

Contending for Our All

The Life and Ministry of Athanasius

2005 Bethlehem Conference for Pastors

 [Listen](#)

February 1, 2005

By John Piper

Athanasius was born in AD 298 in Egypt and became the bishop of Alexandria on June 8, 328 at the age of 30. The people of Egypt viewed him as their bishop until he died on May 2, 373 at the age of 75.¹ I say he was “viewed” by the people as their bishop during these years because Athanasius was driven out of his church and office five times by the powers of the Roman empire. Seventeen of his 45 years as bishop were spent in exile. But the people never acknowledged the validity of the other bishops sent to take his place. He was always bishop in exile as far as his flock was concerned.

Gregory of Nazianzus (330-389) gave a memorial sermon in Constantinople seven years after the death of Athanasius and described the affections of the Egyptian people for their bishop. At the end of the third exile from his homeland, when Athanasius returned in 364 after six years away, Gregory tells us:

amid such delight of the people of the city and of almost all Egypt, that they ran together from every side, from the furthest limits of the country, simply to hear the voice of Athanasius, or feast their eyes upon the sight of him.²

From their standpoint none of the foreign appointments to the office of bishop in Alexandria for 45 years was valid but one, Athanasius. This devotion was owing to the kind of man Athanasius was. Gregory remembered him like this:

Let one praise him in his fastings and prayers . . . , another his unweariedness and zeal for vigils and psalmody, another his patronage of the needy, another his dauntlessness towards the powerful, or his condescension to the lowly. . . . [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.³

One of the things that makes that kind of praise from a contemporary the more credible is that, unlike many ancient saints, Athanasius is not recorded as having done any miracles. Archibald Robertson, who edited Athanasius' works for the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, said, "He is . . . surrounded by an atmosphere of truth. Not a single miracle of any kind is related of him. . . . The saintly reputation of Athanasius rested on his life and character alone, without the aid of any reputation for miraculous power."⁴ Then he goes on with his own praise of Athanasius:

In the whole of our minute knowledge of his life there is a total lack of self-interest. The glory of God and the welfare of the Church absorbed him fully at all times. . . . The Emperors recognized him as a political force of the first order . . . but on no occasion does he yield to the temptation of using the arm of flesh. Almost unconscious of his own power . . . his humility is the more real for never being conspicuously paraded. . . . 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.⁵

Athanasius—The Father of Orthodoxy—*Contra Mundum*

This single-minded love for Jesus Christ expressed itself in a lifelong battle to explain and defend Christ's deity and to worship Christ as Lord and God. This is what Athanasius is best known for. There were times when it seemed the whole world had abandoned orthodoxy. That is why the phrase "*Athanasius contra Mundum*" (against the world) arose. He stood steadfast against overwhelming defection from orthodoxy, and only at the end of his life could he see the dawn of triumph.

But in a sense it is anachronistic to use the word "orthodoxy" this way—to say that the world *abandoned* orthodoxy. Was it really there to abandon? Well, biblical truth is always there to abandon. But "orthodoxy" generally refers to a historic, or official, or universally held view of what is true to Scripture. Was *that* there to abandon? The answer is suggested in the other

great name given to Athanasius, namely, “Father of Orthodoxy.”⁶ That phrase seems to say that orthodoxy came to be because of Athanasius. And in one sense that is true in regard to the Trinity. The relationships between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit had not received formal statement in any representative council before the time of Athanasius.

R.P.C. Hanson wrote, “There was not as yet any orthodox doctrine [of the Trinity], for if there had been, the controversy could hardly have lasted sixty years before resolution.”⁷ The sixty years he has in mind is the time between the Council of Nicaea in 325 and the Council of Constantinople⁸ in 381. The Council of Nicaea established the battle lines and staked out the deity of Christ, and the Council of Constantinople confirmed and refined the Nicene Creed. The sixty years between was war over whether the Nicene formulation would stand and become “orthodoxy.”

This was the war Athanasius fought for 45 years. It lasted all his life, but the orthodox outcome was just over the horizon when he died in 373. And under God this outcome was owing to the courage and consistency and work and writing of Athanasius. No one comes close to his influence in the cause of biblical truth during his lifetime.⁹

The war was sparked in 319. A deacon in Alexandria named Arius, who had been born in 256 in Libya, presented a letter to bishop Alexander arguing that if the Son of God were truly a Son, he must have had a beginning. There must have been a time, therefore, when he did not exist. Most of what we know of Arius is from others. All we have from Arius’ own pen is three letters, a fragment of a fourth and scrap of a song, the *Thalia*.¹⁰ In fact he proved to be a very minor character in the controversy he unleashed. He died in 336.¹¹

Athanasius was a little over 20 when the controversy broke out—over 40 years younger than Arius (a lesson in how the younger generation may be more biblically faithful than the older). Athanasius was in the service of Alexander the bishop of Alexandria. Almost nothing is known of his youth. Gregory of Nazianzus celebrates the fact that Athanasius was brought up mainly in biblical training, not philosophical.

He was brought up, from the first, in religious habits and practices, after a brief study of literature and philosophy, so that he might not be utterly unskilled in such subjects, or ignorant of matters which he had determined to despise. For his generous and eager soul could not brook being occupied in

vanities, like unskilled athletes, who beat the air instead of their antagonists and lose the prize. From meditating on every book of the Old and New Testament, with a depth such as none else has applied even to one of them, he grew rich in contemplation, rich in splendor of life.¹²

This was the service he was to render for 45 years: biblical blow after blow against the fortresses of the Arian heresy. Robert Letham confirms the outcome of Gregory's observation: "Athanasius' contribution to the theology of the Trinity can scarcely be overestimated. . . . He turned discussion away from philosophical speculation and back to a biblical and theological basis."¹³

In 321 a synod was convened in Alexandria, and Arius was deposed from his office and his views declared heresy. Athanasius at age 23 wrote the deposition for Alexander. This was to be his role now for the next 52 years—writing to declare the glories of the incarnate Son of God. The deposition of Arius unleashed 60 years of ecclesiastical and empire-wide political conflict.

Eusebius of Nicomedia (the modern Izmit in Turkey) took up Arius' theology and became "the head and center of the Arian cause."¹⁴ For the next 40 years the Eastern part of the Empire was mainly Arian. That is true in spite of the fact that the great Council of Nicaea came down for the full deity of Christ. Hundreds of bishops signed it and then twisted the language to say that Arianism really fit in the wording of Nicaea.

The Council of Nicaea (325)

Emperor Constantine had seen the sign of the cross during a decisive battle 13 years earlier and was converted to Christianity. He was concerned with the deeply divisive effect of the Arian controversy in the kingdom. Bishops had tremendous influence, and when they were at odds (as they were over this issue), it made the unity and harmony of the empire more fragile. Constantine's Christian advisor, Hosius, had tried to mediate the Arian conflict in Alexandria, but failed. So in 325 Constantine called the Council at Nicaea across the Bosphorus from Constantinople (today's Istanbul). He pulled together, according to tradition,¹⁵ 318 bishops plus other attenders like Arius and Athanasius, neither of whom was a bishop. He fixed the order of the council and enforced its decisions with civil penalties.

The Council lasted from May through August and ended with a statement of orthodoxy that has defined Christianity to this day. The wording today

which we call the Nicene Creed is really the slightly altered language of the Council of Constantinople in 381. But the decisive work was done in 325. The anathema at the end of the Creed of Nicaea shows most clearly what the issue was. The original Creed of Nicaea was written in Greek, but here it is in English:

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 of the Father the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father (*ek tēs ousias tou patros*), God of God (*theon ek theou*), and Light of Light (*kai phōs ek phōtos*), very God of very God (*theon alēthinon ek thou alēthinou*), begotten, not made (*gennēthenta ou poinēthenta*), being of one substance with the Father (*homoousion tō patri*); by whom all things were made in heaven and on earth; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; from thence he cometh to judge the quick and the dead.

And in the Holy Ghost.

And those who say: there was a time when he was not; and: he was not before he was made; and: he was made out of nothing, or out of another substance or thing (*ē ex heteras hypostaseōs ē ousias*), or the Son of God is created, or changeable, or alterable; they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.

The key phrase, *homoousion tō patri* (one being with the Father), was added late on the insistence of the emperor. It made the issue crystal clear. The Son of God could not have been created, because he did not have merely a *similar* being to the Father (*homoiusion tō patri*), but was of the very being of the Father (*homoousion tō patri*). He was not brought into existence with similar being, but was eternally one with divine being.

Astonishingly all but two bishops signed the creed, some, as Robertson says, “with total duplicity.”¹⁶ Secundus and Theonas, along with Arius, were sent into exile. Eusebius squeaked by with what he called a “mental reservation,” and within four years would persuade the emperor that Arius held substantially to the Creed of Nicaea—which was pure politics.¹⁷

When Athanasius' mentor, Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria died, April 17, 328, three years after the Council of Nicaea, the mantle of Egypt and of the cause of orthodoxy fell to Athanasius. He was ordained as Bishop June 8 that year. This see was the second in Christendom after Rome. It had jurisdiction over all the bishops of Egypt and Libya. Under Athanasius Arianism died out entirely in Egypt. And from Egypt Athanasius wielded his Empire-wide influence in the battle for the deity of Christ.

Athanasius, the Desert Monks, and Antony

We've passed over one crucial and decisive event in his role as Alexander's assistant. He made a visit with Alexander to the Thebaid, the desert district in upper Egypt where he came in contact with the early desert monks, the ascetics who lived lives of celibacy, solitude, discipline, prayer, simplicity, and service of the poor. Athanasius was deeply affected by this visit and "set on fire by the holiness of their lives."¹⁸

For the rest of his life there was an unusual bond between the city bishop and the desert monks. They held him in awe, and he admired them and blessed them. Robinson says, "He treats . . . the monks as equals or superiors, begging them to correct and alter anything amiss in his writings."¹⁹ The relationship became a matter of life and death because when Athanasius was driven out of his office by the forces of the empire, there was one group he knew he could trust with his protection. "The solitaries of the desert, to a man, would be faithful to Athanasius during the years of trial."²⁰

One in particular captured Athanasius' attention, affection, and admiration: Antony. He was born in 251. At 20 he sold all his possessions and moved to the desert but served the poor nearby. At 35 he withdrew for 20 years into total solitude and no one knew if he were alive or dead. Then at 55 he returned and ministered to the monks and the people who came to him for prayer and counsel in the desert until he died at 105. Athanasius wrote the biography of Antony. This was Athanasius' ideal, the combination of solitude and compassion on the poor based on rock-solid orthodoxy.

Antony made one rare appearance in Alexandria that we hear about, namely, to dispel the rumor that the desert monks were on the Arian side. He denounced Arianism "as the worst of heresies, and was solemnly escorted out of town by the bishop [Athanasius] in person."²¹ Orthodoxy, rigorous asceticism for the sake of purity, and compassion on the poor—these were the virtues Athanasius loved in Antony and the monks. And he

believed their lives were just as strong an argument for orthodox Christology as his books were.

Now these arguments of ours do not amount merely to words, but have in actual experience a witness to their truth. 2. For let him that will, go up and behold the proof of virtue in the virgins of Christ and in the young men that practice holy chastity, and the assurance of immortality in so great a band of His martyrs.²²

Athanasius' biography of Antony is significant for another reason. It was translated from Greek to Latin, and found its way into the hands of Ponticianus, a friend of St. Augustine, some time after 380. Ponticianus told St. Augustine the story of Antony. As he spoke, Augustine says, he was "violently overcome by a fearful sense of shame." This led to Augustine's final struggles in the garden in Milan and his eventual conversion. "Athanasius' purpose in writing Antony's *Life* had gained its greatest success: Augustine would become the greatest theologian in the church for the next 1,000 years."²³

Athanasius Embroiled in Controversy

Within two years after taking office as Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius was embroiled in controversy. Most of the Bishops who had signed the Creed of Nicaea did not like calling people heretics who disagreed. They wanted to get rid of Athanasius and his passion for this cause. Athanasius was accused of levying illegal taxes, that he was too young when ordained, that he used magic, that he subsidized treasonable persons, and more. Constantine did not like his hardline either and called him to Rome in 331. The facts acquitted him, but his defense of the Nicene formulation of Christ's deity was increasingly in the minority.

The First Exile of Athanasius (336–338)

Finally his enemies resorted to intrigue. They bribed Arsenius, a Bishop in Hypsele (on the Nile in southern Egypt), to disappear so that the rumor could be started that Athanasius had arranged his murder and cut off one of his hands for magic. Constantine was told and asked for a trial to be held in Tyre. Meanwhile one of Athanasius' trusted deacons had tracked Arsenius to a monastery in hiding and taken him captive and brought him secretly to Tyre.

At the trial the accusers produced a human hand to confirm the indictment.

But Athanasius was ready. “Did you know Arsenius personally?” he asked. “Yes” is the eager reply from many sides. So Arsenius is ushered in alive, wrapped up in a cloak. They were surprised but demanded an explanation of how he had lost his hand. Athanasius turned up his cloak and showed that one hand at least was there. There was a moment of suspense, artfully managed by Athanasius. Then the other hand was exposed, and the accusers were requested to point out whence the third had been cut off.²⁴

As clear as this seemed, Athanasius was condemned at this Council and fled in a boat with four bishops and came to Constantinople. The accusers threw aside the Arsenius indictment and created another with false witnesses: Athanasius had tried to starve Constantine’s capitol by preventing wheat shipments from Alexandria. Constantine ordered Athanasius banished to Treveri (Trier, near today’s Luxemborg). Athanasius left for exile on February 8, 336.

Constantine died the next year, and the empire was divided among his three sons, Constantius (taking the East), Constans (taking Italy and Illyricum), and Constantine II (taking the Gauls and Africa). One of Constantine II’s first acts was to restore Athanasius to his office in Alexandria (November 23, 327).

The Second Exile of Athanasius (339–346)

Two years later Eusebius the leader of the Arians had persuaded Constantius to get rid of Athanasius. He took the ecclesiastical power into his hands, declared Gregory the bishop of Alexandria, and put his own secular governor in charge, and used force to take the bishop’s quarters and the churches. Athanasius was forced to leave the city to spare more bloodshed.

This was the beginning his second exile—the longest time away from his flock. He left on April 16, 339 and didn’t return until October 21, 346, over seven years in exile. Constantine’s other two sons supported Athanasius and called the Council of Sardica (now Sophia in Bulgaria) which vindicated him in August of 343. But it took three years till the political factors fell into place for his return. Constans threatened Constantius with war if he did not reinstate Athanasius. In the meantime the Arians had fallen out of favor with Constantius and the substitute bishop Gregory had died. So Athanasius was restored to his people with rejoicing after seven years away (346).

During this season of peace Alexandria and the surrounding districts

seemed to have experienced something of a revival, with a strong ascetic flavor. Athanasius wrote (in *History of the Arians*):

How many unmarried women, who were before ready to enter upon marriage, now remained virgins to Christ! How many young men, seeing the examples of others, embraced the monastic life! . . . How many widows and how many orphans, who were before hungry and naked, now through the great zeal of the people, were no longer hungry, and went forth clothed! In a word, so great was their emulation in virtue, that you would have thought every family and every house a Church, by reason of the goodness of its inmates, and the prayers which were offered to God. And in the Churches there was a profound and wonderful peace, while the Bishops wrote from all quarters, and received from Athanasius the customary letters of peace.²⁵

The Third Exile of Athanasius (356–362)

On January 18, 350 Constantius was murdered. This freed Constantius to solidify his power and to oppose Athanasius and the Nicene theology unopposed. The people of Alexandria held off one armed assault on the city by the Emperor's Secretary Diogenes in 355, but the next year Constantius sent Syrianus his military commander

On Thursday night, Feb. 8 [356], Athanasius was presiding at a crowded service of preparation for a Communion on the following morning . . . in the Church of Theonas . . . the largest in the city. Suddenly the church was surrounded and the doors broken in, and just after midnight Syrianus . . . “entered with an infinite force of soldiers.” Athanasius . . . calmly took his seat upon the throne (in the recess of the apse), and ordered the deacon to begin the 136th psalm, the people responding at each verse “for His mercy endureth for ever.” Meanwhile the soldiers crowded up to the chancel, and in spite of entreaties the bishop refused to escape until the congregation were in safety. He ordered the prayers to proceed, and only at the last moment a crowd of monks and clergy seized the Archbishop and managed to convey him in the confusion out of the church in a half-fainting state . . . but

thankful that he had been able to secure the escape of his people before his own (p. 264). From that moment Athanasius was lost to public view for “six years and fourteen days.”²⁶

He had spared his people briefly. But in June the hostility against the supporters of Athanasius were attacked with a viciousness unlike anything before.

In the early hours of Thursday, June 13, [356] after a service (which had begun overnight . . .), just as all the congregation except a few women had left, the church of Theonas was stormed and violences perpetrated which left far behind anything that Syrianus had done. Women were murdered, the church wrecked and polluted with the very worst orgies of heathenism, houses and even tombs were ransacked throughout the city and suburbs on pretence of “seeking for Athanasius.”²⁷

The secular authorities forced a new bishop on the people. It proved to be a disaster. Bishop George instigated violent persecution of any who sided with Athanasius and did not support the Arian cause. Many were killed and others banished. At last in December 361, the people’s patience was exhausted and George was lynched.

Such was the mingling of secular and ecclesiastical forces in those days. But at the darkest hour for Athanasius and for the cause of orthodoxy, the dawn was about to break. This third exile proved to be the most fruitful. Protected by an absolutely faithful army of desert monks, no one could find him, and he produced most of his most significant written works. *The Arian History*, the four *Tracts Against Arians*, the four dogmatic letters *To Serapion*, and *On the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia*.

This last work was a response to the two councils called by Constantius in 359 to settle the conflict between the Arians and the supporters of Nicea. 400 bishops assembled in Ariminum in Italy, and 160 assembled in Seleucia in Asian Minor. The aim was a unifying creed for Christianity. The upshot of these councils was a compromise, sometimes called semi-Arian, that says the Son is “like the Father” but does not say how. It basically avoids the issue. For Athanasius this was totally unacceptable. The nature of Christ was too important to obscure with vague language.

It is one of the typical ironies of God’s providence that the triumph over

Arianism would happen largely through the ministry of a fugitive living and writing within inches of his death. Here is the way Archibald Robertson described the triumph of the third exile:

The third exile of Athanasius marks the summit of his achievement. Its commencement is the triumph, its conclusion the collapse of Arianism. It is true that after the death of Constantius [November 3, 361] the battle went on with variations of fortune for twenty years, mostly under the reign of an ardently Arian Emperor [Valens] (364–378). But by 362 the utter lack of inner coherence in the Arian ranks was manifest to all; the issue of the fight might be postponed by circumstances but could not be in doubt. The break-up of the Arian power was due to its own lack of reality: as soon as it had a free hand, it began to go to pieces. But the watchful eye of Athanasius followed each step in the process from his hiding-place, and the event was greatly due to his powerful personality and ready pen, knowing whom to overwhelm and whom to conciliate, where to strike and where to spare. This period then of forced abstention from affairs was the most stirring in spiritual and literary activity in the whole life of Athanasius. It produced more than half of . . . of his entire extant works. . . . Let it be noted once for all how completely the amazing power wielded by the wandering fugitive was based upon the devoted fidelity of Egypt to its pastor. Towns and villages, deserts and monasteries, the very tombs were scoured by the Imperial inquisitors in the search for Athanasius; but all in vain; not once do we hear of any suspicion of betrayal. The work of the golden decade [the period of revival before the third exile] was bearing its fruit.²⁸

Athanasius returned to Alexandria on February 21, 362 by another irony. The new and openly pagan emperor, Julian, reversed all the banishments of Constantius. The favor only lasted eight months. But during these months Athanasius called a Synod at Alexandria and gave a more formal consolidation and reconciliation to the gains he had accomplished in the last six years of his writing. It had a tremendous impact on the growing consensus of the church in favor of Nicene orthodoxy. Jerome says that this synod “snatched the whole world from the jaws of Satan.”²⁹ And Robertson calls it “the crown of the career of Athanasius.”³⁰ The rallying

point that it gave for orthodoxy in 362 enabled the reuniting forces of Eastern Christendom to withstand the political Arianism under emperor Valens who reigned from 364 to 378.

The Fourth Exile of Athanasius (362–364)

But in October of 362 Athanasius was again driven from his office by the emperor's wrath when he realized that Athanasius took his Christianity seriously enough to reject the pagan gods. Again he spent the next 15 months among the desert monks. The story goes that he was freed to return by a prophecy by one of the monks that Julian had that very day fallen in battle in Persia. It proved true, and Athanasius was restored to his ministry on February 14, 364.

The Fifth Exile of Athanasius (365–366)

A year and a half later the emperor Valens gave order that all the bishops expelled under Julian should be removed by the civil authorities. On October 5, 365 the Roman Prefect broke into the church and searched the apartments of the clergy, but the 67-year-old Athanasius had been warned and escaped one last time—his fifth exile. It was short because a dangerous revolt led by Procopius had to be put down by Valens and it was not time to allow popular discontent to smolder in Alexandria. Athanasius was brought back February 1, 366.

The Last Years of Athanasius' Life

He spent the last years of his life fulfilling his calling as a pastor and overseer of pastors. He carried on extensive correspondence and gave great encouragement and support to the cause of orthodoxy around the empire. He died on May 2, 373.

Lessons from Athanasius's Life and Ministry

I turn now to the lessons that we may learn from this remarkable life and ministry.

1. Defending and explaining doctrine is for the sake of the gospel of Christ's glory and our everlasting joy.

When Athanasius was driven into his third exile, he wrote an open letter called "To the Bishops of Egypt." In it he referred to the martyrs for who had died defending the deity of Christ. Then he said, "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."³¹ "The Arian controversy was to him no battle for ecclesiastical power, nor for theological triumph. It

was a religious crisis involving the reality of revelation and redemption.”³²
He said in essence, “We are contending for our all.”

What was at stake was everything. Oh, how thankful we should be that Athanasius saw things so clearly. The incarnation has to do with the gospel. It has to do with salvation. It has to do with whether there is any hope or life. The creed that Athanasius helped craft, and that he embraced and spent his life defending and explaining, says this plainly:

We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father . . . very God of very God, . . . being of one substance with the Father . . . *who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate* and was made man; he suffered, and the third day he rose again . . .

In other words, the deity of the incarnate Son of God is essential because the gospel of our salvation is essential. There is no salvation if Jesus Christ was not God. It’s true that Athanasius deals with salvation mainly in terms of restoring the image of God in man by Christ’s taking human nature into union with the divine nature. But Athanasius does not emphasize this to the exclusion of the death of Christ and the atonement. You hear both in this passage from *On The Incarnation of the Word*:

For the Word, perceiving that no otherwise could the corruption of men be undone save by death as a necessary condition, while it was impossible for the Word to suffer death, being immortal, and Son of the Father; to this end He takes to Himself a body capable of death, that it, by partaking of the Word Who is above all, might be worthy to die in the stead of all, and might, because of the Word which was come to dwell in it, remain incorruptible, and that thenceforth corruption might be stayed from all by the Grace of the Resurrection. Whence, by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by His death. And thus He, the incorruptible Son of God, being conjoined with all by a like nature, naturally clothed all with incorruption, by the

promise of the resurrection.”³³

Athanasius saw the great proportion of things. There are doctrines in the Bible that are worth dying for and living for. They are the ground of our life. They are the heart of our worship. The divine and human nature of Christ in one person is one of those doctrines.

2. Joyful courage is the calling of a faithful shepherd.

Athanasius stared down murderous intruders into his church. He stood before emperors who could have killed him as easily as exiled him. He risked the wrath of parents and other clergy by consciously training young people to give their all for Christ, including martyrdom. He celebrated the fruit of his ministry with these words: “in youth they are self-restrained, in temptations endure, in labors persevere, when insulted are patient, when robbed make light of it: and, wonderful as it is, they despise even death and become martyrs of Christ”³⁴—martyrs not who kill as they die, but who love has they die.

Athanasius *contra mundum* should inspire every pastor to stand your ground meekly and humbly and courageously whenever a biblical truth is at stake. But be sure that you always out-rejoice your adversaries. If something is worth fighting for, it worth rejoicing over. And the joy is essential in the battle, for nothing is worth fighting for that will not increase our joy in God. Our people must see that.

Courage in conflict must mingle with joy in Christ. This is what Athanasius loved about Antony and what he sought to be himself. This was part of his battle strategy with his adversaries:

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.³⁵

So, brothers, even if at times it may feel as though we are alone *contra mundum*, let us stand courageous and out-rejoice our adversaries.

3. Loving Christ includes loving true propositions about Christ

What was clear to Athanasius was that propositions about Christ carried convictions that could send you to heaven or to hell. There were

propositions like: “There was a time when the Son of God was not,” and, “He was not before he was made,” and, “the Son of God is created.” These propositions were strictly damnable. If they were spread and believed they would damn the souls which embraced them. And therefore Athanasius labored with all his might to formulate propositions that would conform to reality and lead the soul to faith and worship and heaven.

I believe Athanasius would have abominated, with tears, the contemporary call for “depropositionalizing” that you hear among many of the so-called “reformists” and “the emerging church,” younger evangelicals,” postfundamentalists,”

“postfoundationalists,” postpropositionalists,” and “postevangelicals.”³⁶ I think he would have said, “Our young people in Alexandria die for the truth of propositions about Christ. What do your young people die for?” And if the answer came back, “We die for Christ, not propositions about Christ,” I think he would have said, “That’s what Arius says. So which Christ will you die for?”

Athanasius would have grieved over sentences like “It is Christ who unites us; it is doctrines that divides.” And sentences like: “We should ask, Whom do you trust? rather than what do you believe?”³⁷ He would have grieved because he knew this is the very tactic used by the Arian bishops to cover the councils with fog so that the word “Christ” could mean anything. Those who talk like this—“Christ unites, doctrine divides”—have simply replaced propositions with a word. They think they have done something profound and fresh, when in fact they have done something very old and stale and very deadly.

This leads to a related lesson . . .

4. The truth of biblical language must be vigorously protected with non-biblical language.

Athanasius’ experience was critically illuminating to something I have come to see over the years, especially in liberally minded baptistic and pietistic traditions, namely, that the slogan, “the Bible is our only creed” is often used as a cloak to conceal the fact that Bible language is used to affirm falsehood. This is what Athanasius encountered so insidiously at the Council of Nicaea. The Arians affirmed biblical sentences. Listen to this description of the proceedings:

The Alexandrians . . . confronted the Arians with the traditional Scriptural phrases which appeared to leave no

doubt as to the eternal Godhead of the Son. But to their surprise they were met with perfect acquiescence. Only as each test was propounded, it was observed that the suspected party whispered and gesticulated to one another, evidently hinting that each could be safely accepted, since it admitted of evasion. If their assent was asked to the formula “like to the Father in all things,” it was given with the reservation that man as such is “the image and glory of God.” The “power of God” elicited the whispered explanation that the host of Israel was spoken of as *dunamis kurion*, and that even the locust and caterpillar are called the “power of God.” The “eternity” of the Son was countered by the text, “We that live are alway (2 Corinthians 4:11)!” The fathers were baffled, and the test of *homoosion*, with which the minority had been ready from the first, was being forced (p. 172) upon the majority by the evasions of the Arians.³⁸

R. P. C. Hanson explained the process like this: “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.*”³⁹ The Arians railed against the unbiblical language being forced on them. They tried to seize the biblical high ground and claim to be the truly biblical people—the pietists, the simple Bible-believers—because they wanted to stay with biblical language only—and by it smuggle in their non-biblical meanings.

But Athanasius saw through this “post-modern,” post-conservative,” “post-propositional” strategy and saved for us not just Bible words, but Bible truth. May God grant us the discernment of Athanasius for our day. Very precious things are at stake.⁴⁰

5. A widespread and long-held doctrinal difference among Christians does not mean that the difference is insignificant or that we should not seek to persuade toward the truth and seek agreement.

What if someone had said to Athanasius, “Athanasius, people have disagreed on this issue for 300 years and there has never been an official position taken in the church to establish one side as orthodox and the other as heresy? So who do you think you are? Half the bishops in the world disagree with you and they read the same Bible you do. So stop fighting this

battle and let different views exist side by side.

We may thank God that Athanasius did not think that way. He did not regard the amount of time that has elapsed or the number of Christians who disagreed to determine what doctrines are important and which we should strive to teach and spread and make normative in the church.

And so today we should not conclude that the absence of consensus in the church means doctrinal stalemate. God may yet be pleased to give the blessing of unity on some crucial areas of doctrine that are not yet resolved in the Christian church. I think for example of the issue of Manhood and Womanhood, the issue of Justification by faith, and the issue of how the death of Christ saves sinners, and the issue of the sovereignty of God's grace in converting the soul. I don't think we should assume that because much time has gone by and many people disagree it must always be this way. Who knows but that, by God's amazing grace, wrong views on these things could become as marginal as the Arianism of the Jehovah's Witnesses is today?

6. Don't aim to preach only in categories of thought that can be readily understood by this generation. Aim at creating biblical categories of thought that are not present.

Another way to put it is to use the terminology of Andrew Walls: Don't embrace the indigenous principle of Christianity at the expense of the pilgrim principle.⁴¹ The indigenous principle says, "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). The pilgrim principle says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (Rom. 12:2).

Some of the most crucial and precious truths of the Scripture are counter-intuitive to the fallen human mind. They don't fit easily into our heads. The orthodox understanding of the Trinity is one of those. If the indigenous principle had triumphed in the fourth century, we would all be Arians. It is far easier for the human mind to say that the Son of God, like all other sons, once was not, and then came into being, than it is to say that he has always been God with the Father, but there is only one God. But the Bible will not let its message be fit into the categories we bring with our fallen, finite minds. It presses us relentlessly to create new categories of thought to contain the mysteries of the gospel.

Archibald Roberts points out that with the conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313) which gave legal status to Christianity, "the

inevitable influx of heathen into the Church, now that the empire had become Christian, brought with it multitudes to whom Arianism was a more intelligible creed than that of Nicaea.”⁴² And if you want to grow a church the temptation is to give the people what they already have categories to understand and enjoy. But once that church is grown, it thinks so much like the world that the difference is not decisive. The radical, biblical gospel is blunted and the glory of Christ is obscured.

Rather, alongside the indigenous principle of accommodation and contextualization, Athanasius would plead with us to have a deep commitment to the pilgrim principle of confrontation and transformation and brain-boggling, mind-altering, recategorization of the way people think about reality.

And we must not treat these two principles as sequential. They start and continue together. We must not assume that the first and basic truths of Christianity fit into the fallen mind of unbelievers. We must not assume that these first truths can be contextualized in categories of thought that are present in the minds of 21st century human beings, and that only later, after they have become Christians, we can begin to alter the way they think with more advanced truth.

That’s not the case. From the very beginning, we are speaking to them God-centered, Christ-exalting truths that shatter fallen human categories of thought. We must not shy away from this. We must do all we can to advance it and to help people, by the grace of God, to see what is happening to them (the shattering of their categories) as the best news in all the world.

From the very beginning, in the most winsome way possible, we must labor to create categories like this: God rules the world of bliss and suffering and sin, right down to the roll of the dice and the fall of a bird and the driving of the nail into the hand of his Son, yet, though he will that such sin and suffering be, he does not sin, but is perfectly holy. Or a category like this: God governs all the steps of all people, both good and bad, at all times and in all places, yet such that all are accountable before him and will bear the just consequences of his wrath if they do not believe in Christ. Or this category: All are dead in their trespasses and sin and are not morally able to come to Christ because of their rebellion, yet, they are responsible to come and will be justly punished if they don’t. Or: Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, divine and human, such that he upheld the world by the word of his power while living in his mother’s womb. Or: sin, though committed

by a finite person and in the confines of finite time is nevertheless deserving of an infinitely long punishment because it is a sin against an infinitely worthy God. Or: the death of the one God-Man, Jesus Christ, so displayed and glorified the righteousness of God that God is not unrighteous to declare righteous ungodly people who simply believe in Christ.

These kinds of mind-boggling, category-shattering truths demand our best thought and our most creative labors. We must aim to speak them in a way that, by the power of God's word and Spirit, a place for them would be created in the minds of those who hear. We must not preach only in the categories that are already present in our listeners' fallen minds, or we will betray the gospel and conceal the glory of God.

7. Finally, we must not assume that old books, which say some startling things, are necessarily wrong, but may in fact have something glorious to teach us that we never dreamed.⁴³

For example, Athanasius says some startling things about human deification that we would probably never say. Is that because one of us is wrong? Or is it because the language and the categories of thought that he uses are so different from ours that we have to get inside his head before we make judgments about the truth of what he says? And might we discover something great by this effort to see what he saw?

For example, he says, “[The Son] was made man that we might be made God (*theopoiētōmen*).”⁴⁴ Or: “He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us.”⁴⁵ The issue here is whether the word “make God” or “deify” (*theopoiēō*) means something unbiblical or whether it means what 2 Peter 1:4 means when it says, “that you may become partakers of the divine nature” (*hina genēsthe theias koinōnoi phuseōs*)? Athanasius explains like this:

John then thus writes; ‘Hereby know we that we dwell in Him and He in us, because He hath given us of His Spirit. . . . And the Son is in the Father, as His own Word and Radiance; but we, apart from the Spirit, are strange and distant from God, and by the participation of the Spirit we are knit into the Godhead; so that our being in the Father is not ours, but is the Spirit’s which is in us and abides in us, . . . What then is our likeness and equality to the Son? . . . The Son is in the Father in one way, and we become in Him in another, and that

neither we shall ever be as He, nor is the Word as we.⁴⁶

What becomes clear when all is taken into account is that Athanasius is pressing on a reality in the Scriptures that we today usually call “glorification” but is using the terminology of 2 Peter 1:4 and Romans 8:29, “Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” He is pressing the destiny and the glory of being a brother of the second person of the Trinity, and “sharing in his nature.”⁴⁷

And thus Athanasius raises for me one of the most crucial questions of all: What is the ultimate end of creation—the ultimate goal of God in creation and redemption? Is it being or seeing? Is it our being like Christ or our seeing the glory of Christ? How does Romans 8:29 (“predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son”) relate to John 17:24 (“Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory”)? Is the beatific vision of the glory of the Son of God the aim of human creation? Or is likeness to that glory the aim of creation?

Athanasius has helped me go deeper here by unsettling me. I am inclined to stress seeing as the goal rather than being. The reason is that it seems to me that putting the stress on seeing the glory of Christ makes him the focus, but putting the stress on being like Christ makes me the focus. But Athanasius will not let me run away from the biblical texts. His language of deification forces me to think more deeply and worship more profoundly.

My present understanding would go like this: the ultimate end of creation is neither being nor seeing, but *delighting* and *displaying*. Delighting in and displaying “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). And the displaying happens both in the *delighting*, since we glorify most what we enjoy most, and in the *deeds* of the resurrection body that flow from this enjoyment on the new earth in the age to come. The display of God’s glory will be both internal and external. It will be spiritual and physical. We will display the glory of God by the Christ-exalting joy of our heart, and by the Christ-exalting deeds of our resurrection bodies.

How then should we speak of our future *being* and *seeing* if they are not the ultimate end? How shall we speak of “sharing God’s nature” and being “conformed to his Son”? The way I would speak of our future *being* and *seeing* is this: By the Spirit of God who dwells in us, our final destiny is not self-admiration or self-exaltation, but *being* able to see the glory of God without disintegrating, and *being* able to delight in the glory of Christ with

the very delight of God the Father for his own Son (John 17:26),⁴⁸ and *being* able to do visible Christ-exalting deeds that flow from this delight.

And in this way a wave of revelation of divine glory in the saints is set in motion that goes on and grows for all eternity. As each of us sees Christ and delights in Christ with the delight of the Father, mediated by the Spirit, we will overflow with visible actions of love and creativity on the new earth. In this way we will see the revelation of God's glory in each other's lives in ever new ways. New dimensions of the riches of the glory of God in Christ will shine forth every day from new delights and new deeds. And these in turn will become new seeings of Christ which will elicit new delights and new doings. And so the ever-growing wave of the revelation of the riches of the glory of God will role on for ever and ever.

And we will discover that this was possible only because the infinite Son of God took on himself the human nature so that we in our human nature might be united to him and display more and more of his glory. We will find in our eternal experience that his infinite beauty took on human form so that our human form might increasingly display his infinite beauty.

I am thankful to God that I did not run away from the word "deification" in Athanasius. There is here "a grace the magnitude of which our minds can never fully grasp."⁴⁹ Thank you, Athanasius. And thank you, Father. And thank you, Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Endnotes

¹ Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.

² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21: On Athanasius of Alexandria*, in Gregory Nazianzus, *Select Orations, Sermons, Letters; Dogmatic Treatises*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [hereafter *NPNF*], vol. 7, 2nd Series, ed. P. Shaff and H. Wace (repr.: Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 277 ¶27.

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21*, 272 ¶10.

⁴ *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, in *NPNF*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999; orig. 1892), lxvii.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *NPNF* 4:lviii.

⁷ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), xviii-xix.

⁸ See the chapter on “The Council of Constantinople” in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004), 167-183.

⁹ “The Nicene formula found in Athanasius a mind predisposed to enter into its spirit, to employ in its defense the richest resources of theological and biblical training, of spiritual depth and vigor, of self-sacrificing but sober and tactful enthusiasm; *its victory in the East is due under God to him alone.*” *NPNF* 4:lxix.

¹⁰ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 109.

¹¹ Archibald Robertson recounts the death of Arius like this: “From Jerusalem Arius had gone to Alexandria, but had not succeeded in obtaining admission to the Communion of the Church there. Accordingly he repaired to the capital about the time of the Council [of Tyre]. The Eusebians resolved that here at any rate he should not be repelled. Arius appeared before the Emperor and satisfied him by a sworn profession of orthodoxy, and a day was fixed for his reception to communion. The story of the distress caused to the aged bishop Alexander [Bishop of Constantinople] is well known. He was heard to pray in the church that either Arius or himself might be taken away before such an outrage to the faith should be permitted. As a matter of fact Arius died suddenly [A.D. 336] the day before his intended reception. His friends ascribed his death to magic, those of Alexander to the judgment of God, the public generally to the effect of excitement on a diseased heart. Athanasius, while taking the second view, describes the occurrence with becoming sobriety and reserve (pp. 233, 565). *NPNF* 4:xli.

¹² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21*, 270-271 ¶6.

¹³ Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 145.

¹⁴ *NPNF* 4:xvi.

¹⁵ Archibald Robertson estimates the bishops at something over 250, and attributes the number 318 to the symbolic significance it had. “According to Athanasius, who again, toward the end of his life (*ad Afr.* 2) acquiesces in the precise figure 318 (Gen xiv. 14; the Greek numeral *tiē* combines the Cross [*χ*] with the initial letters of the Sacred Name [*ιē*]) which a later generation adopted (it first occurs in the alleged Coptic acts of the Council of Alexandria, 362, then in the Letter of Liberius to the bishops of Asia in 365), on grounds perhaps symbolical rather than historical. *NPNF* 4:xvii n. 1.

¹⁶ *NPNF* 4:xx.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xx. “In 329 we find Eusebius once more in high favor with Constantine, discharging his episcopal functions, persuading Constantine that he and Arius held substantially the Creed of Nicaea.”

¹⁸ F. A. Forbes, *Saint Athanasius* (repr., Rockford, Ill.: Tan Books and Publishers, 1989; orig., 1919), 8.

¹⁹ *NPNF* 4:lxvii.

²⁰ Forbes, *Saint Athanasius*, 36.

²¹ *NPNF* 4:xl.ii. (July 27, 338).

²² *Ibid.*, 62.

²³ David Wright, “The Life Changing ‘Life of Antony,’” in *Christian History* vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1999): 17.

²⁴ *NPNF* 4:xl.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 278.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, l.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, lii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, li.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, lviii.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 234.

³² *Ibid.*, lxvii.

³³ *NPNF* 4:40-41. Archibald Robertson observes, “Athanasius felt, as we have already mentioned, the supremacy of the Cross as the purpose of the Saviour’s coming, but he does not in fact give to it the central place in his system of thought which it occupies in his instincts” (lxix). That is a fair statement. But the following one from Robert Letham goes against the evidence as I have seen it in what Athanasius wrote: “For Athanasius the decisive fulcrum is the Incarnation. As a result, the Cross has diminished significance. [R.P.C.] Hanson likens his theory of salvation to a sacred blood transfusion that almost does away with a doctrine of the Atonement. Athanasius lacks reasons why Christ should have died. For him, corruption consists in fallenness, rather than in sin.” Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 133. Consider, for example, the following passages:

“For man, being in Him, was quickened for this was why the Word was united to man, namely, that against man the curse might no longer prevail. This is the reason why they record the request made on behalf of mankind in the seventy-first Psalm: ‘Give the King Thy judgment, O God’ (Ps. lxxii. 1): asking that both the judgment of death which hung over us may be delivered to the Son, and that He may then, by dying for us, abolish it for us in Himself. This was what He signified, saying Himself, in the eighty-seventh Psalm: ‘Thine indignation lieth hard upon me’ (Ps. lxxxviii. 7). For He bore the indignation which lay upon us, as also He says in the hundred and thirty-seventh: ‘Lord, Thou shalt do vengeance for me’ (Ps. cxxxviii. 8, LXX.)”. *NPNF* 4:88.

“But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again: for, as I have already said, it was owing that all should die, for which *especial cause*, indeed, He came among us: to this intent, after the proofs of His Godhead from His works, He next offered up His sacrifice also on behalf of all, yielding His Temple to death in the stead of all, in order firstly to make men quit and free of their old trespass, and further to shew Himself more powerful even than death, displaying His own body incorruptible, as first-fruits of the resurrection of all.” (Italics added.) *NPNF* 4:47. Note: Athanasius is willing to make the death for our debt the “special cause” of the incarnation. But he returns quickly to his usual way of seeing things, namely, restoration of the image of God.

³⁴ *NPNF* 4:65.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 207.

³⁶ See the critical interaction with these movements in Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004).

³⁷ These sentences are from E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon, 1925), 155-157. I cite this older book because it is being used with enthusiasm by some today to buttress a vision that beclouds the importance of doctrine.

³⁸ *NPNF* 4:xix.

³⁹ Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, xxi.

⁴⁰ Another way that Athanasius and the orthodox bishops at Nicaea protected the truth was to include denials as well as affirmations. In their case they were called anathemas. The point here is this: When mistaken

teachers are looking for a way to have their views accepted in the mainstream, they are often willing to agree with affirmations and give them a different meaning. Or sometimes the affirmations are broad and general and so do not make clear what is being excluded as false. But if a denial is included, which explicitly names what is being rejected as false, then th

© Desiring God

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do *not* alter the wording in any way, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you do not make more than 1,000 physical copies. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be explicitly approved by Desiring God.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Piper.
© Desiring God. Website: www.desiringGod.org. Email: mail@desiringGod.org.
Toll Free: 1.888.346.4700.