



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

Church History – Part One (100-1500 AD)

Lesson 16 – The Life and Teachings of Athanasius

The Council of Nicea took the right Scriptural stand on the doctrine of the Trinity and the person of Christ against the false teachings of Arianism. In the century that followed, however, there were times when it looked as though Arianism would triumph over the Nicene doctrine. But our Lord God was not going to let that happen, and therefore He provided a champion of orthodoxy, Athanasius of Alexandria, to stand up for Scripture and defend the true doctrine from its enemies. At the Council of Nicea Athanasius served as secretary for Bishop Alexander, the chief defender of the true doctrine. When Alexander died, he was replaced by Athanasius, Athanasius was called “the black dwarf” by his enemies because he was dark and short.

In his youth Athanasius was in close contact with the monks of the desert. Even though he himself was not a monk or a hermit, he lived a very simple, disciplined life without the pomp of many other bishops. He also did not have the philosophical bent of earlier Alexandrian teachers like Clement and Origen.

Athanasius wrote a book titled *On the Incarnation of the Word*. To him there was no more important doctrine than that God became man in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Arius’ denial of Jesus’ eternal deity threatened the heart and core of Christian teaching, for without a divine Savior, we have no Savior at all.

The Arians, under the leadership of Eusebius of Nicomedia, tried to bring Athanasius down by false accusations. In fact, they accused Athanasius of having killed a bishop named Arsenius and using Arsenius’ cut off hand in a magical rite. When Constantine ordered Athanasius to defend himself, Athanasius produced the very much alive Arsenius, who still had both of his hands. Nevertheless, Eusebius convinced Constantine that Athanasius was a dangerous man, and Constantine banished Athanasius from Alexandria to a city in the West.

Shortly before his death, Constantine was baptized by the Arian Eusebius of Nicomedia. After Constantine’s death, Athanasius was permitted to return as bishop of Alexandria, but another man claimed to be bishop of Alexandria. To avoid violence, Athanasius again left the city and escaped to Rome. The Roman church leaders sided with Athanasius and his Nicene teaching against the Arians. A synod was convened in Rome that declared that Athanasius was the rightful bishop of Alexandria.

As we have seen, Constantine the Great was succeeded in power by his three sons. After his son Constantine II died, Constans and Constantius II gave orders that Athanasius should return as bishop of Alexandria. The people welcomed him with great joy as a hero. Even the

desert monks came to the city to join in the celebration. But Athanasius remained safe for only a short time. After Constans died, Constantius II became the sole ruler, and he was an Arian. In 353 AD Constantius II used his imperial power to force the bishops to condemn Athanasius and his orthodox teaching. When Athanasius remained in the city, Constantius II sent armed soldiers into a church service to drag him out. Somehow his supporters managed to carry him away safely, and for some time no one knew where he was. He had found a place of escape with the monks in the desert, and they managed to keep him hidden for five years.

During this time the Arians were in control, even forcing aged orthodox bishops to sign Arian confessions of faith. In fact, a council in Sirmium formally revoked the Nicene Creed, which had been adopted in 325. But Constantius II died and was replaced by Julian. Julian was opposed to all Christians, whether Arians or orthodox. He permitted all exiled bishops to return to their homes because he hoped that the two parties would destroy each other, while he would lead paganism to triumph over all its foes.

During all of this time Athanasius remained faithful to the Nicene Creed. He defended it in his writings. He promoted it in church meetings, and he explained it to those who found fault with it. A synod was convened in Alexandria in 362 AD that clarified the teaching that there was one God in three persons, and that Jesus was indeed true God, equal with the Father and the Holy Spirit. After Athanasius died, the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 381 AD ratified the Nicene Creed as we know it today, except for one phrase which we will discuss in lesson 25. Because the final form was established at this council, a more exact name for the Nicene Creed is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

Emperor Julian was upset with Athanasius, who resisted the emperor's attempts to restore paganism to its former dominance. So Athanasius was forced to go into exile once more, again with the monks in the desert. He barely escaped arrest this time.

After Julian died, Emperor Jovian allowed Athanasius to return to Alexandria once more. But when Jovian was replaced by Emperor Valens, an Arian, Athanasius thought he would have to leave again, but Valens allowed him to stay in Alexandria until he died in 373 AD.

Athanasius had devoted his life to the cause of orthodoxy, and even though he suffered for his faith, his teaching and his example led the younger generation to walk in his ways. The church as a whole accepted the Nicene Creed as its confession, and the Arians gradually lost their influence.

The so-called Athanasian Creed was not written by Athanasius, and, in fact, was not written until many years after Athanasius died. One could say that it was written in his memory; it contains the orthodox teaching about the Triune God and Jesus Christ, the truth to which Athanasius devoted his life.

Questions:

1. Whom did God send to His Church to champion the orthodox teaching of Christ?
2. Who was the leader of the false-teaching Arians?
3. How did Athanasius prove that the charges against him were false?
4. Why did Athanasius have to leave his home in Alexandria so many times?
5. Which Roman emperors protected Athanasius?
6. Which Roman emperors persecuted Athanasius?
7. How did Emperor Constantius II use his imperial power in the cause of Arianism?
8. What happened at meetings in 362 and 381 AD?
9. Why is it so important to confess that Jesus is true God?
10. Why should the church have resisted interference by the emperors?
11. In what areas should Christians obey the laws of the land?
12. Do you think there are Christians today who believe what Arius taught? What evidence do you have for your answer?