

Introduction to Athanasius

- Born in 296 AD, hailed from Egypt (possibly Alexandria)
- Spoke Coptic, was likely an ethnic Egyptian, possibly a member of the lower class
- Story is told that he was discovered by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria while “playing church” with his friends (took place in 306AD)
- In this game, Alexander role was to baptize his friends, reciting the church liturgy from memory.
- Alexander approached him and soon learned that this boy was very skilled in terms of his knowledge of the scripture
- Alexander took Athanasius in as a student, where he excelled, eventually becoming Alexanders’ assistant
- Fought on the side of the orthodox believers during the council of Nicea
- Later in 381 AD, the Nicene creed was re-written in a more useful liturgical form, this is called the “Athanasian” creed in observance of Athanasius’ strong stand against the Arian heresy
- Was referred to as “The black dwarf”
- Had friendly relations with the monks of the desert
- Became the most feared opponent of Arianism
- Strength lies in relationship with the people, and sincerity of his faith
- Wrote two works: “Against the Gentiles” (i.e. pagans) and “On the Incarnation of the Word”
- Regarded the Incarnation as the central fact of human history
- Understood that for Christ to do the work that he did, he had to be God
- Worked as the secretary to Alexander
- Upon Alexander’s death, he succeeded him in AD 328, the same year that Constantine revoked the banishment of Arius
- Was exiled 5 times by 4 emperors and spent 17 of 45 years as Bishop in exile

Excerpt from “On the Incarnation”

In order to effect this re-creation, however, He had first to do away with death and corruption. Therefore He assumed a human body, in order that in it death might once for all be destroyed, and that men might be renewed according to the Image. The Image of the Father only was sufficient for this need. Here is an illustration to prove it.

(14) You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself, and seek out His lost sheep, even as He says in the Gospel:

"I came to seek and to save that which was lost."²

The Council of Nicaea (Review)

- Took place in AD325
- The first Ecumenical (Universal) Council
- Around 300 Bishops from around the Empire
- These were the most well-known, famous of the church leaders
- Many had only recently been released from prison, and showed signs of torture inflicted by the Roman authorities
- Now, they were being united for the first time under “one roof” by those same authorities to deliberate critical theological issues

- These deliberated and came to an agreement on the readmission of the lapsed, aligned on standard procedures for election and ordination of Presbyters and Bishops, as well as the Arian controversy
- Bishops gathered to discuss
- Arius was not a Bishop, so he could not meet or speak, but was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia
- Eusebius and co. expected an easy discussion, as the issue seemed clear to them
- The opposing view was represented by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria who believed the Arian view was a major threat to the core of Christianity. One deacon of his party was Athanasius of Alexandria
- For those from the West, this discussion seemed to be a debate among those members from the East.
- For the Westerners, the issue had been settled by Tertullian: "Three persons and one substance"
- A third, very small group maintained that the Father and the Son were one, and so the father suffered the Passion (Patripassianism).

The Resulting Credal Statement

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, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance [hypostasis] or essence [ousia], or that He is created, or mutable, these the Catholic church anathematizes.²⁶

Consequences of the Council of Nicea

- The “Arian” group refused to sign the creed
- These were declared heretical, and deposed
- Additionally, Constantine banished these Bishops from their cities
- This resulted in a serious and unfortunate precedent: the intervention of secular authorities in doctrinal matters
- In time, the Arian group continued to lobby Constantine
- Constantine later relented, and ordered the Bishop of Constantinople to restore Arius to the communion
- While debating what to do about this, Arius died
- Alexander died in AD 328, and was succeeded by Athanasius, who became the champion of Nicene Orthodoxy
- In a strange turn of events, Athanasius was later exiled by Constantine at the behest of the Arian group
- Eusebius of Nicomedia is brought back as Constantine’s advisor
- Constantine suppresses the Nicene church
- Constantine deposes Nicene bishops, many of whom looked to Rome for support (which they received, and were reinstated)
 - At this time, the Bishop of Rome was Nicene, and the Bishop of Constantinople (Eusebius of Nicomedia) was Arian
- The Bishop of Rome is exiled
- Constantias (successor to Constantine) is Arian – he further suppressed the orthodox church
- Ulfilas (Arian missionary) is sent to evangelize the Goths, and even writes an Arian creed, which he teaches to these people
- Council of Sirmium in 357, the Nicene creed is rejected, stated that Father and son were not of the same substance, and that Father was greater than the son.
 - The Bishop of Rome was exiled for refusing to submit to this doctrine
 - Bishop of Antioch was also deposed at request of Eusebius for his support of the Nicene creed
- Emperor continued to appoint Arian Bishops

- Arianism continued to flourish until AD379 when Emperor Theodosius, a supporter of the Nicene churches became emperor, expelled the Arian Bishop of Constantinople, appointed a Nicene Bishop, and made Arianism illegal
- Once again, riots in the streets
- Edict of Thessalonica – claimed the Nicene teaching as authoritative and commanded all to adhere
- Council of Constantinople more fully established the doctrine of the trinity

Athanasius against the world

- Alexander had been the champion of the orthodox view at Nicea
- He was supported by his assistant, Athanasius
- When Alexander died, Athanasius took his place, and took up the challenge to defend Nicene orthodoxy
- This was taking place in the context of the Mayhem described above
- His opponents sought ways to discredit him, especially in response to his refusal to reinstate Arias
- Opponents charged him with crimes, including murder of “Arsenius”
- Charges insisted he either cut off a hand, or killed this man
- This mutilation was related to supposed use for black magic rites
- Athanasius was brought before the Synod at Tyre
- Athanasius came to the hearing, and brought Arsenius with him, eventually showing the man’s face and both hands, proving his innocence
- Athanasius later decided to present his case before the emperor, and in desperation to get an audience, stood in front of his carriage and grabbed the bridle of the horse.
- The event left Constantine with a bad impression of the man, and he later banished him to Trier
- After Constantine died, Athanasius was able to return
- During this time, a rival emerged (Gregory), whom the Arians and the government supported
- The Nicene group appealed to Julius, the bishop of Rome for support
- A Synod was held in which Athanasius was confirmed to be the legitimate Bishop of the church in Alexandria
- Eventually, Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria

- His return was celebrated enthusiastically by the people, which strengthened his position and granted some peace

Athanasius suffers under Constantias

- In 353 AD, Constantias, now ruler of the entire empire unleashed his pro-Arian agenda
- Furthered this agenda through threats and the use of force against opponents
- Many Bishops accepted Arianism
- Constantias ordered Synod to condemn Athanasius, claiming “my will also is a church cannon”.
- Many signed agreement to the condemnation of Athanasius, others were banished
- The emperor attempted to rid himself of Athanasius quietly by granting him an audience, which Athanasius had not requested. Athanasius didn’t fall for the trick.
- Later, the governor ordered him to leave in the name of the Emperor, to which Athanasius showed the letter authorizing him to return to Alexandria.
- Finally, the governor burst into a church service in which the Lord’s Supper was being served. During the tumult, the church started singing Psalm 136 “For his mercy endureth forever”. The clergy formed a tight ring around Athanasius and managed to get him away.
- For the next 5 years, Athanasius lived secretly among the monks of the desert, who warned him whenever his pursuers were approaching.
- During this time, many staunch orthodox leaders were forced to accept the Arian doctrine.
- Eventually, Constantias died, and his cousin Julian (the apostate) succeeded him. This emperor had an agenda of re-establishing paganism; and didn’t support either side the ecclesiastical debate.
- Athanasius returned to Alexandria and undertook needed reforms.

Athanasius pursued by Julian

- Emperor Julian attempted to exile Athanasius, and his soldiers pursued him
- Athanasius fled toward the desert
- While on a ship, soldiers who were attempting to locate Athanasius shouted to the ship ahead of them “Have you seen Athanasius?” This this, Athanasius honestly replied “Yes, he is just in front of you, and if you hurry, you shall overtake him”.
- Julian died, and was replaced by Jovian, an admirer of Athanasius
- Athanasius again was allowed to return to Alexandria

- Jovian died within months, and was replaced with Valens, who did not pursue Athanasius.
- Athanasius remained in Alexandria until his death in 373 AD

Athanasius advances orthodoxy

- Though not a match for the subtle logic of many of the classically trained Arian leaders, Athanasius made a powerful case based on the understanding that the impact of sin was so powerful, that a recreation needed to take place.
- Only God could do this, therefore Christ must be God
- Many rejected Arianism, but refused to adopt the Nicene statement that Christ is of the same substance with the Father, fearing this must indicated the existence of multiple gods.
- During the synod of Alexandria in 362 AD, it was determined that it was legitimate to refer to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as one substance, so long as this did not obliterate the distinction between them.
- Athanasius and his followers furthered the cause by writing chants and songs about the trinity, including “O splendor of God’s glory bright” and “Of the Father’s love begotten”

Of the Father’s Love Begotten:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Of the Father's love begotten
ere the worlds began to be,
he is Alpha and Omega,
he the Source, the Ending he,
of the things that are, that have been,
and that future years shall see,
evermore and evermore! • 2 O that birth forever blessed,
when the Virgin, full of grace,
by the Holy Ghost conceiving,
bore the Savior of our race;
and the babe, the world's Redeemer,
first revealed his sacred face,
evermore and evermore! • 3 This is he whom heav'n-taught singers
sang of old with one accord,
whom the Scriptures of the prophets
promised in their faithful word;
now he shines, the long expected;
let creation praise its Lord, | <p>4 O ye heights of heav'n, adore him;
angel hosts, his praises sing:
all dominions, bow before him
and extol our God and King;
let no tongue on earth be silent,
ev'ry voice in concert ring,
evermore and evermore!</p> <p>5 Christ, to thee, with God the Father,
and, O Holy Ghost, to thee,
hymn and chant and high
thanksgiving
and unwearied praises be,
honor, glory, and dominion
and eternal victory,
evermore and evermore!</p> |
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Consequently, most of the church rallied behind the Nicene orthodoxy, which was ratified by the second ecumenical council in Constantinople in 381 AD.

Preservation against external forces

- During the events discussed above, the Nicene church was threatened not only by the Roman Emperor and those clerics he supported, they were geographically surrounded by Arians



Northern Africa:

- Vandals crossed the straits of Gibraltar in 429, and conquered Northern Africa by 439.
- By 455, they sacked Rome, causing great devastation and persecution against the Nicene/Catholic church.
- After century of Vandal rule, the area was conquered by the eastern Roman Empire, who had orthodox doctrine, but different customs and practices.

Spain:

- The Visigoths also defeated Rome in AD 410, and also held power in Spain.

- Visigoth King Racadred (586 – 601) converted to Nicene Christianity in 589 AD. This prompted a mass conversion of the Nobility.
- Arianism soon disappeared.
- Orthodox Christianity gained a strong foothold during this time, and was firmly established until the Muslim invasion of AD 710.

Gaul:

- Burgundian Arians and Frankish Pagans
- Burgundians did not persecute the Catholics
- In 516, King Sigismund was converted to orthodox trinitarian doctrine, and the rest of the kingdom followed him

Franks:

- King Clovis married a Christian princess, promised to convert if his wife's God gave him victory
- On Christmas day, 496 AD, he was baptized, his nobility and people followed him into the faith

Muslim invasion

- Muslims overran Spain, and advanced into Frankish Gaul
- Frankish leader Charles Martel ("The Hammer" led Frankish troops against the Muslims and defeated them at the battle of Tours in 732
- Martel's Son Pepin took the throne with the support of Pope Zacharias and anointed by Bishop Boniface
- Pepin's son Charlemagne was eventually crowned by the Pope

End Result

- Orthodox Christianity was threatened internally by heresies whose version of Christianity denied the key fundamental of the Christian faith – the deity of Christ
- These threats were overcome through the preservation of God for His people, whom he moved to provide greater clarity to key doctrines through creeds
- External threats diminished as Arian Kings adopted the orthodox faith of the peoples, they conquered
- Though the Islamic threat overran much of the territory of the ancient church, their forces were stopped, and they were eventually forced to give up much of their territory