

Heroes of the Faith #02: Athanasius

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And, you know, it is always intimidating to have in the crowd someone who know what you are talking about? Who is that? It reminds me of that wonderful dedication that Edna Gerstner wrote in her little biography of John Calvin's wife. If you have never had a chance to read that biography, it is a charming little work.

Edna Gerstner's husband is John Gerstner the Church historian who taught for many years at Pittsburgh Seminary and she wrote in the dedication of her biography, "To my husband without whose help this book would have been far less accurate and far more interesting." So of [?] doesn't show up, this lecture may be more interesting.

I want to talk this morning about Athanasius. Athanasius, not, perhaps the best known figure in Church history to all of us. To those of you young enough to be contemplating having more children, you may want to write this name down as a potential name for a child. I remember while I was teaching back in Philadelphia one of the children born to a seminarian as named Athanasius Augustine. And my colleague in the Church history department and I discussed who was responsible amongst us for that name for fear that in years to come that child might come after us.

But Athanasius is one of the great heroes of the ancient period, a hero of the eastern church. Most of our studying and attention as westerners, as those who are mainly influenced by the western European tradition of the Church, most of our attention doesn't focus on that eastern part of Christianity. But in the ancient period a lot of the action, a lot of the important formative development took place in the eastern part of the Church. And Athanasius was one of those great eastern fathers.

A native of Egypt, a descendant of Egyptian parents, perhaps in part a descendant from black African ancestors, a man who lived at an important transitional period in the life of the Church. He was born around 295. That is a very long time ago, right at that period when some of the worst persecution was breaking out against the Church because the emperors were realizing that Christianity had spread so far that it was almost unstoppable now. And some of the emperors then in a kind of desperation move hoped as a last ditch to spread, to stop the spread of Christianity.

And so in his youngest days Athanasius lived through those last worst persecutions of the

Church. But he also, then, lived into those days when the Church passed from a persecuted Church to a privileged Church and had opportunity to minister during those days when the Church was beginning to live in a situation of toleration in the days when the Church was beginning to face new problems because of its now favored status.

Athanasius was clearly a brilliant young man. At the age of 25 he wrote a treatise called *On the Incarnation of the Word*. This morning we had a chance to read John one in our family devotions how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And that was a theme that fascinated Athanasius even in his quite early years. And it was the theme that was to be the focus, the pointed concentration of his whole ministry throughout his life. He was the great defender of the incarnation of the Word of God.

John one, in a special way, was the center of Athanasius' concern and he showed throughout his ministry that he was a remarkably talented and sensitive student of the Scripture and what it taught about how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

He was very talented. He was a very fine preacher, but he would never have made a TV preacher. He was not impressive in physical appearance, at least that is what the tradition of the Church teaches us. He was very short. He was called dwarf by his enemies. He had a rather large hooked nose. He was kind of stooped over. He had kind of straggly red beard. He was just not impressive. He had poor health and throughout his life he struggled against that.

But because of his talents he came early to the attention of the leaders of the Church and particularly to the bishop of Alexandria, a man by the name of Alexander. And he made of Athanasius a secretary and a deacon in the Church.

And Athanasius, then, was drawn into the very center of affairs in that great cosmopolitan city Alexandria, one of the most important cities in the empire, a city that had long had a reputation for being a center of learning because of the fabulous library that had been gathered there. Scholars had gathered there in the city of Alexandria. And so in this very important center of commerce and of learning, Athanasius was at the center of the Church and was concerned then to serve the Church particularly in this matter of understanding Who Jesus really was.

I mentioned last night that this was a question of every age. "Who do men say that I am?" And Athanasius was willing to say unequivocally with the Scriptures, "You are the Christ, the Son of God."

But there were some in the Church who raised some questions about that. And in the Church of Alexandria there was another man who didn't see things the way Athanasius did who, indeed, became a center and leader of heresy in the Church, a man by the name of Arius.

Now if we were all good pious Jews, you know, when pious Jews read the book of Esther every time the name of Haman is read they all stamp their feet. But I don't want you to

do that. We will be talking too much about Arius for you to stamp your feet every time he is mentioned, but he is a man well worth stamping your feet at.

Arius became in the mind of the ancient Church sort of the arch heretic. He became like Simon Magus, the very focus and concentration point of what it meant to be a heretic because Arius was a man who denied that Jesus was eternally divine.

But it wasn't just, I think, that Arius was a heretic that made him such an enemy in the mind of the ancient Church. It was the fact that he was so successful initially in his heresy. He posed a very real and serious challenge to the Church.

Arius was much more impressive in physical stature than Athanasius. He was tall. He was thin. He was sort of pale and ascetic. It looked like he was very serious. It looked like he must know what he was talking about.

He was much older than Athanasius. He was about 30 years Athanasius' senior. And he was a very powerful preacher. He was a man who was able to attract a great following. He was able to really communicate with people. And it was that power of communication that gathered a large following to himself as he preached.

And on the surface, Athanasius' preaching sounded so reasonable. He had three main points that he wanted to stress. He was a good preacher, you see. He had three points. Actually, you know, if you were a good preacher you could make something of the fact that you have Athanasius, Arius and Alexander. You could have a nice three point message. But I said we are not going to.

Ok. Arius had three points that he wanted to stress. The first was: We Christians are monotheists. We believe in one God.

Who could deny that?

And Arius said that is one of the distinctive things that we have to uphold. We live in a world surrounded by polytheists, people who believe in many gods. The Romans have their gods. The Greeks have their gods. All the people have a variety of gods. And one of the distinctive things we Christians have to hold to, continuing the tradition of our Jewish forbearers is that there is only one God. We have to be clear about that and that one God is the Father. The Father is God. So we need to teach that clearly. We mustn't compromise that point.

And, of course, that point by itself is true enough. We do believe in one God.

And then his second point was: We need to say that Jesus was truly human. There, again, a point that is true in and of itself. Jesus was truly human. The Scripture makes clear that he was human Athanasius said. Wasn't he born a human being? Didn't he have to grow up the way human beings do? Don't we read that he was hungry? Don't we read that he

wept? Don't we read that he had to sleep at night, that he grew tired? Don't we read that he could be angry? Don't we read that he died?

Jesus is human. And we need to be very clear about that and emphasize that.

Again, you see, a point that seems oh so biblical, oh so true, oh so appealing.

And then Arius said, "We need to remember that Jesus is the great hero of our faith. Jesus is the great model for how we ought to live as Christians. Jesus is the one who provides the example of Christian living for us. If we want to know how to live as Christians, we must look to Jesus Christ. He shows us how to live. He lived a holy life, a righteous life, a perfect life. We need to model ourselves after Jesus. Jesus is our strength because he shows us how to live.

Very appealing point, true as far as it goes.

And, you see, this was some of the appeal of Arius. Got to keep these players straight. If I get it wrong, now, you interrupt me. This was part of... if I get it wrong it will be just a test to see if you are paying attention.

This was part of the appeal, you see, of Arius. He taught, as we all teach, that there is one God. He taught, as we all teach, that Jesus was truly human. He taught, as we all teach, that Jesus was our model, our example, our inspirer.

But, you see, Athanasius was a theologian who could see below the surface, below what was true and appealing on the surface to the foundations of what Arius was saying. And he saw the real problems in the teacher's teachings of Arius.

He said, "Oh, yes, Arius teaches that there is one God, but he misses the fullness of the biblical revelation about that one God, because Arius is telling us that there is just the Father who is truly God. And Arius has missed the biblical revelation that the Son and the Spirit are also truly God. Yes, we have one God, but he exists eternally in three persons. We serve a trinity, a tri-unity. God is one, to be sure. But God is also three. Arius is right when he says there is one God. But he has missed the fact that God exists eternally in three persons."

Now any of you who have ever had to teach on the trinity know that it is not the easiest thing in the world. It is a mystery ultimately. It goes beyond what we can fully grasp with our minds.

How is it that God is one and yet is at the same time eternally three? Ministers, preachers, theologians labor for analogies as John Frame, I think, teaches the doctrine of God course. We may call on him any moment to straighten this all out for us and make it clear. Maybe even John would recognize that there are difficulties in communicating fully and clearly the doctrine of the trinity. He is nodding, I am relieved.

But, you see, this is a point, then, that it was oh so easy for Arius to capitalize on.

You Trinitarians don't really know what you are talking about. You need something clearer and simpler. And Athanasius saw that Arius was so clear and simple that he was wrong. He wasn't really able to incorporate the depth and richness of the biblical revelation that not only is the Father God, but the Son is God and the Spirit is God and they are one God.

And so the monotheist that seems so attractive in Arius, was really at its roots rationalistic. It was really saying, "I with my mind can understand how God exists. I can understand and reduce to a simple statement all the richness and depth of the biblical revelation about God. I must have a God that I can understand fully and clearly with my mind and that God must be one and only one."

It is the appear that eventually Islam would have to many people. God is one. An appeal that manifests itself in certain cults today. Jehovah's Witnesses are basically Arians today. And that looking for a oneness in God manifests itself in other ways as well. But that is the problem that Athanasius saw so clearly. Arius can't really take account of John one verse one.

"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

Then, secondly, he went on to this matter of the humanity of Jesus. And Athanasius said, "Oh yes, Jesus was, indeed, truly human. The Word was incarnate. The Word did become flesh. The Word became a man and dwelt among us. That is oh so true."

But it is also and equally true that Jesus, true man, was also at the same time true God, that the glory and mystery of our religion is that God became flesh. God came to dwell among us. God became one with us.

And what Athanasius saw was that if we don't assert that Jesus is the incarnate God, that Jesus as well as being human is truly divine, we run into all sorts of problems.

Arius, when pressed, was forced to acknowledge that Jesus didn't fully and directly know and understand God. You see, if Jesus isn't God, how can he fully know the mind of God? And if Jesus doesn't fully know the mind of God how can we be sure that he is the final revelation of God? How do we know that God doesn't have yet something more to tell us through somebody else?

How do we know?

That's right. Hebrews one is exactly the point.

"In this last day he has spoken to us by his Son." And because he has spoken to us by his Son, that only begotten Son, that eternal Son, we can be sure that he has spoken the last

word, the final word, the permanent word. Otherwise how do we know that Mohammed isn't right?

What does Mohammed say? Mohammed says Jesus was a wonderful fellow, great prophet of God, but I have a further word, a more final word than Jesus had.

That is the kind of problem that... now who am I talking about? That Athanasius saw in Arius, you see. Athanasius saw that there was nothing definite, final, settled, absolute about the revelation of Jesus Christ if you followed consistently the pattern that Arius was teaching.

And then this matter of Jesus as our model, our example, our inspiration.

What Athanasius saw there as the problem was that old problem, but oh so new in the teaching of Arius of works righteousness. What Athanasius saw so clearly was that when you have teaching like that of Arius, it is not just the person of Christ that is affected, but your understanding of the work of Christ is affected. The two things can never be separated.

Though the whole history of the Church, whenever you have a cult or a sect that misunderstands the person of Christ, they will misunderstand the work of Christ. And usually the reverse is true. If they misunderstand the work of Christ, they will misunderstand the person of Christ. And that is what Athanasius saw all those centuries ago in the teaching of Arius.

Oh, Arius made Jesus sound so important and so central in our redemption. Jesus inspires us by his example. Jesus models, strengthens us for service. Jesus shows us the way in which we are to walk, but what is all of that in the final analysis? All of that is to say Jesus teaches and we must work.

There is no clear testimony, there is no basic understanding that Jesus had worked for our redemption, that Jesus by his grace accomplishes our redemption. And so at the most basic level the struggle between Athanasius and Arius was not only a struggle about the person of Christ, but it was a struggle that anticipated the struggle between Augustine and Pelagius about the work of Christ. This is already a struggle about grace.

You see, if Jesus is divine, if Jesus is the God man, if Jesus is the word incarnate, then can he fully be the second Adam, the one who can take the place for each one of us on the cross to bear the penalty of our sins and by his perfect obedience fulfill all righteousness.

And Athanasius sensed that. Athanasius saw that, that Arius was betraying not only Jesus as divine, as some kind of maybe abstracted question, but that the question of Jesus' divinity touches every one of us as to the nature of our redemption.

We need a divine Savior who by the infinite merit of his obedience and death can save each one of us. And Athanasius saw that. And Athanasius determined to defend that.

He saw it as the great biblical truth as we see it when we read John one.

You know, I am really not much of a theologian. I am a historian. And it amazes me how people can read John one and not see clearly that John is testifying to the eternal divinity of our Lord. That is always sort of a mystery to me.

I think the Scripture really is clear. It is profound. It is complex at points, but I think it is abundantly clear in its testimony that Jesus is divine.

And Athanasius at this relatively early point of the Church labored to teach that clearly and faithfully to the people of God out of the Scriptures. Jesus is divine.

He was aided in that teaching by something else.

If I swallow that fly, don't worry about it. One of the ladies in our church was telling me a few weeks ago that we had a very hot evening and the doors were open in Church and she said, "You know, years ago we had a professor Riorda who preached here in Escondido. And they opened the doors one hot evening and a fly flew in, a great big fly. Flew up around the pulpit. Reverent Riorda took a deep breath to make a point, the fly flew right in his mouth and he swallowed it."

She said, "The congregation was just appalled. Everyone was just... felt sort of sick about it. And one of the men at the door said to Reverent Riorda, 'You know, you know, pastor,' he probably said Domine, 'You know, Domine, ministers are supposed to have a text for every occasion. Do you have a text for swallowing a fly?' And Reverent Riorda thought a minute and said, 'He was a stranger and I took him in.'"

That has nothing at all to do with Arius.

Athanasius was aided in his efforts to oppose Arius by the worshipping life of the Church. You see, the Church when it gathered for worship prayed to the Lord Jesus Christ. They followed, of course, the biblical example. You remember, for example, the martyrdom of Stephen and as Stephen lay dying being stoned to death for his defense of the gospel he said, "Lord Jesus, into your hands I commend my Spirit."

And the Church had followed that model, praying to Jesus as well as to the Father. And Athanasius pressed this point.

"Oh, people of God, if we are praying to Jesus, if we are baptized in Jesus' name, if we believe that we commune with Jesus in the Lord's Supper, how could it be that he is anything other than divine? We ought not to be praying to one who is not divine. We

ought not to be baptized in the name of anyone except one who is divine. How can communion help us except if it is with the divine one?"

And Athanasius convinced many people, probably more people by that argument from their Christian worship even than from their argument from the Scripture, because people sensed that is true. That is what is essential to our faith. We believe that we have fellowship in prayer and in worship with the divine Lord Jesus. That is at the very essence and heart of our religion.

And Athanasius and those who supported him like his bishop, bishop Alexander, worked hard to win Arius over. They met with him privately. They prayed with him and for him to lead him away from his error. But Arius would not be convinced. And so in due course, Alexander gathered the clergy of the area together, various preachers and bishops and they held a little meeting, a synodical meeting and they deposed Arius from the ministry and excommunicated him. They said this error that Arius will not repent of is so serious that it must be punished with Church discipline.

Well, Church discipline doesn't always settle the problem. And so it was with Arius. Arius went on teaching, went on preaching, went on gathering a following.

And Arius was a great popularizer. He even developed a slogan that his followers set to music in a kind of chant that they could sing in the streets. Madison Avenue isn't the first to develop the importance of advertising and slogans. And the chant that the Arians changed, "There was when he was not." They chanted that in Greek, of course. It is catchier in Greek. "But there was when he was not."

Denis can chant it for you later [?].

There was when he was not. You see, the confession was that Jesus is in some sense a creature. In some sense he is brought into being by God's activity.

There was, God was when Jesus was not. And that rallied a lot of popular support.

Now the orthodox had their answer. You know, you orthodox usually aren't quite as clever. But in this case they had their answer and their answer, their answering slogan that also rang through the streets of Alexandria was, "There was not when he was not. There was not when he was not."

In effect, they are saying, "If you can ever think of a time when Jesus was not, when the Word was not, then there was nothing," which, of course, is impossible because God is eternal.

And so there were these two forces now at work in the city of Alexandria and spreading beyond.

There was when he was not.

There was not when he was not.

I don't want to assign all of you to Arianism, but these two groups, you see, developed. And it led to riots. People took their theology seriously. They took... it led to riots in the streets of Alexandria. And those riots in the early 320s came to the attention of the new young emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor.

Now Constantine had come to his throne, he later confessed, by what he saw as the intervention of God. He came to the throne for a series of battles, each one of which, it was thought, he certainly would not win. And Constantine was one who thought that God had been with him.

Constantine claimed later of Christ that he had seen a vision before one of the crucial battles and it was a vision of a cross in the sky with the words "In this sign conquer."

And he had that cross put on the shields of the soldiers and they went off and were victorious in battle.

Now historians spend a lot of their time debunking all of the best stories out of history and we can't be sure whether that really happened or whether Constantine made it up later in his life to make his earlier life sound more Christian than it was.

But in any case, it is clear that Constantine thought he had come to the throne because of God's intervention. And that made Constantine maybe a Christian and maybe sort of superstitious about it and maybe a little bit of both. And Constantine was convinced, like any Roman Emperor, that if it was true that God had helped him to the throne, then he was obligated as emperor to keep God happy. And the way to keep God happy, clearly, was to keep the Church united. God couldn't be happy if his clergy were all fighting with one another.

And when word came to Constantine that these clergymen were all fighting with one another in Alexander, Constantine was very upset about that. It might endanger the empire. It might endanger his throne. We had better do something.

And so Constantine decided that the thing to do was to have a general assembly, to have an ecumenical council, to invite as many of the clergy as possible to come and to gather and to settle this theological question. And so the first ecumenical council of the Church, like a great general assembly.

Now we all know the first general assembly was in Acts 15, but the first ecumenical council of the Church was held then at little town of Nicea in what is modern day Turkey at the palace of the emperor who invited 1800 clergymen. But a little over 300 showed up. And they were going to spend their time debating this theological question about who really is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now Constantine was quite a showman as well as being a rather very effective emperor. In fact, being a good showman probably was tied in with being an effective emperor.

Once when he had gone out to battle as his troops marched off, every night when they made camp he pitched a tent outside the camp. And he went and stood before that tent outside the camp and prayed. And he let word circulate through the troops. Our Constantine is certainly a second Moses, going there to the tabernacle to pray for the troops.

He had real like showman's flare there. And so it was at the palace. Not only did he invite the bishops and clergymen to his palace, but he chaired the sessions himself. Think of the honor, the emperor there and that first day he appeared in all of his imperial glory, very rugged, battle seasoned emperor, a young looking 51 and literally glittering there towards these bishops and he appeared in purple silk covered with cloth of gold and jewels, literally shimmered in front of him as if he had a halo around himself, there to dazzle these bishops.

And they must have been amazed some of them as they gathered. Bishop Paul of Mesopotamia in Caesarea who came to this council still with scorched hands from when he had experienced imperial persecution, or bishop [?] from Upper Egypt who had had to limp into the palace because the muscles of his left leg had been cut in persecution and his right eye pulled out in persecution.

Now the world so turned upside down that they were invited into the persecutor's house. Constantine himself had never been a persecutor, but into the imperial palace, the center of power. How they must all have been thrilled and dazzled. There the emperor himself was chairing the meeting and they entered in to theological debate at a very high level.

Some of the theories think that Constantine never really quite followed the debate, but whether that is true or not, there he sat and for seven weeks—now there is a general assembly to try one's patience—for seven weeks... so you all need a couple of weeks to complain and groan and moan about how long it is, but seven weeks they debated this question. And Athanasius showed himself to be one of the really clear thinkers and clear articulators. And gradually he came to get the emperor's ear and to say, "What we have to say about Jesus is that he is of the same substance with the Father."

That became the rallying cry of the orthodox party, the same substance with the Father. They are one God. They share the same divineness, the same divinity. They are of the same substance.

And for those of you who are familiar at all with the Nicene Creed, what we call the Nicene Creed today, which did basically flow out of this meeting of the council at Nicea, those words are preserved where it is confessed, "And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God begotten of the Father, only begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, very God from very God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father through whom all things were made."

That was the key phrase. And then they had a little addition on the end of the creed just in case anybody had missed the point. And they say, "As far as those who say there was when he was not, or who say before being born he was not, or who say that he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different substance from the Father or is created or is subject to alteration or change, we the catholic church anathematize them."

The council wanted to be crystal clear in what they were saying. Jesus is divine, just as the Father is divine. There is no lesser deity in the Son than in the Father.

Now, not everybody was convinced by the theological arguments that Athanasius brought forward with great power. But the emperor produced a clinching argument. The emperor, having been persuaded the rightness of this creed said to the assembled clergy, "Sign or be exiled." And that argument not precisely a theological argument, carried the day.

And only two clergymen refused to be reconciled to this creed and Arius, therefore, was officially anathematized, excommunicated from the Church.

Victory for the cause of orthodoxy. Victory for Athanasius who had stood so faithful and clear.

Well, if the Church had been consistently psalm singing they might have remembered the words of the psalm, "Put not your trust in princes," because princes who have the power today to define orthodoxy one way have the power tomorrow to define it another way.

And Arius had strong and important friends and those friends had strong and important connections in the palace. And gradually they began to argue and to whisper in the ear of Constantine, "You know, we have gone too far. Arius really is a good guy. Very sincere, very well meaning, good preacher, very devout, has so many good things to say from which we can profit. We have really got to bring him back."

And so the pressure began. There was problem, though. By the time the emperor decided that Arius really ought to be restored to the Church, the problem was that Athanasius had become bishop in Alexandria and the rules governing the Church, the government of the Church adopted at the council of Nicea, approved by the emperor said that if someone had been excommunicated, the excommunication could only be lifted by the bishop of the diocese that had pronounced the excommunication.

So Arius could only be restored if Athanasius would lift the excommunication. So pressure began to be placed on Athanasius, growing, growing, growing. Athanasius wasn't too tall, but he had broad shoulders and the pressure didn't matter to him at all.

He said, "No. He is a heretic, condemned by the council. I won't lift it."

Well, emperors are not easily thwarted. If you can't get the bishop to change his mind, you can change bishops. And so Athanasius was deposed and exiled, the first of five exiles that he went through. There will be a test at the end to see if you can remember the dates of each of the five exiles.

And so preparations were made for a glorious restoration of Arius to the Church, a great church service was to be planned in which he could be restored in 336, only 11 years after the great council of Nicea.

And the night before the service in which Arius was to be gloriously restored and the ban of excommunication lifted, Arius died. And the orthodox were quick to execute providence and to point out that God himself had confirmed the verdict of excommunication by his providential removing of Arius.

And yet the Church was to struggle, struggle for over 40 years, struggling in a way that at times led Athanasius to feel that he stood all alone, giving rise to the slogan, "Athanasius Contra mundum, Athanasius against the world." As if only Athanasius were left, at times he felt almost like an Elijah, alone.

It appeared that the whole world had gone over and the Church had gone over to heresy. But Athanasius persevered. Athanasius continued to preach the truth. Athanasius by the power of his arguments, by the biblical character of the arguments, by the increasing weakness and fanaticisms of the opposition came more and more to begin to draw people back to the truth of the Scriptures.

And although Athanasius died a few years before that final triumph of orthodoxy was achieved, it really was Athanasius' victory. He was a man who had stood at points against the world and had held up the scriptural teaching that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God, that he is eternally God himself and that great truth was like a lighthouse to the Church.

One of those who succeeded him in the battle for Orthodoxy, Bavo, said of him, "He was a lighthouse seeing with his ubiquitous eye all that was passing in the tempestuous sea below, treachery, stupidity and shipwreck. And, like a lighthouse, he showed the Promised Land."

And so Athanasius stands, I think as a great model to us, a great encouragement to us as a lighthouse does, that we might understand that our Lord Jesus Christ is eternally God and because he is eternally God, he is the firstborn final revelation of God to us and he is our redemption because he of his infinite merit saves us from our sins.

Let's look to the Lord with a Word of thanks.

Father, we do thank you for men like Athanasius who saw clearly your Word and how testified and helped us to see that our Lord Jesus Christ is true man and true God. Grant, oh Lord, that we might ever be those who confess before you that he is God of

God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made. And grant that in that divine Savior we might each of us find redemption for we pray in his name. Amen.