successfully ratified the Nicene position. However, in his twilight years he did see the rise of the next generation of orthodox leaders, especially the Cappadocians.

The Times of Athanasius

A post-Constantinian world

- Pros – an end to Imperial persecution
- Cons – internal Christian controversy, esp. regarding doctrine, could now be 'appealed' to a higher civil authority
- Both – now the state had a vested interest in Christianity; the 'glue' of the empire

Christological debate – divine vs. human Jesus

- All heresy and error can be traced to either adoptionism or docetism. Adoptionism: Jesus is human, or his humanity is over-emphasized, and his prestige was bestowed by his earning it. Docetism: Jesus only appeared human, i.e. his nature was only divine, or his divinity is over-emphasized.
- The roots of the debates centered around two key ideas: 1) if Jesus was indeed human, how could he be divine as well (or to what extent was he also divine); 2) If he was indeed divine, what is his relationship to God the Father?
- Docetism was fairly easily put to rest with clear readings of the NT, and was primarily an issue among gnostic Christians. By the third century there was little doubt in the Church of Jesus' humanity. The question of Jesus' nature becomes heated as Christians try to figure out the second question and reconcile Christianity's monotheism with Jesus' relationship to the Father.
- Challenges: Over-identification with classical worldview was a problem. The Christian God is the God of the prophets and patriarchs, not of the philosophers. The popular and appealing use of allegory for interpretation also led to quirky understandings of Scripture.
- Recall Justin's use of the Logos (Reason) to explain pagan, pre-Christ revelation. The One High God of the neo-platonic pagan world, was the God Christians were talking about. He connected, following John's Gospel, the Logos (of Greek thought) with the Son of God. Note, Justin's argument, from the second century, is not so much concerned with these Christological questions but rather the mechanism of general revelation to Greek pagans.

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- Was the Logos, the pre-incarnate Son, created by the Father or was he co-eternal with the Father. Various teachers in the church during the third century try to explain this question, often relying on a Greco-Roman worldview to do it.
- Key points prior to Athanasius' time and the Council of Nicaea in 325.
 - Modalism: Sabellius (c.205) explained the Trinity in terms of the One High God simply wearing three different 'masks' (Greek: *prosopon*) into the material world
 - Monarchianism: Paul of Samosata (c. 260 in Syria) taught that God's mind, the Logos, was of the same substance (*homoousios*) as God and 'broadcast' the Logos to Jesus at his baptism

Arianism

- Arius was a well liked and well known presbyter from Alexandria; charismatic and eloquent, he was able win many to his side. In order to explain the divine nature of Christ, he argued that essentially Jesus was a created 'super angel' being: "Once there was when he was not". In other words, God did not have a beginning, but the Logos did.
- Utilized such passages as John 14:28 ("the Father is greater than I") and Jesus' crying out on the cross
- This fit well with both the speculative Alexandrine Christian theology handed down from Origen, and also with the prevailing Greco-Roman world view. Thus, what made Arianism so dangerous was one could be a Christian and still hold to the G-R worldview; one could do and say all the things a Christian would but mean something totally different.
- Problem: If Jesus really is not the same god as the Father, then we have not really known or seen the Father (cf. John 1:17-18). Furthermore, if all authority is not in Christ, then his salvation can be revoked by a higher authority. While Arius was preserving the distinction between Son and Father, he destroyed the unity and defined an 'alternate' divinity for the Son. This is not Christianity.
- Arianism spread quickly and widely. Even after Nicaea, the Arians regained power and Constantine himself was baptized on his deathbed by an Arian bishop. In 380, just one year before the Second Council, when Gregory of Nazianzus (one of the three Cappadocian Fathers) took his post as Bishop of Constantinople, he found only one non-Arian church in the city. Many Germanic tribes were converted by Arian Christians, and Arianism survived in Gaul well into the seventh century.

Council of Nicaea, 325.

- Convened by Constantine to settle the Arian issue, and among other items, establish a canon. About 300 bishops attended (actual number not known), from as far away as Britain they came. Note, Arius himself, since he was not a bishop, could not attend and was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia.
- The debate centered on one iota: *homoousios* vs. *homoiousios*. Of the same substance as the Father or of a similar substance with the Father. The Council ruled of the same substance, but recall that the term *homoousios* had been used in a heretical fashion by Paul of Samosata in the third century.
- While the Arian bishops consented to the Canons of the Council, most went back to their sees especially Eusebius of Nicomedia, and still taught Arianism and persecuted Nicene leaders.
- The Creed that was produced very clearly rejected the idea that the Logos/Son/Word was any less divine than the Father. However, in the years that followed this strong assertion of the unity led to concerns that there was no distinction, leading to patripassianism, which brought about the need to articulate the distinctiveness of the Son from the Father and the Spirit, while retaining the unity

The Theology of Athanasius

Extant works

- *Life of St. Anthony* and his treatises *Against the Gentiles (Heathen)*, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God* are his most well known. Many of his commentaries survive, including those on Genesis, Psalms and Song of Solomon.
- Many of his letters survive, the most important of which is "Concerning the Decrees of the Council of Nicaea" which is his account of the Council. Written in 367, it contains the first known documented listing of all 27 books of the New Testament canon.
- Other letters of significance are his *Letters to Serapion*, where he discusses the Holy Spirit

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Christology

- Perhaps the best repository of his Christology is the Athanasian Creed, found in our BCP, p. 864, which addresses the nature of the Trinity and the Incarnation. Although it dates much later than Athanasius, and likely was not written by him, it was attributed to him and is in keeping with what we know of his theology.
- The Logos is in fact of the same substance as the Father. Although distinct from the Father, the Logos was never created by the Father, but co-eternal with the Father (John 1:1-5). To be the only begotten of the Father means there was never a time when was un-begotten.
- Athanasius preserved Christianity from being subsumed into the Greco-Roman milieu.
- "Both from the confession of the evil spirits and from the daily witness of His works, it is manifest, then, and let none presume to doubt it, that the Savior has raised His own body, and that He is very Son of God, having His being from God as from a Father, Whose Word and Wisdom and Whose Power He is. He it is Who in these latter days assumed a body for the salvation of us all, and taught the world concerning the Father. He it is Who has destroyed death and freely graced us all with incorruption through the promise of the resurrection, having raised His own body as its first-fruits, and displayed it by the sign of the cross as the monument to His victory over death and its corruption" – *On the Incarnation of the Word*, ch. 5