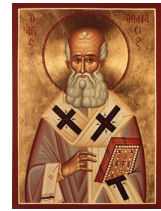


HEROES OF THE CHURCH: Athanasius



I. Praise for Athanasius

"[He was to] the unfortunate their consolation, the hoary-headed their staff, youths their instructor, the poor their resource, the wealthy their steward. Even the widows will... praise their protector, even the orphans their father, even the poor their benefactor, strangers their entertainer, brethren the man of brotherly love, the sick their physician." - Gregory of Nazianzus, 4th century

"In the whole of our minute knowledge of his life there is a total lack of self-interest. ...Almost unconscious of his own power... Courage, self-sacrifice, steadiness of purpose, versatility and resourcefulness, width of ready sympathy, were all harmonized by deep reverence and the discipline of a single-minded lover of Christ " - Archibald Robertson *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters in NPNF*

II. Life of Athanasius (died 373 AD)

- A. Born in Egypt, member of the lower class
- B. Served as secretary to Alexander, bishop of Alexandria
- C. Highly esteemed the desert monks; wrote biography of an early Egyptian monk, *Life of Antony*
- D. Believed the incarnation lay at the core of the Christian message
- E. Became bishop of Alexandria in 328 against his wishes

III. The Arian Controversy

- A. Constantine the Great (285-337 AD) takes Rome and reunifies the Roman Empire
- B. "Converts" to Christianity and outlaws persecution of Christianity with Edict of Milan (313 AD)
- C. Arius, elder in Alexandria, teaches Christ was created by God; excommunicated by Alexander in 321.
- D. Arius gains more Eastern support, risks dividing the empire.

Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria	Arius, an elder of Alexandria
Jesus is <u>eternally divine</u> with the Father	Jesus is the <u>highest and first creation</u> ("there was a time when he was not")
Accused Arius of denying Christ's divinity (right!)	Accused Alexander of believing in two gods (wrong!)
Son is of 'one substance' (<i>homoousios</i>) with the Father	Son is of 'similar substance' (<i>homoiousios</i>) with the Father

IV. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and Athanasius

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things, visible and invisible

And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father before all worlds, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation came down from heaven, descended 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. But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten he was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance or essence, or

- A. Over time, Constantine and his sons who succeeded fell to Arianism and began persecuting Alexander's successor, Athanasius.

V. Athanasius Against the World – “Athanasius Contra Mundum”

- A. Arian leaders took steps to do away with Athanasius, their most formidable foe.
 B. Athanasius was driven from his church into exile 5 times!
 C. Athanasius finds refuge with desert monks

VI. Lessons from Athanasius (see J. Piper's “Contending for Our All: The Life and Ministry of Athanasius”)

- A. To contend for truth means everything for the Christian

“Wherefore...considering that *this struggle is for our all*...let us also make it our earnest care and aim to guard what we have received.” - Athanasius in letter “To the Bishops of Egypt” during 3rd exile

“I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” (Jude 1:3)

- B. A truth worth fighting over is a truth worth rejoicing over

“Let us be *courageous* and *rejoice* always. . . . Let us consider and lay to heart that while the Lord is with us, our foes can do us no hurt. . . . But if they see us *rejoicing in the Lord*, contemplating the bliss of the future, mindful of the Lord, deeming all things in His hand . . . —they are discomfited and turned backwards.” - Athanasius of Alexandria

- C. Loving Christ involves loving propositional truths about Christ

1. Proposition = a statement describing some reality that is either true or false (e.g., “A-Rod took steroids,” “Jesus physically rose from the dead,” “There is no absolute truth”)
2. What about “Christ unites. Doctrine divides”? “No Creed but Christ”?

- D. It is important to use non-Bible vocabulary to describe Biblical truth

1. Biblical statements can be used to deny the Bible (e.g., “Jesus is the Son of God” for Arians)

“Theologians of the Christian Church were slowly driven to a realization that the deepest questions which face Christianity cannot be answered in purely biblical language, *because the questions are about the meaning of biblical language itself.*” - R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, xxi.

“...impiety boiled over when the Arians began most wickedly to hate and curse the word homoousios... I was long ago made aware, and, indeed, on more than one occasion, that those who persistently quarrel over words nurse a secret poison; and, therefore, that it is more expedient to challenge them deliberately, than to speak more obscurely to please them.”

-John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.4-5