



2: Athanasius

Constantine at Nicaea – 300
bishops said: 'Jesus is God'

In this occasional series **Jon Garvey** looks at some of the great upholders of the Gospel over the last 2,000 years, what they taught, what they mean for today – and sometimes their faults, too

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Most people, if they have heard of Athanasius at all, remember the long and difficult *Athanasian Creed*, which was actually composed long after his death. But apart from being the first writer to record all 27 books of the New Testament, he is also a great example of that rare breed of people who, by standing uncompromisingly – even stubbornly – for truth, overcome lies that others cannot perceive.

He was probably born about 300 AD, just a dozen years before the conversion of the Emperor Constantine brought to an end a time of terrible persecution. Constantine is often blamed for turning the Church from a spiritual to a political body, but to be fair his involvement was welcomed by many Christians, who saw in him a counterpart to the godly kings of Israel. In any case, Roman emperors had always had the duty of encouraging the people in their religious duties, and Constantine would not have wanted to risk the wrath of the true God by neglecting his job.

However, Constantine was a politician at heart, and showed that bias when, in 318, trouble arose in the Eastern Church over the teachings of a pastor in Egypt called Arius. This man heard his bishop teach that God was 'Unity in Trinity', and thought the idea offended both the uniqueness of God, and common logic. Arius' logical powers were

good, but his underlying assumptions were based on Greek philosophy, not God's word. That needs to be understood, because he insisted on arguing from Scriptural texts – but you can quote scripture and still not be thinking biblically!

To Arius, Jesus could not be God if the Father is God too – and God's Oneness is fundamental. The idea that God sometimes shows himself as Father, sometimes as the Son, had already been rejected by the Church. So if you can't have one God in two modes, and you can't have two Gods, the answer must be that Jesus isn't God. God must have created him. Arius seemed to accept a lot – Jesus was higher than all other creation, and was even God's agent of creation, as Scripture says. Indeed, he existed before time began. But the bottom line was, 'There was when the Son was not'. He was not God, merely a creature – he could not know God fully. No wonder there was controversy!

The Council of Nicaea

Constantine, the politician, couldn't see why Christians were arguing over such theological trifles. They all believed the same fundamentals, didn't they? Why couldn't Arius and his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, just sink their differences and get on with their jobs? It seemed to him that, freed from persecution, Christians had too much time on their hands for trivia.



But Arius had a lot of support in the Eastern church, which had always stressed the supremacy of the Father. When the arguments continued, in 325 the emperor called a General Council – the first ever – to decide the issue. It was an apparent success, partly because of Constantine’s own suggestion of the idea of ‘one essence’ to describe the Godhead. It resulted in the Creed of Nicaea, still used today, with only 2 bishops dissenting out of 300. I must point out to fans of *The Da Vinci Code* that the Council didn’t invent the full deity of Jesus – it just stated more clearly what Christians had always believed.

Constantine was very pleased when Arius wrote to him describing his beliefs in a very orthodox way – but failed to realise that what mattered was the things he left out. So he continued to tolerate the Arians for the sake of peace.

Making waves

Alexander saw through the deception, as did Athanasius, who had been his young assistant at the Council of Nicaea and later took over as Bishop. The problem was that there was still a lot of underground sympathy for Arius in the Eastern church, and in particular the leaders closest to the emperor were followers of Arius.

When Constantine died, his son Constantius was a supporter of the Arians, and proceeded to undo the work of the Nicaea Council. Athanasius, who had become the main champion of the Council, was exiled to France. In 355, Constantius forced another Council to agree to the theology of Arius, though few actually believed it. To quote St Jerome, ‘The whole world groaned in astonishment at finding itself Arian.’

Groan they might, but for most the combination of the Emperor’s power and the desire for a quiet life kept them from making waves. Many didn’t see that it made much difference. But Athanasius did, and continued to say so, with the result that he was exiled no less than five times, for a total of something like seventeen years, living sometimes in genuine fear for his life.

The Incarnation

To Athanasius, commonsense logic was less important than salvation

truth. In his most important book, *The Incarnation*, he showed that in order to restore creation, Christ had to be God. **Only God could be sufficient to atone for the sin of the world. And yet he must also be fully man, if he was to be a substitute for us on the Cross.** Like others of his time, his use of Scripture was occasionally dubious – yet he understood its heart in a way that Arius did not. Arius was a good speaker, an eminently reasonable and pious chap, and apparently far more willing to make peace than Athanasius, who didn’t seem willing to compromise at all. But things are not always as they seem. Ultimately Arius did not know Christ, and Athanasius did.

Athanasius’ zeal and teaching encouraged others to work through the theology. In the end, after much trouble and apparently unseemly controversy, the Church formulated the understanding of the Trinity which all Christians now take for granted. The only significant exceptions nowadays are the Jehovah’s Witnesses, who do not realise they are Arius’ disciples. Who knows how many millions would have been lost to salvation if Athanasius had been willing to compromise on these ‘unprofitable questions’?

Downsides

As is so often the case, Athanasius’ faults appear to be the counterpart of his strengths. He was unable to see any good in his opponents, and seems on occasions to have used violence against them – but these were violent times, and he had been treated violently himself. Conversely, he could be blind to the faults of his allies, a failing far from uncommon amongst Christians today, even when considering figures from the past! Yet he was much loved by his congregation.

Sources

Athanasius’ remaining writings are still **in print**, but in ‘scholarly’ editions. Once again the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org/>), has free downloads of *On the Incarnation*, a useful read for pastors. For his life and work see *The Lion Handbook of the History of Christianity* (p.145) and *The New Dictionary of Theology* (IVP) (p.52).

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