

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 22

Athanasius and the Arians

INTRODUCTION

Some of you have surely seen the old far-side cartoon which has two deer in conversation with each other. It was hunting season and one has a bull's eye on his chest. The other says to him nonchalantly, "That's quite a birthmark you've got there." I have kiddingly observed that most church leaders have the same birthmark, perhaps on their foreheads. Many of them are constantly under criticism. Some church members seem to feel it is their spiritual gift to take pot shots at the preacher. Others shoot cannons or bombs. Generally, it is agreed that at least 10% of the membership of most churches is opposed in some way to their preacher. A much higher percentage regularly has "roast preacher" for Sunday lunch. A man preparing for fulltime ministry should know such "goes with the territory" he is about to enter. He simply must prepare for his inevitable critics and claim God's help to respond with patience and mercy.

In this lesson we are studying a church leader whose career is dominated by criticism, accusations and even escapes into exile for fear of death at the hands of his enemies. Athanasius was the controversial bishop of Alexandria between 328 and 373 A.D. Because of five such exile experiences, he was away for about one-third of this time. He certainly seemed to suffer more opposition than what might be received from only 10% of the membership. Most of his opposition came from other church leaders, however, both inside and outside his see (the district of a bishop or archbishop), and from various Roman emperors.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

There is much that is uncertain about Athanasius because of limited resources and because of the different perspectives of the authors/appraisers. You can find widely divergent views on how good or bad a man and church leader he was. Edward Gibbon, for example, found in him "a superiority of character and abilities which would have qualified him, far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine, for the government of a great monarchy." The majority by far agree with Gibbon and favor Athanasius as "a model of propriety and honesty, as a high-minded and prudent leader of genius constantly assailed by the false accusations and ignoble machinations of dishonest and mean-spirited adversaries." On the other hand, Timothy Barnes in his 1993 book, *Athanasius and Constantius, Theology and Politics in the Constantine Empire*, states clearly that Athanasius

was a liar and perverted the facts on a number of issues. Specifically, he thinks Athanasius misrepresented how emperors treated the decisions of church councils.

A key difference between these two authors in their view of Athanasius is in how they answer these questions. Whom will you believe? What resource will you accept as truth? Gibbon relied almost exclusively on the writings of Athanasius himself and his supporters. Barnes and others say, “An impartial historian cannot simply pin his faith on the utter veracity of Athanasius or dismiss the testimony of his enemies without due consideration.”

PERSPECTIVE

Can we approach the study of such a church leader, revered as “the father of orthodoxy” after the Council of Nicaea, and allow for his inability to be totally objective in his own writings? Can we allow for his natural human tendency to slant things his way, to be imperfect in a variety of ways, and still see the positive way in which God used him? Certainly! That’s exactly what the Bible does repeatedly as it records the stories of Abraham, Moses, David and many others. It seems to go out of its way to tell the good, the bad and the ugly, in order to assure us that God can use us, despite our sins. He can restore and renew confessed sinners and use them powerfully in His cause. The story of Peter, especially in his denials of Jesus just before the crucifixion, reminds us that great leaders make serious mistakes and need forgiveness, but can still be very effective in bringing others to Christ. Perhaps it is in the very experience of being humiliated by his own sin that a man such as Peter finds the true meaning of grace and God’s love and then can proclaim it most powerfully.

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

Athanasius was born sometime between 295 and 299. The Catholic Encyclopedia narrows it to between 296 and 298. That becomes somewhat important when one of the first accusations against him was that he is too young to become the bishop of Alexandria after Alexander. We know very little about his family and education. One little story has it that he was playing with friends in 312 when Bishop Alexander noticed them outside his window. He could tell they were “playing church,” we might say, and imitating the ritual of baptism. Alexander sent for them and determined that Athanasius himself was playing the part of bishop. He construed this as an omen and took the boys into his household and gave them an education.

GROOMED FOR A PROMINENT ROLE

Athanasius is almost certain to have come from humble origins in or near Alexandria, but he obtained a good education, even if it was primarily religious. He became a deacon in the church and was also Alexander's assistant. In that role he attended what has come to be viewed as one of the most pivotal events in all of church history, the Council of Nicaea in 325. Alexander groomed him to become his heir as bishop of Alexandria and at his death in 328, the 30-year-old Athanasius (nicknamed the "Black Dwarf") became one of the most prominent church leaders in the world at that time. Alexandria was the most important center of trade in the whole Roman Empire and was also a center of ideas and education, with its famous "Catechetical School," where Clement and Origen taught earlier. One example of the power that came with this position was his role in the distribution of grain which came as Constantine sent imperial subsidies to all Egyptian churches through Alexandria. Athanasius was not just a local bishop and not just a metropolitan bishop; he was even more because of the importance of his city.

BACKGROUND: ARIAN CONTROVERSY

The career of Athanasius as a church leader is tied inextricably to the Arian controversy and we must do a quick review to provide a good background for understanding this man and his leadership. Arius was born in Libya and trained under Lucian of Antioch who was influenced by the heretic bishop Paul of Samosata. Paul taught what was tagged the adoptionist heresy by which Jesus was not in any sense divine, but was a human prophet adopted by God into a special relationship. Lucian emphasized the humanity of Jesus and tried to explain the incarnation of God in Christ without making Jesus God. Adoptionism was condemned by the Synod of Antioch in 268. Also in Arius's background was Origen who affirmed an equality of the Logos with God, but also affirmed a subordination of the Logos to God. He was quoted by both sides of this controversy.

Deeper in both Arius's background and those who opposed him (like Alexander and Athanasius) lay Greek philosophy. It assumed that divinity required immutability. In other words, to be divine means to be incapable of change. Absolute static perfection, immutability and impassibility became chief attributes of God. Arius and his followers argued that if Jesus is the incarnation of the Logos (John 1:1ff) and if the Logos is divine in the same sense that God the Father is divine, then God's nature would be changed and God would have suffered in him. But that is impossible, so the Logos who became incarnate in Jesus must not be fully divine. He must be a great and exalted creature, but not divine.

ARIUS VS. ALEXANDER

Arius arrived in Alexandria to be ordained as priest in 311. He had such a charismatic personality that when he openly challenged Bishop Alexander, many Alexandrians followed him. He charged Alexander with denying the humanity of Jesus and reverting to the Sabellian heresy. It was also called Monarchianism and Modalism and reduced the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to mere names or aspects of the one divine person, God. When Arius persisted in this, Alexander called a synod to meet in 318. Arius rallied his followers and Alexander's supporters marched against them. It may be hard to imagine, but rioting between Christians broke out in the streets over a point of theology! At the synod about 100 bishops condemned Arius and deposed him as presbyter. They accused him of repeating the adoptionist heresy in a slightly more sophisticated form, which denied the deity of Jesus Christ and rejected the Trinity. If God has not united with humanity, they reasoned, we cannot be saved, so our very salvation is at stake.

Arius left Alexandria, but fled to his old friend Eusebius of Nicomedia (not Eusebius of Caesarea), who was an influential bishop. Eusebius began a campaign with letters to bishops who were not at the synod in 318. Alexander responded with his *Deposition of Arius* to explain his position. His summary reads like a description of the doctrine of today's Jehovah's Witnesses. The two key elements of Arius's thought are 1) God is by nature not a creature and if the Logos became human in Jesus, he must be a creature, and 2) salvation is a process of grace and free will and if Jesus communicates salvation to us, it must be by grace and free will in a manner we can emulate, but if he was God, then salvation is not something he could accomplish. Much seemed to hinge on the apostolic word "begotten" (in Greek, *gennetos*, e.g., in John 3:16). If Jesus was begotten, he must have had a beginning in time and not be God who is eternal and unbegotten. More subtle than adoptionism, Arianism denied the deity of Jesus, but affirmed his preexistence and ranked him higher than any other creature. Still Jesus was not equal with God. In Arius's thinking, Christ was neither fully God nor fully man, but something in between.

WHY SO IMPORTANT?

Was this an important issue? Yes, the deity of Jesus Christ is the linchpin of the gospel. No more important issue could be raised for Christian theology to settle. Pause to reflect on some of what we learned in what we called Biblical Literacy. In the history of the early church, incipient Gnosticism was the background of much of the New Testament. It denied either the divinity or the humanity of Jesus. If he was divine, he could not be human, and if he was human, he could not be divine. Docetism, one branch of Gnosticism, said Jesus just seemed to be human, but he was not really human. The apostle John replied, "Every spirit that

acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.” (I John 4:2-3) In a way, you could say Arianism simply shadows earlier heresies as it struggled with what may seem impossible, the perfect combination of both divinity and humanity in one person, Jesus Christ.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Such a heated controversy developed that Constantine, the “Christian” Roman emperor heard of it and decided to intervene and try to resolve the conflict. He ordered all bishops throughout the empire to attend what became the first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325. He even paid all the expenses for this two-month meeting with 318 bishops present. There is no doubt that Constantine’s main concern was political. He wanted to quell this divisive issue which threatened the church and his empire. He showed up in his royal robes and ascended a throne, ostensibly as “*the* bishop of the bishops.”

The variety of issues discussed in this council ranged from how to date Easter to whether to ordain eunuchs as priests, but everything was secondary to settling the Arian controversy. Only 28 of 318 were clearly Arians from the outset. Arius was not a bishop, so not present, but he was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia and the bishop of Nicaea, Theognis. A riot even broke out at one point and was stopped by the emperor, but eventually what is now known as the Nicene Creed was produced. Constantine himself, probably prompted by his personal chaplain Hosius, proposed a key word for the creed, *homoousios*, which literally means “one substance.” When applied to Jesus, it meant he is “consubstantial” with the Father, of the same substance. It was accepted by the bishops to mean the Father and Son share all the same essential attributes of deity.

Here is the creed, without the lines which were added in 381 at the Council of Constantinople:

We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And, in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead; And in the Holy Spirit. Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was

made out of nothing; or who maintain that He is of another hypotasis or another substance, or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, the Catholic Church anathematizes.

Notice the phrase “begotten not made” in the fourth line, an example of wording Alexander insisted was necessary to eliminate Arianism. The point? Jesus was not created! And, with this creed, Arius was condemned as a heretic. Only Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis refused to sign it, putting their leading positions in the East at risk. They were sent into exile, but later restored in 328 and their followers became known as Eusebians.

AFTER THE COUNCIL

What may surprise you is that despite all this, council and creed, Arianism raged on for 53 more years before the church finally and definitely condemned it in 381. It is really amazing that during those years, there were times when Arianism regained such momentum that it seemed about to become the orthodox doctrine. Were it not for a little man named Athanasius, it might have. He had assisted Alexander in his key role at Nicaea and after becoming bishop in 328, he devoted incredible energy and devotion to fighting in defense of the Nicene Creed and its key terminology for the rest of his life.

Soon after the council, opposition began to rise over the special word *homoousios* in the creed. To a large party of disciples of Origen, the word seemed Sabellian. Two other prominent defenders of the Nicene faith (orthodoxy) were Marcellus of Ancyra and Eustathius of Antioch and both were, with good cause, accused of Sabellianism. It was Athanasius who emerged as the key figure and the reason that the Nicene theology ultimately conquered. Later, after the son of Constantine, Constantius, was in full control of the empire in 353, the word *homoousios* became even more of an issue. Constantius wanted that word replaced with *homoiousios*, which means of a similar substance (not the same substance). Those who lobbied for such a change became known as “semi-Arians” and they became quite influential around 360. Athanasius condemned it as rank heresy.

What a difference one letter can make in the meaning of a message! Perhaps you’ve heard the story Roger Olson tells from Millard Erickson. A wealthy woman supposedly traveled to Europe and found an expensive necklace she wanted to buy. She telegraphed her husband back home to tell him the price. He replied, “No! Price too high,” but the telegraph operator dropped the exclamation mark. She bought the necklace and caused financial ruin and the end of the marriage. It’s probably apocryphal, but it illustrates the importance of something small, like the “i” in *homoiousios*.

EMPERORS AND ENEMIES

It did not help Athanasius's cause that Constantine began to switch sides after the council, because of pressure from secret sympathizers to Arius. He tried to get Athanasius to accept Arius back as a presbyter, but he refused so he was exiled. While away in Germany, the Alexandrian church refused to replace him and as he traveled, he spread the influence of the Nicene faith. Also while away, Arius died; some think he was poisoned by enemies. A few months later Constantine died in 337. Olson wrote that "Constantine lived as a pagan and died as an Arian. Hardly an admirable *curriculum vitae* for 'the first Christian emperor'!" Constantine's son Constantius allowed Athanasius to return, but not for long. He had to flee again in 339 to Rome.

Repeatedly during these years, the enemies of Athanasius trumped up charges against him and appealed to a synod of like-minded church leaders to condemn him. They also appealed to the emperor to draw his power into the mix. At various times he was charged with abuse of power, financial improprieties and even murder. Of course, he was cleared of murder when the named victim showed up physically unharmed and of the other charges eventually, but only after great opposition and interruption to his work. On one occasion in 356, Roman troops invaded while he led worship in order to arrest him and possibly kill him. His congregation protected him and he slipped away to live with the desert monks for 6 years. It was during this period that he likely wrote his *Apology to Constantius*, *Apology for His Flight*, *Letter to the Monks*, and *History of the Arians*.

WRITINGS

Athanasius's main treatises were *On the Incarnation of the Word* and *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, the latter of which was probably written between 356 and 360. In the first of these, which is still in print and considered a classic, he tried to make clear that the Son is begotten and not made. He emphasized the necessity of a real incarnation of God in humanity for human salvation and stressed the deity of Jesus. The latter is obviously a polemical work, attempting to deconstruct radical subordinationism. In other words, the Son is not subordinate to the Father. Two other writings, *The Life of Anthony* (the basis for last week's lesson) and *Against the Heathen*, were less important. W.H.C. Frend stated that "as a pamphleteer, he outdid the emperor Julian himself."

LAST YEARS

Constantius died in 361 and was succeeded by Julian. His accession seemed to prompt a pagan outbreak against the dominant Arian faction in Alexandria and the bishop replacing Athanasius was imprisoned and murdered. An edict from Julian

permitted exiled bishops to return and Athanasius came back again, only to be expelled by Julian who did not intend to permit him to return. He returned when Julian was quickly replaced by Jovian. The accession of Valens after Jovian gave fresh life to the Arian party and meant another expulsion for Athanasius. In 364 he hid for 4 months in his father's tomb, but eventually Valens allowed him to return to his see in order to prevent a popular outbreak.

Athanasius was able to call a council at Alexandria in 362 which prepared the way for one in Constantinople in 381. The bishops reaffirmed *homoousios* and specifically rejected both the semi-Arian *homoiousios* and Sabellianism as heresies. Athanasius proposed a statement and the bishops accepted it, that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were three distinct but not separate *hypostases* of the one God. This was intended to contradict Sabellian modalism and make clear that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though one substance, are not the same identical person or subsistence. With this, they seemed to agree wholeheartedly with Tertullian's trinitarian formula, *una substantia, tres personae*.

DEATH AND TRIBUTE

Athanasius died in 373, after spending the last seven years of his life in relative peace and quiet. He died in his own bed, surrounded by those who loved and admired him. Justo Gonzalez seems to express the consensus of most Christian theologians when he says that "Athanasius was without doubt the most remarkable bishop ever to occupy the ancient see of Alexandria, and . . . he was as well the greatest theologian of his time." Frances Young wrote that he "was a bit of a tyrant, and violent acts were committed in his name," but then she places him on a pedestal as "the pillar of the church; he cleansed the temple in imitation of Christ, not with whips but with persuasive arguments."

SUMMARY OF HIS THEOLOGY

In summary of Athanasius's theology, Roger Olson suggests three main points.

1) Metaphysical -- If the Father is God, then the Son must be God as well, for otherwise the Father would have changed in becoming Father. If there was a time when the Son was not, then there was a time when the Father was not a father. For him, the Son did not change in entering human existence in Jesus Christ, so he remained immutable and truly divine.

2) Soteriological -- If the Son of God is not truly God in the same sense as the Father, then salvation as re-creation is impossible. Only God can undo sin and bring a creature to share in the divine nature. Unless Jesus was both truly God and truly human, salvation simply could not occur. His troubling legacy is the

question of how Jesus could accomplish the work of salvation if only his body or flesh was truly human and the divine Logos remained immutable, impassible and outside of the body throughout life and death.

3) Revelational -- For Jesus to be the true revelation of God and not merely another image or prophet as so many already were, he had to be God. Only God can truly reveal God. Jesus is the self-revelation of God and not merely another messenger.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. All of us will receive criticism, much of it behind our backs. We should evaluate it carefully when we hear it, learn from it and make proper changes to honor God. We should always respond, even to unbiased criticism and false accusations, with patience. When we are certain the criticism is coming from the evil one to distract us from doing the right things, we must press on. Jesus is our example.
2. Perseverance in face of opposition can take many forms. It may mean physical retreat for safety of the body for a time, but we should stay alert for God's call which may put us back at risk again. Endurance and persistence are marks of the Christian disciple.
3. Theology does matter! It does make a difference whether we believe Jesus was all together divine and all together human. The New Testament writers focused on the message of Jesus and about Jesus. Paul and others had no tolerance for those who would pervert the basic gospel message that Jesus was the Son of God, fully God and fully man, and able, because of that to be the atonement for the sins of all who put their faith in him.