

Church History

Lesson 13 - Athanasius

1. Introduction - The Situation After Nicea: Athanasius' World

- 1.1. As we saw last time, at the Council of Nicea the leaders of the church overwhelmingly recognized the biblical teaching that Jesus is God and not a created being. Only two bishops in the church refused to sign the Nicene Creed, the emperor agreed with the Creed, and the Emperor banished Arius.
- 1.2. However, soon after the council, Constantine began to waiver in his support for orthodoxy against Arianism, and eventually began to side with the Arian party against the orthodox church and her leaders. This pattern of vacillation between orthodoxy and Arianism continued in the successors of Constantine over the next almost 50 years. One successor, Julian, even sought to return the Empire to paganism.
- 1.3. Athanasius became the central figure in this controversy. The fortunes of his life shifted with the changing tides of Imperial favor for and against orthodoxy. Through all of this Athanasius stood strong for the orthodox faith, accurately seeing that to deny the Deity of Christ was to deny the faith itself. His life and writings thus became one of the most important chapters in church history.

2. Athanasius - His Life and Times

2.1. An Introduction to the Life of Athanasius

- 2.1.1. Athanasius was apparently born in Alexandria, around 296 AD. He was apparently quite dark skinned (he was nicknamed 'the black dwarf) and was probably of Coptic descent, and most likely a member of the lower classes. He also developed early contact with the desert monks in Egypt, who taught him to live in austerity rather than opulence. His connections with both the people and the desert monks would become important in the struggles that would mark his life.
 - 2.1.1.1. His complexion was dark, like that of the Copts, it is very likely that he belonged to that group, and that therefore he was a member of the lower classes in Egypt. (Gonzales, location 3545)
 - 2.1.1.2. During his early years he was in close contact with the monks of the desert. (Gonzales, location 3548)
 - 2.1.1.3. Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that throughout his life Athanasius kept in close contact with the monks of the desert, who repeatedly gave him support and asylum. (Gonzales, location 3550)
 - 2.1.1.4. From the monks, Athanasius learned a rigid discipline that he applied to himself, and an austerity that earned him the admiration of his friends and even the respect of many of his enemies. (Gonzales, location 3555)
 - 2.1.1.5. His strong suit was in his close ties to the people among whom he lived, and in living out his faith without the subtleties of the Arians or the pomp of so many bishops of other important sees. His monastic discipline, his roots among the people, his fiery spirit, and his profound and unshakable conviction made him invincible. (Gonzales, location 3558)

- 2.1.2.** Athanasius was originally a secretary to Alexander. However, in the wake of this controversy he rose to great position and fame, and spent the rest of his life as the main proponent of Nicene orthodoxy.
- 2.1.3.** In 328, when Athanasius was 33, Alexander died and Athanasius was elected as the new bishop of Alexandria - a position he held for 45 years until his death in 373. This occurred within a few year of the Council of Nicea, when Orthodoxy was the clear victor over Arianism. However, the winds were beginning to shift.
- 2.1.3.1.** Athanasius, one of the giants of church history, was born in a Christian home in Alexandria about 300. He studied under Peter the Martyr and was influenced by those who emphasized Origen's view of the common nature of Father and Son. As a deacon under bishop Alexander, he served as his secretary at the Council of Nicaea in 325. He succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria in 328. (Ferguson, location 3946)
- 2.1.3.2.** When Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, was on his deathbed, all took for granted that he would be succeeded by Athanasius. But the young man, whose purpose was to live in peace offering the sacraments and worshiping with the people, fled to the desert. (Gonzales, location 3576)
- 2.1.3.3.** Finally, several weeks after the death of Alexander, and much against his own wishes, Athanasius was made bishop of Alexandria. The year was 328, the same year in which Constantine revoked the sentence banishing Arius. Arianism was regaining ground, and the battle lines were being drawn. (Gonzales, location 3579)
- 2.1.4.** Over the remaining life and career of Athanasius he fell in and out of favor with the succession of Emperors and was banished no less than 5 times - for a total of 16 years! As a result Athanasius summed his life in what has become known as his epitaph: Athanasius Contra Mundum - Athanasius Against the World.
- 2.1.4.1.** The vicissitudes of imperial and ecclesiastical politics are mirrored in Athanasius's five exiles from Alexandria: (Ferguson, location 3949)
- 2.1.4.2.** Each time changing political fortunes brought Athanasius back to the enthusiastic welcome of his parishioners. Nearly sixteen of his forty-five years in the episcopate were spent in exile. He died in 373. (Ferguson, location 3956)
- 2.1.4.3.** At the age of 33, he succeeded Alexander as bishop of the great see of Alexandria. For the next 50 years, however, no one could predict who would win in the struggle with Arianism. During these decades, Athanasius was banished no less than five times, each banishment and return to Alexandria representing either a change in emperors or a shift in the makeup of the palace ecclesiastical clique that had the emperor's ear. (Shelly, location 1975)
- 2.1.4.4.** During one such hour he uttered his famous defiance, Athanasius Against the World (Shelly, location 1979)

- 2.1.5.** By the end of his life in 373, however, the winds were again shifting decidedly in favor of orthodoxy. Athanasius did not live to see the final victory at the Council of Constantinople, but he remained faithful throughout his life and his efforts were the major force God used to preserve the truth and His church.
- 2.1.5.1.** As it turned out, then, Athanasius was not all alone against the world. He lived to see the triumph of the cause he championed. When he died at the age of seventy-five, his death was peaceful. He had been at last secure in his office as bishop of Alexandria in the closing years, and—what mattered more to him—he could rest assured that the creed he had fought for at Nicea and ever afterward was the creed of the church. “God in three persons, blessed Trinity. (Shelly, location 2033)
- 2.1.5.2.** It was not obvious in the 330s to 360s that the Nicene Creed was the one universal creed of Christendom. That it became so was largely the achievement of Athanasius. (Ferguson, location 3944)
- 2.2.** The Political World of Athanasius’ Day
- 2.2.1.** Although Constantine had clearly favored Nicene orthodoxy against Arian heresy at the Council of Nicea, he soon began to come under the sway of Eusebius of Nicomedia - the main champion of Arianism at the Council of Nicea, and one of only two bishops who refused to sign the Nicene Creed. This happened because the summer residence of Constantine was in Nicomedia. As a result of prolonged contact with Eusebius (who continued to press his beliefs with the Emperor), Constantine began to believe he had treated the Arians too harshly. Constantine even ordered that Arius be recalled from his exile, but before this was done Arius died.
- 2.2.1.1.** Since the emperor’s summer residence was in Nicomedia, soon Eusebius was able to present his case once again before Constantine. Eventually, the emperor decided that he had been too harsh on the Arians. Arius himself was recalled from exile, and Constantine ordered the bishop of Constantinople to restore him to communion. The bishop was debating whether to obey the emperor or his conscience, when Arius died. (Gonzales, location 3435)
- 2.2.2.** Eventually Eusebius even convinced Constantine to turn against Athanasius. Furthermore, other bishops were waning in their zeal against Arianism, and the Arian party began to grow in power. This culminated in the Council of Tyre in 335, which banished Athanasius from Alexandria and sent him to Trier. Furthermore, many of the Nicene leaders were banished as well. Finally, when Constantine was baptized on his deathbed, it was at the hand of Eusebius!
- 2.2.2.1.** In 335–37, deposed by the Council of Tyre, he was sent by Constantine to Trier. (Ferguson, location 3950)
- 2.2.2.2.** Eusebius of Nicomedia and the other Arian leaders knew that Athanasius was one of their most formidable enemies. They soon began to take steps to assure his downfall, circulating rumors that he dabbled in magic, and that he was a tyrant over the Christian flock in Egypt. As a result, Constantine ordered him to appear before a synod gathered at Tyre, where he was to answer to grave charges brought against him. In particular, he was accused of

having killed a certain Arsenius, a bishop of a rival group, and having cut off his hand in order to use it in rites of magic. (Gonzales, location 3582)

2.2.2.3. Let it suffice to say that Eusebius of Nicomedia and his followers managed to have Athanasius exiled by order of Constantine. By then, most of the Nicene leaders were also banished. When Constantine finally asked for baptism, on his deathbed, he received the sacrament from Eusebius of Nicomedia. (Gonzales, location 3441)

2.2.2.4. One day when Constantine was out for a ride, the tiny bishop of Alexandria simply jumped in front of the emperor's horse, grabbed its bridle, and did not let it go until he had been granted an audience. Perhaps such methods were necessary, given the political situation at court. But they served to convince Constantine that Athanasius was indeed a dangerous and impulsive fanatic. Therefore, he was willing to listen some time later, when Eusebius of Nicomedia told him that Athanasius had boasted that he could stop the shipments of wheat from Egypt to Rome. On the basis of Eusebius' accusation, Constantine sent Athanasius away from Alexandria, banishing him to the city of Trier, in the West. (Gonzales, location 3596)

2.2.3. Constantine was succeeded by three of his sons, who were split in their loyalties between the Nicene party and the Arian party. Constantine's oldest son, Constantine II favored the orthodox and recalled Athanasius and others from exile. (Although the pro-Arian party in the city declared that a certain Gregory was still the bishop and rejected Athanasius. Overall, though, Athanasius was very popular among the people and was received back with joy.) However, war soon broke out between Constantine II and Constans, which allowed the third son, Constantius II, to re-enact pro-Arian policies. During this struggle Constantius began a staunchly pro-Arian campaign, once again banishing Athanasius from Alexandria. This exile lasted from 339-346, and during this time Athanasius went to Rome. This actually worked to allow Athanasius to greatly strengthen his ties in the West, which generally favored the orthodox and became closely aligned with Athanasius from this point forward.

2.2.3.1. In 339–46, banished by Constantius as still canonically deposed, he went to Rome. (Ferguson, location 3950)

2.2.3.2. Constantine was succeeded by three of his sons: Constantine II, Constans, and Constantius II. (Gonzales, location 3444)

2.2.3.3. At first the new situation favored the Nicene party, for the eldest of Constantine's three sons took their side, and recalled Athanasius and the others from exile. But then war broke out between Constantine II and Constans, and this provided an opportunity for Constantius, who ruled in the East, to follow his pro-Arian inclinations. (Gonzales, location 3446)

2.2.3.4. The three brothers decided that all exiled bishops—there were a number of them—could return to their sees. Yet Athanasius' return to Alexandria was not the end, but rather the beginning, of a long

period of struggle and repeated exiles. There was an Arian party in Alexandria, and these people now claimed that Athanasius, who had been away, was not the legitimate bishop. The rival claimant, a certain Gregory, had the support of the government. (Gonzales, location 3602)

- 2.2.3.5.** Athanasius' exile in Rome was fruitful. Both the Arians and the Nicenes had requested support from Julius, the bishop of Rome. Athanasius was able to present the Nicene position in person, and he soon gained the support of the Roman clergy, who took up the Nicene cause against the Arians. Eventually, a synod gathered in the ancient capital declared that Athanasius was the legitimate bishop of Alexandria, and that Gregory was a usurper. Although this did not mean that Athanasius could return to Alexandria immediately, it did signal the support of the Western church for the Nicene cause, and for Athanasius in particular. (Gonzales, location 3610)
- 2.2.4.** Due to certain political circumstances, Constantius II had accepted the request of his brother Constans to allow Athanasius to return to Alexandria in 346. The Arian bishop Gregory has done a poor job and was growing increasingly unpopular and thus Athanasius was received as a hero.
 - 2.2.4.1.** After the death of Constantine II, Constans became sole emperor in the West, and he then asked Constantius, who ruled in the East, to permit the return of Athanasius to Alexandria. Since at that particular moment Constantius needed the support of his brother, he granted the request, and Athanasius was able to return to Alexandria. (Gonzales, location 3618)
 - 2.2.4.2.** The mismanagement of Gregory in Alexandria had been such that the people received Athanasius as a hero or a liberator. It is possible that one of the factors involved in this situation was that Gregory and the Arian party represented the more Hellenized higher classes, whereas Athanasius was the man of the people. (Gonzales, location 3620)
- 2.2.5.** Athanasius was allowed to remain in Alexandria for 10 years, and he used this time to great effect, strengthening his ties with other orthodox bishops through a great deal of correspondence. He also wrote a number of treatises defending Nicene orthodoxy and refuting the heresy of Arianism.
 - 2.2.5.1.** With such show of support, Athanasius was free from the attacks of his enemies for approximately ten years. During that time he strengthened his ties with other defenders of orthodoxy, particularly through abundant correspondence. It was also at this time that he wrote a number of treatises against Arianism. (Gonzales, location 3623)
- 2.2.6.** However, when Constans died in 353, Constantius, who was now the sole emperor, resumed his pro-Arian efforts with zeal. He decided he accomplish this he had to rid himself of Athanasius. Through threats and force, he coerced many bishops to accept Arianism and to condemn Athanasius. Those refusing to do so were themselves banished. Even many Nicene bishops caved under pressure and signed Arian confessions of faith

(including Hosius of Cordova one of the main champions of orthodoxy at Nicea, and Liberius the bishop of Rome.) However, Athanasius went into hiding among the desert monks, who helped him evade the Emperor and his forces for 5 years. During this time it appeared that the cause of the orthodox faith was all but lost.

- 2.2.6.1.** But Emperor Constantius was a convinced Arian, and felt the need to rid himself of this champion of the Nicene faith. As long as Constans lived, Constantius endured the presence of Athanasius, who counted on the support of the western emperor. (Gonzales, location 3626)
- 2.2.6.2.** Finally, in A.D. 353, Constantius, who now ruled the whole Empire, felt sufficiently secure to unleash his pro-Arian policy. Through threats and the use of force, an increasing number of bishops accepted Arianism. (Gonzales, location 3629)
- 2.2.6.3.** On that ominous threat, many of the bishops signed the condemnation of Athanasius. Those who refused were banished. (Gonzales, location 3632)
- 2.2.6.4.** Eventually, however, Constantius became sole emperor, and it was then that, as Jerome said, “the entire world woke from a deep slumber and discovered that it had become Arian.” Once again the Nicene leaders had to leave their cities, and imperial pressure was such that eventually even the elderly Hosius of Cordova and Liberius—the bishop of Rome—signed Arian confessions of faith. (Gonzales, location 3449)
- 2.2.6.5.** From 356–61, outlawed again by Constantius, he went into hiding among the monks in the deserts of Egypt, from which he was able to direct the affairs of his church.
- 2.2.6.6.** Constantius then ordered a concentration of troops in Alexandria. When the legions were in place and any revolt could be crushed, the governor ordered Athanasius, in the name of the emperor, to leave the city. Athanasius responded by showing the old imperial order in which he was given permission to return. There must be a mistake, he told the governor, since the emperor would not contradict himself. (Gonzales, location 3637)
- 2.2.6.7.** From that moment, Athanasius seemed to have become a ghost. He was sought everywhere, but the authorities could not find him. He had taken refuge among the monks of the desert, his faithful allies. These monks had means of communication among themselves, and whenever the officers of the Empire approached the bishop’s hideout, he was simply transferred to a safer place. (Gonzales, location 3644)
- 2.2.6.8.** For five years, Athanasius lived among the monks in the desert. During those five years, the Nicene cause suffered severe setbacks. Imperial policy was openly in favor of the Arians. Several synods were forced to declare themselves for Arianism. Eventually, even Hosius of Cordova and Liberius of Rome, both well advanced in years, were forced to sign Arian confessions of faith. (Gonzales, location 3647)

- 2.2.6.9.** The high point for Arianism came when a council gathered in Sirmium openly rejected the decisions of Nicea. This was what orthodox leaders called the “Blasphemy of Sirmium. (Gonzales, location 3651
- 2.2.7.** When Constantius suddenly died in 361, everything once again changed. He was succeeded by his cousin Julian, later known as “Julian the Apostate.” Julian had been raised in Athens and had abandoned Christianity and became a convinced pagan, at least in part because it appeared Constantius had killed most of his close relatives in taking power. He thus wanted a return to paganism. In order to increase Christian fighting and weaken their cause, he simply canceled the orders of exile against all bishops. This meant that Athanasius was allowed to return to Alexandria once again in 361.
- 2.2.7.1.** Such was the state of affairs when the unexpected death of Constantius changed the course of events. He was succeeded by his cousin Julian, later known by Christian historians as “the Apostate.” Profiting from the endless dissension among Christians, the pagan reaction had come to power. (Gonzales, location 3452)
- 2.2.7.2.** Unexpectedly, Constantius died and was succeeded by his cousin Julian. Since the new emperor had no interest in supporting either side of the controversy, he simply canceled all orders of exile against all bishops. He was hoping that the two parties would weaken each other while he moved forward in his goal of restoring paganism. (Gonzales, location 3652)
- 2.2.7.3.** Meanwhile, Julian had continued his philosophical studies in Athens, a city famous as the seat of much of ancient wisdom. There he knew Basil of Caesarea, a devout Christian who would eventually become one of the greatest bishops of his time. It was also there that he became interested in the ancient mystery religions. He had definitively abandoned Christianity, (Gonzales, location 3482)
- 2.2.7.4.** Julian had many reasons to dislike both Constantius and the Christian faith that the latter professed. At the time of Constantine’s death, most of the dead emperor’s close relatives had been massacred. (Gonzales, location 3460)
- 2.2.7.5.** The circumstances in which these crimes were committed are not altogether clear, and therefore it may be unfair to lay the blame on Constantius. (Gonzales, location 3462)
- 2.2.7.6.** Julian sought both to restore the lost glory of paganism, and to impede the progress of Christianity. (Gonzales, location 3501
- 2.2.7.7.** Julian wished to bring about a total restoration and reformation of paganism. To that end he ordered that everything that had been taken from the temples was to be returned to them. Following the example of the Christian church, he organized the pagan priesthood into a hierarchy similar to that which the church had by that time. (Gonzales, location 3506)
- 2.2.7.8.** And these high priests were under a “supreme priest,” who was Julian himself. All members of this priestly hierarchy were to lead an exemplary life, and they should be concerned, not only with

worship, but also with acts of charity for those in need. While rejecting Christianity, Julian actually learned a great deal from it. (Gonzales, location 3510)

2.2.8. During 361-362 Athanasius worked to re-establish the orthodox position. He had come to the conclusion that some of the problem was a fear that the Nicene terminology of the Son and the Father being of the same substance (homoousios) was feared as allowing Sabellianism/modalism (the heresy that God is not Triune but merely is one Person who assumes different titles or modes at different times.) Those who feared this preferred the term “of like substance” (homoiousios). Athanasius worked to convince those with this concern that Nicea should be interpreted to disallow modalism. Furthermore, at a synod in Alexandria in 362, it was agreed that it was acceptable to refer to the Father, Son, and Spirit as one substance (homoousios) as long as this did not deny the distinction among the Three, and that it was also legitimate to speak of them as being of “like substance” (homoiousios) as long as this did not deny that they were One Being and not three gods. (This would later be recognized as the position of the whole orthodox church and was ratified at the Council of Constantinople in 381).

2.2.8.1. Athanasius had come to the conclusion that many opposed the Nicene Creed because they feared that the assertion that the Son was of the same substance as the Father could be understood as meaning that there is no distinction between the Father and the Son. Therefore, some preferred not to say “of the same substance,” but rather “of a similar substance.” The two Greek words were homoousios (of the same substance) and homoiousios (of a similar substance). The Council of Nicea had declared the Son to be homoousios with the Father. But now many were saying that they would rather affirm that the Son was homoiousios with the Father. (Gonzales, location 3658)

2.2.8.2. Through a series of negotiations, Athanasius convinced many of these Christians that the formula of Nicea could be interpreted in such a way as to respond to the concerns of those who would rather say, “of a similar substance.” Finally, in a synod gathered in Alexandria in A.D. 362, Athanasius and his followers declared that it was acceptable to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as “one substance” as long as this was not understood as obliterating the distinction among the three, and that it was also legitimate to speak of “three substances” as long as this was not understood as if there were three gods. On the basis of this understanding, most of the church rallied in its support to the Council of Nicea, whose doctrine was eventually ratified at the Second Ecumenical Council, gathered in Constantinople in A.D. 381. But Athanasius would not live to see the final victory of the cause to which he devoted most of his life. (Gonzales, location 3666)

2.2.9. Although Julian did not care about the differences between the orthodox and the Arians, he did care about the complete popularity Athanasius had achieved in Alexandria, which was preventing paganism from gaining a foothold. Consequently, in 363 he banished Athanasius from Alexandria once

again! Athanasius was again concealed by his supporters. In 363, exiled by Julian, he was concealed again in Egypt. (Ferguson, location 3950)

2.2.9.1. Although Julian did not wish to persecute Christians, the news that arrived from Alexandria disturbed him. His efforts to restore paganism were met with the staunch resistance of Athanasius, who by now had become a popular hero. If imperial policy were to succeed in Alexandria, it was necessary to exile its bishop once again. (Gonzales, location 3675)

2.2.10. However, Julian died while on a military campaign against the Persian that same year, and was succeeded by Jovian - who was a big admirer of Athanasius and thus restored him to Alexandria in 363 - the same year he had been banished!

2.2.10.1. As we have seen, Julian's reign did not last long. He was succeeded by Jovian, who was an admirer of Athanasius. Once again the bishop of Alexandria returned from exile, although he was soon called to Antioch to counsel the emperor. When he finally returned to Alexandria, it seemed that his long chain of exiles had come to an end. (Gonzales, location 3683)

2.2.11. However, Jovian died within a few months and was succeeded by Valens - who was a staunch Arian! Athanasius was thus forced to leave Alexandria again from 365-366. However, his support was so great that Valens had to relent, and Athanasius triumphantly returned to Alexandria in 366, where he remained until his death in 373. During this time he saw the cause of orthodoxy clearly on the rise, and the arrival of a new generation of leaders who would lead the church into the next generation. It is during this time that he also wrote his famous Paschal letter of 367.

2.2.11.1. As we have seen, Julian's reign did not last long. He was succeeded by Jovian, who was an admirer of Athanasius. Once again the bishop of Alexandria returned from exile, although he was soon called to Antioch to counsel the emperor. When he finally returned to Alexandria, it seemed that his long chain of exiles had come to an end. But Jovian died in a few months and was succeeded by Valens, a staunch defender of Arianism. Fearing that the emperor would take measures against the orthodox in Alexandria if he remained in the city. Athanasius resolved to leave once again. It soon became evident, however, that Valens was not eager to tangle with the bishop who had bested both Constantius and Julian. Athanasius was thus able to return to Alexandria, where he remained until death claimed him in A.D. 373. (Gonzales, location 3683)

2.2.11.2. As he approached his old age, he saw emerge around himself a new generation of theologians devoted to the same cause. Most remarkable among these were the Great Cappadocians, to whom we now turn our attention. (Gonzales, location 3690)

3. The Importance of Old Writings - CS Lewis Introduction to On the Incarnation

3.1. Great writings should be read because everyone can understand them

3.3.1. Now the layman or amateur needs to be instructed as well as to be exhorted. In this age his need for knowledge is particularly pressing. Nor would I admit any sharp division between the two kinds of book. For my own part I tend to find the doctrinal books often more helpful in devotion than the devotional books, and I rather suspect that the same experience may await many others. I believe that many who find that “nothing happens” when they sit down, or kneel down, to a book of devotion, would find that the heart sings unbidden while they are working their way through a tough bit of theology with a pipe in their teeth and a pencil in their hand.

3.4. We should read “On the Incarnation”

3.4.1. His epitaph is Athanasius contra mundum, “Athanasius against the world.” We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same. He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, “whole and undefiled,” when it looked as if all the civilized world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those “sensible” synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen. It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.

4. Athanasius “On the Incarnation”

4.1. Athanasius makes his point in logical fashion following the arc of the story of Scripture. He begins with creation and the fall, showing the dilemma this presents and how God solves the dilemma, then moves to the death and resurrection of Christ. After concluding all of this, he moves to specifically refute both Jewish and Gentile unbelievers.

4.2. Who Athanasius is writing against - Gentile pagans, Gnostics, and Jewish unbelievers

4.2.1. For it is a fact that the more unbelievers pour scorn on Him, so much the more does He make His Godhead evident. The things which they, as men, rule out as impossible, He plainly shows to be possible; that which they deride as unfitting, His goodness makes most fit; and things which these wiseacres laugh at as “human” He by His inherent might declares divine. (Page 1)

4.2.2. Others take the view expressed by Plato, that giant among the Greeks. He said that God had made all things out of pre-existent and uncreated matter, just as the carpenter makes things only out of wood that already exists. But those who hold this view do not realize that to deny that God is Himself the Cause of matter is to impute limitation to Him, just as it is undoubtedly a limitation on the part of the carpenter that he can make nothing unless he has the wood. (Page 2)

4.2.3. Then, again, there is the theory of the Gnostics, who have invented for themselves an Artificer of all things other than the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. These simply shut their eyes to the obvious meaning of Scripture. (Page 3)

4.3. A key point is the Deity of Christ (note the title!)

4.3.1. We also, by God's grace, briefly indicated that the Word of the Father is Himself divine, that all things that are owe their being to His will and power,

and that it is through Him that the Father gives order to creation, by Him that all things are moved, and through Him that they receive their being. (Page 1)

4.3.2. For it is a fact that the more unbelievers pour scorn on Him, so much the more does He make His Godhead evident. The things which they, as men, rule out as impossible, He plainly shows to be possible; that which they deride as unfitting, His goodness makes most fit; and things which these wiseacres laugh at as "human" He by His inherent might declares divine. (Page 1)

4.4. Key points in Athanasius' argument

4.4.1. God is the Creator of all things through the Word Jesus, but humans are objects of special care and concern

4.4.1.1. From it we know that, because there is Mind behind the universe, it did not originate itself; because God is infinite, not finite, it was not made from pre-existent matter, but out of nothing and out of non-existence absolute and utter God brought it into being through the Word. (Page 3)

4.4.1.2. Grudging existence to none therefore, He made all things out of nothing through His own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ and of all these His earthly creatures He reserved especial mercy for the race of men. Upon them, therefore, upon men who, as animals, were essentially impermanent, He bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked—namely the impress of His own Image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God even as He does, though in limited degree they might continue for ever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise. (Page 3)

4.4.2. In the fall, humans became subject to death, and this is why the Word came down and took human flesh - to save us.

4.4.2.1. it was our sorry case that caused the Word to come down, our transgression that called out His love for us, so that He made haste to help us and to appear among us. It is we who were the cause of His taking human form, and for our salvation that in His great love He was both born and manifested in a human body. (Page 4)

4.4.3. The dilemma - the image of God is perishing and the only thing that can save them is if the Word - in whose image they were made - comes to save them

4.4.3.1. The thing that was happening was in truth both monstrous and unfitting. It would, of course, have been unthinkable that God should go back upon His word and that man, having transgressed, should not die; but it was equally monstrous that beings which once had shared the nature of the Word should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption. (page 6)

4.4.3.2. He could not falsify Himself; what, then, was God to do? Was He to demand repentance from men for their transgression? You might say that that was worthy of God, and argue further that, as through the Transgression they became subject to corruption, so through repentance they might return to incorruption again. But repentance would not guard the Divine consistency, for, if death did not hold dominion over men, God would still remain untrue. Nor does

repentance recall men from what is according to their nature; all that it does is to make them cease from sinning. Had it been a case of a trespass only, and not of a subsequent corruption, repentance would have been well enough; but when once transgression had begun men came under the power of the corruption proper to their nature and were bereft of the grace which belonged to them as creatures in the Image of God. No, repentance could not meet the case. (Page 7)

4.4.4. Only the Divine Word could save humanity.

4.4.4.1. Who, save the Word of God Himself, Who also in the beginning had made all things out of nothing? His part it was, and His alone, both to bring again the corruptible to incorruption and to maintain for the Father His consistency of character with all. For He alone, being Word of the Father and above all, was in consequence both able to recreate all, and worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to be an ambassador for all with the Father.

4.4.5. He stresses the union of humanity with the Word. This is how the actions of Jesus are beneficial to us.

4.4.5.1. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire. (Page 9)

4.4.5.2. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, might become in dying a sufficient exchange for all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. (Page 9)

4.4.5.3. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. (Page 9)

4.4.5.4. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all. You know how it is when some great king enters a large city and dwells in one of its houses; because of his dwelling in that single house, the whole city is honored, and enemies and robbers cease to molest it. Even so is it with the King of all; He has come into our country and dwelt in one

body amidst the many, and in consequence the designs of the enemy against mankind have been foiled and the corruption of death, which formerly held them in its power, has simply ceased to be. (Page 9)

4.4.6. Because of the union of the Word with our humanity, death's power over us is undone and the hope of the resurrection is given to us.

4.4.6.1. For by the sacrifice of His own body He did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way; and He made a new beginning of life for us, by giving us the hope of resurrection. By man death has gained its power over men; by the Word made Man death has been destroyed and life raised up anew. That is what Paul says, that true servant of Christ: "For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. Just as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive,"¹⁵ and so forth. (Page 10-11).

4.4.7. The Word was also made flesh to renew our knowledge of God, which had become corrupted and virtually lost through the fall (even though we should have known it from creation and the law.)

4.4.7.1. Creation was there all the time, but it did not prevent men from wallowing in error. Once more, then, it was the Word of God, Who sees all that is in man and moves all things in creation, Who alone could meet the needs of the situation. It was His part and His alone, Whose ordering of the universe reveals the Father, to renew the same teaching. But how was He to do it? By the same means as before, perhaps you will say, that is, through the works of creation. But this was proven insufficient. Men had neglected to consider the heavens before, and now they were looking in the opposite direction. Wherefore, in all naturalness and fitness, desiring to do good to men, as Man He dwells, taking to Himself a body like the rest; and through His actions done in that body, as it were on their own level, He teaches those who would not learn by other means to know Himself, the Word of God, and through Him the Father. (Page 16-17)

4.4.7.2. The Savior of us all, the Word of God, in His great love took to Himself a body and moved as Man among men, meeting their senses, so to speak, half way....For this reason was He both born and manifested as Man, for this He died and rose, in order that, eclipsing by His works all other human deeds, He might recall men from all the paths of error to know the Father. (Pages 17-18)

4.4.8. The great mystery of the Incarnation - the One Who is the Eternal God has become human, without ceasing in any way to be God.

4.4.8.1. There is a paradox in this last statement which we must now examine. The Word was not hedged in by His body, nor did His presence in the body prevent His being present elsewhere as well. When He moved His body He did not cease also to direct the universe by His Mind and might. No. The marvelous truth is, that being the Word, so far from being Himself contained by anything, He actually contained all things Himself. (Page 18).

- 4.4.8.2.** His body was for Him not a limitation, but an instrument, so that He was both in it and in all things, and outside all things, resting in the Father alone. At one and the same time—this is the wonder—as Man He was living a human life, and as Word He was sustaining the life of the universe, and as Son He was in constant union with the Father. (Page 19)
- 4.4.9.** Jesus died that we might be freed from death. He had to die to undo the power of death and to give us the resurrection.
- 4.4.9.1.** Here, then, is the second reason why the Word dwelt among us, namely that having proved His Godhead by His works, He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering His own temple to death in place of all, to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression. In the same act also He showed Himself mightier than death, displaying His own body incorruptible as the first-fruits of the resurrection. (Page 21)
- 4.4.9.2.** Here, again, you may say, "Why did He not prevent death, as He did sickness?" Because it was precisely in order to be able to die that He had taken a body, and to prevent the death would have been to impede the resurrection. (Page 23)
- 4.4.10.** The willingness of Christians to die for their faith is strong proof of the truth of Christ's death and resurrection, which destroyed death and brought the resurrection for His followers.
- 4.4.10.1.** A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death; they take the offensive against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as on something dead. (page 29)
- 4.4.10.2.** Is this a slender proof of the impotence of death, do you think? Or is it a slight indication of the Savior's victory over it, when boys and young girls who are in Christ look beyond this present life and train themselves to die? Every one is by nature afraid of death and of bodily dissolution; the marvel of marvels is that he who is enfolded in the faith of the cross despises this natural fear and for the sake of the cross is no longer cowardly in face of it. (Page 30)
- 4.5.** His refutation of the Jews
- 4.5.1.** All of this is proven by Scripture, which foretold of the coming of Christ, His life, death, burial and resurrection.
- 4.5.1.1.** First, then, we will consider the Jews. Their unbelief has its refutation in the Scriptures which even themselves read; for from cover to cover the inspired Book clearly teaches these things both in its entirety and in its actual words. (Page 37)
- 4.5.2.** Scripture also spoke of the ingathering of the Gentiles, which had obviously happened after the coming of Christ.
- 4.5.2.1.** Besides this, since the Savior dwelt among men, all nations everywhere have begun to know God; and this too Holy Writ expressly mentions. "There shall be the Root of Jesse," it says, "and he who rises up to rule the nations, on Him nations shall set their hope." (Page 39)

- 4.5.3. Scripture said that the city of Jerusalem would be destroyed in the time of the Messiah - and this had happened (see page 43).
- 4.6. His refutation of the Gentiles
- 4.6.1. Reason tells us that the Creator needed to rescue humans, who alone had sinned, and so it is reasonable for the Creator to become human to rescue us (Chapter 7)
- 4.6.2. It was after the coming of Christ that the world began turning from idols, which shows He is the one true God. (Chapter 8)
- 4.6.3. The power of Christ is seen in the transformed lives of His people (Chapter 8).
- 4.7. The question of 'theosis'
- 4.7.1. Athanasius makes a statement that sounds very strange to our ears. He says "**He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God.** He manifested Himself by means of a body in order that we might perceive the Mind of the unseen Father. He endured shame from men that we might inherit immortality."
- 4.7.2. This idea is often called 'theosis' or 'divinization' and actually forms a cornerstone of the theology of the Eastern Church (both Eastern Orthodox" and Eastern Rite Roman Catholic churches.
- 4.7.3. This idea finds its first expression in Irenaeus who said "[T]he Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself." (Against Heresies, Book 5, Preface).
- 4.7.4. It was also taught by several others:
- 4.7.4.1. Clement of Alexandria - "The Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God." (Exhortation to the Heathen, Chapter 1)
- 4.7.4.2. Hippolytus of Rome - "If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead." (The Discourse on the Holy Theophany)
- 4.7.4.3. Augustine of Hippo - "If we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods." (Exposition on the Psalms, Psalm 50)
- 4.8. It is clear that these writers do not mean that we literally become gods as in Mormonism, for many of them were actually writing treatises against polytheists!
- 4.9. Furthermore, they do not seem to be indicating that we are somehow going to become one with God in the sense that we are absorbed into His Being, or that we somehow come to share His Being (ontologically).
- 4.9.1. It is important to point out that deification has never meant for Orthodoxy that the soul becomes one with God in essence. We have seen that the ancient theologians of the Eastern church were at great pains to emphasize the Creator-creature distinction. God so transcends creation in his incomprehensible majesty that we cannot even know God's being in itself but only according to God's works. Following this Creator-creature distinction, the East carefully distinguished between God's essence and energies. I have referred to this distinction several times under different topics, but its prominence is especially evident in Orthodox treatments of theōsis. (Michael

Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, 690.)

- 4.10.** What they seem to be indicating is that the fellowship we will share with God is so close that we are brought into God's radiating glory. This is similar to how normally think of glorification, but using different terminology. However, this is affirmed by several evangelical authors and theologians.
- 4.10.1.** So there is deification without pantheism, union without fusion. Furthermore, the deifying energies come to us from the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. To be deified is to be transfigured, so that the rays of God's energies (again, not the divine essence) permeate (rather than obliterate) the creature. The Old Testament theophanies, as well as the transfiguration, and the experience of Paul on the Damascus road, represent such events. (Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, 691.)
- 4.10.2.** Whatever one's evaluation of the Eastern formulation, it is not as susceptible as the Western view to allowing the absorption of the creature into the Creator and plurality into unity (panentheism or even pantheism). The overcoming estrangement paradigm witnesses to the East's suspicion that Western mysticism always tends toward this very confusion. The doctrines of creation ex nihilo and the Trinity become more legible, I suggest, in the Eastern account. Further, precisely because creatures participate in the energies rather than in the essence of God, there is no need to talk about kenotic theories that imply a more emanationist scheme of diminishing "being" as one descends the ontological ladder. (Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way*, 692.)
- 4.10.3.** CS Lewis - It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship. (*The Weight of Glory*)
- 4.10.4.** CS Lewis - The command Be ye perfect is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command. He said (in the Bible) that we were "gods" and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him, if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said. (*Mere Christianity*, 174-175).
- 4.11.** While we might question the use of the term "we will become gods" the point they were aiming at in their own using current language was that we will indeed "share in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), and that we will be so much like Jesus (and God) that we will see Him as He is (1 John 3:2). Glorification is more than life after death - our very essence will radiate with the glory of God. This is what Athanasius and the others seem to be aiming at, and it is a point we in the West could hear more about.

5. Paschal Letter of 367

- 5.1.** As bishop, Athanasius would write a letter to his flock each Easter (Pascha). In 367, he used this occasion to instruct his flock as to which books belonged to the Canon of Scripture.
- 5.2.** This letter is notable in that it is the first listing of exactly the 27 books of our New Testament - nor more, no less, and no questions regarding any of the books.
- 5.3.** Furthermore, this book lists the OT canon accepted by Protestants. Apocryphal books are listed as not being part of the canon, but as being worthwhile reading for instruction.
 - 5.3.1.** Athanasius refers to 22 books - which is the count in the Hebrew bible (because 1-2 Samuel, is one book, as are 1-2 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles, and because the 12 Minor prophets are counted as one book.)
 - 5.3.2.** Interestingly, he follows the Jewish canon, and even the Jewish counting, but he places the books in the order of the Septuagint rather than the Hebrew canon.
 - 5.3.3.** It should also be noted that he follows Origen in appending the letter of Baruch and Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles to the canonical book of Jeremiah. This is the only difference from our modern canon.
- 5.4.** It is interesting to note that although Augustine is usually the figure who the Western church follows, on the issue of the Apocryphal OT books Protestants followed Athanasius rather than Augustine.

NEXT CLASS: Saturday, September 26

NEXT TIME: The Great Cappadocians and the Council of Constantinople (Chapter 20).

To prepare, please read chapter 20 in Gonzales (on the Great Cappadocian Fathers).

Also, if you can find any information on the Council of Constantinople it might prove helpful.