

A Church History Series looking at the life and ministry of several men from different time periods. Much is omitted because of time restraints.

**Athanasius 296-373: Vital questions:** Who is Jesus Christ? Is He a created being like us? Is He God is the flesh? Why, the God-Man? Israel believed in One God; *Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might;* (Deuteronomy 6: 4 & 5). The New Testament church needed to work out doctrinal belief in One God with belief in Jesus Christ the God-Man, Son of the one God, Messiah and belief in the Holy Spirit. As Christians we must know what we believe and why we own such belief; and therefore base our beliefs firmly on the Scriptures, the written Word of God. C H Spurgeon: ‘Those who do away with Christian doctrine are, whether they are aware of it or not, the worst enemies of Christian living ... The coals of orthodoxy are necessary to the fire of piety.’ – **Arianism.**

**The Persecution:** Persecution under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, a former cavalry commander, commenced in AD 303 and continued under Emperor Constantine until 311, in Egypt and the East. Christian worship banned, books burned, sacrifice to pagan gods required prior to use of law courts. Persecution of the rack, scorched on gridirons, eyes gouged out, limbs removed, sexual organs and noses hacked off; sacrifice or die! In 312 bombastic, violent; “Bullneck”, Constantine; professed conversion to the Christian faith just before the Battle of Milvian Bridge and saw himself as imperial protector of church but also interferer in internal matters. Pro-Christian policies; with laws passed which favoured church teachings. Lavish church buildings erected at public expense.

**The Dispute:** Alexandria in Egypt, named by Alexander the Great, a major port, one of the finest cities of the ancient world; city of culture and scholarship and rebellion against imperial authority. **Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria 328-373;** greatest theologian of his time. Little known of early life. Taken into his predecessor, Bishop Alexander’s household while a young man; given best education possible; classical Greek training, but no Hebrew. Began to write extensively in his early twenties; confident & secretary to the Bishop. Made Deacon and as such attended Council of Nicea 325; although his role was minor. Bishop Alexander led anti-Arian group which were victorious. This dispute and the historic Council of AD 325 in Nicea, plus the Council of Constantinople in AD 381 (after the death of Athanasius), and other significant

Councils, signified ongoing battles for the souls of men and women; for; *Athanasius rightly knew that upon one's view of Christ hung one's eternal destiny* ( Professor Michael Haykin; Professor Church History, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Kentucky).

**The Council:** In the early 320s, Emperor Lucinius, colleague and rival of Constantine, banned all church councils but Constantine, who succeeded him, called the first ecumenical council at Nicea in Bithynia (modern Iznik, Turkey) to resolve the multitude of controversies, particularly schisms caused by Arianism. Some 300 plus bishops came, also many presbyters, deacons and laymen, most from the East where the Arian heresy was mainly centred and a few from the West. Constantine; who came dressed in glittering raiment, supplied all the food. Council affirmed Son of God 'of one substance with the Father'. Both share alike the fundamental nature of deity. Athanasius returned to Alexandria with the Bishop and continued work of establishing the faith from Nicea. In 328 Bishop Alexander died and Athanasius was elected Bishop. The majority of his work was in the struggle against Arius (260-336) and those who wanted a compromise position. Athanasius was ordered by the Emperor to admit Arius to communion, but he refused. He was exiled five times (some 17 years), spending much of his exile with monks in the desert.

**The Battle:** A crucial issue was the deity of Christ; also the date of Easter. Arias, a presbyter, also from Alexandria, said there was a time when the Son had not existed. The 'first-born of all creation;' higher than the angels but lower than God, a created being; non-trinitarian!! In opposition, Athanasius insisted that the Persons of the Trinity all shared in the Oneness of God and there was no distinctness in substance. He also argued for the biblical foundation of redemption; and soteriology (salvation). Such redemption could only come from God, since only God was righteousness enough to satisfy the demands of His own justice; **John 1: 14; *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*** This means the re-creation of fallen humanity for because of sin, man abandoned the image of God; disintegration within creation through sin and evil. Only solution is a new work of creation; only God Himself can deal with sin by redemption. **The Council of Nicea declared the full deity of the Son of God.** The Son of God was of the one substance or one essence with the Father. The Creed affirmed that the Son had the same nature and being as the Father. The Father is divine, eternal, unchangeable, uncreated; so is the Son

and the Holy Spirit; Trinity. Word *Trinity* is not in the Bible; comes from Latin *trinitas*, meaning ‘threeness’. Athanasius gave no speeches at Nicea but was involved in proceedings. Other matters were also decided but Constantine was more concerned that **peace** won the day. Constantine then invited all the bishops to a sumptuous banquet.

No minutes were kept at Nicea and Arian bishops were soon restored to their episcopal positions. Arianism continues in various anti-scriptural false cults: Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons or Latter-Day saints, Christadelphians, Christian Science, Bahai, etc.

**The Doctrine:** Athanasius insisted that the truth or otherwise of doctrine depends on two foundations of faith; monotheism and salvation. Order in the universe reveals God and that He is One (monotheism). More than one God would destroy any unity of purpose. Both order and reason within nature reveal God as creator and ruler through His Word; the Logos, who is God Himself. Such monotheistic belief was integral to Athanasius before the Arian dispute and had established his convictions. In addition, his conviction in soteriology (salvation) established that fallen sinful humanity needed redemption which only God could provide. The need for a new creation meant that only the Creator God Himself could save humankind. Unless the Saviour and Redeemer was God there was no salvation. Athanasius also believed that the Arians were ignoring such biblical truth as; **John 1: 1 & 3**; *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made.* Also **Colossians 1: 16**; *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities – all things were created through him and for him.* Such convictions of monotheism and redemption were basic to Athanasius’ vital opposition to the Arian heresy. The English historian, H M Gwatkin regarded Arianism; ‘as heathen to the core ... The Arian Christ is nothing but a heathen idol invented to maintain a heathenish Supreme (Being) in heathen isolation from the world.’ Oxford Historian Leonard Prestige described Arianism as ‘one vast system of theological depravity.’ Today’s cults are not only false to the Scriptures but render Christological, Trinitarian true Biblical salvation impossible.

**The Creed:** The Nicene Creed of 325 was not identical with what is called the Nicene Creed today. The relevant part of the original creed is: We

believe in one God, Father Almighty maker of all things, seen and unseen: And in one Lord, Jesus Christ the Son of God, begotten as only begotten of the Father, that is of the substance (*ousia*) of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, both things in heaven and things on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into the heavens, is coming to judge the living and the dead: And in the Holy Spirit.

**The Glory of Jesus Christ:** Who died on the Cross? A created being or the eternal Son made flesh through Incarnation? The God-Man; **2 Corinthians 5: 21;** *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Anathasius' theology centred on doctrine of salvation. **2 Peter 1: 3 & 4;** *His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the (full) knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.* Human nature lifted up by grace, through Christ, to share in the glory and immortality of God.

(Peter Barnes: *Athanasius of Alexandria*, Christian Focus, 2019)