

Athanasius Contra Mundum (Athanasius Against the World)

Athanasius- The Father of Sola Scriptura

October 18, 2015

Hebrews 13:7

Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

To the Glory of God

Now the verse that Brother Andy just read to you is where the writer of **Hebrews** instructs the people of the Christian Church to “remember”. And we are to remember people who have two characteristics:

1. Those who led you.
2. Those who spoke the Word of God to you.

And then the writer goes on to say that we are to “do” two things with those who led us and who spoke the Word of God to us:

1. Consider the result of their conduct.
2. Imitate their faith.

Now the way this is written in the original Greek tells me that the people we are to “remember” are dead- because the writer doesn’t say that we are to merely consider their conduct- but we are to consider the *result* of their conduct, and you simply cannot do that until the life of that person is over and there is no more conduct to consider. You see, because we are fallen creatures- as long as somebody is alive- they are able to destroy a lifetime of service and faithfulness. But after a person is dead and with the Lord- the result of his entire life can be considered and his faith imitated.

So the Holy Bible teaches us that we are to have heroes of the Faith who are now dead, men who led the Church and men who preached and taught the Word of God during their lives, and we are told to consider the end result of their conduct, and we are to then imitate or copy or emulate their faith. In fact, the writer of Hebrews thought this was so important that he included in his Epistle- his own brief biographical sketch of several of the OT heroes of the faith- which is what we today call the 11th Chapter of Hebrews.

And so I want to begin something this morning that I pray will not only be a blessing to you today- but will be something that we will engage in from now on- that the last two weeks of October- in celebration of the many people who came before us and lived lives of godliness and faithfulness to Jesus Christ- we will *obey* this portion of Scripture, and we will remember some of the heroes of the Christian Faith. So I would like to take two Sunday's- this week and next- to humble ourselves to the Authority of the Word of God and look at Christian biographies.

Now anytime you do something like this- there is a danger. And the danger is *not* that we might get some historical facts wrong or get some dates mixed up- but that we will- even slightly- *replace* inerrant and infallible Scripture with the weak and frail experiences of other human beings- no matter how important they may be.

And yet we see that the writer of **Hebrews** tells us right here to risk that danger and to go ahead and remember them. And so in my effort to be Biblical- let us obey this verse and remember these people. And the way I would like to do this is by taking an *ancient* example in the first week and then a more *contemporary* example in the second week. And by "ancient"- I mean someone who followed Jesus faithfully who lived over a thousand years ago, and by "contemporary"- I mean someone who lived and remained true to Scripture within the last 500 years or so.

And today I would like for us to remember a man by the name of Athanasius- who is considered by many Church historians to be the "Father of Biblical Orthodoxy". And I want to "remember" Athanasius for two reasons:

1. He is basically unknown to us.
2. What God used him to do is breathtaking.

Now those of you who “journeyed” with me through the **Epistle of Jude** several years ago remember that I first was introduced to Athanasius when I discovered what Jude meant when he warned the Church in verse 4:

Jude 4

For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

And this verse produced a series of sermons on “The History of Heresy” which looked at the seven major “roots” or “foundations” of all the many false teachings that have warred against the Christian Church during its over 2,000 year existence. And Athanasius’ name came up as we studied the ancient heresy of Arianism- which rose up about 1700 years ago and fought against a biblical understanding of the full Deity of Jesus Christ.

So in a nutshell- Athanasius was used by God to rescue the Christian Church from terrible heresy concerning a distortion of the true Nature of the Lord Jesus Christ. And even though attacks had come against the full Deity or the full Humanity of Jesus both before and after him- Athanasius’ situation was quite unique. In fact, I really believe that the life of Athanasius should be made into a motion picture- because it contains all the ingredients of a really great movie.

What makes this situation so important is that Athanasius not only stood against the “bad guys”- who were trying to bring false teaching into the Church- but he also stood against every other leader of the Christian Church at that time- even the Emperor of Rome himself- as they had *all* gotten to a place where they didn’t see the importance of protecting the Church against the onslaught of apostasy.

And the way that Athanasius defended the Faith against the false teaching was by using the Scriptures and the Scriptures alone- a concept that we know today as “Sola Scriptura”- only he did it 1,200 years before that concept was ever developed- which is why he has been called “The Father of Biblical Orthodoxy”.

And he held that title under great personal hardship as Athanasius was banished from the Church by the Roman Authorities

five different times. And each time that he was allowed to come back- they tried to get Athanasius to compromise on what the Scriptures meant by what they said- just a little- and each time Athanasius refused to compromise, even a little.

Athanasius' steadfast determination to believe and teach what the Bible actually said in the face of almost insurmountable odds and his refusal to compromise even when it came to a single letter of a single word- is the reason that on his tombstone this inscription was written:

"Athanasius Contra Mundum"

... or "Athanasius Against the World".

Now we live in a day of great compromise and false teaching- a day of great change both in and out of the Church- a day where timeless Truths are being attacked and where the great Doctrines of Scripture are being systematically set aside or discarded altogether in the name of "unity". We live in a time where in many minds- it is far more important for the Church to be "welcoming" than it is for the Church to be "holy", where it is viewed that *anything* that would disrupt the unity of believers is wrong- even if that disruption is in the pursuit of obeying Jesus, and a time where Doctrinal Precision is being thrown aside for pop-psychology and shallow, feel good, bubble gum, worldly entertainment. It is truly a strange time.

And I have been faithful to tell you that part of the reason for all this lack of discernment and the impetus to compromise on very serious and eternal issues in our day is the unprecedented prosperity that we have enjoyed in this country over the last 70 years or so. It is simply human nature to want and seek after safety and security and material and financial prosperity so that our lives can be stable and certain. That is simply being human.

But when that happens- when a culture comes into great safety and security- the primary goals of the Church changes. You see, normally, the primary goal of the Christian Church is to faithfully proclaim God's Word, and obey what Jude said in **Jude 3b**:

... that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

So we are to “**contend**”- we are to fight and struggle and strain and seek after- the Faith that was handed down. And we are to contend for that faith “**earnestly**” and fervently and energetically, and faithfully. And the Christian Faith that was once and for all handed down to the saints- has been set down and articulated and recorded for us in the 66 Books of the Holy Bible.

So *that* is our primary mandate. And as we do *that*- we are to then take that very same Christian Faith and we are to *propagate* it throughout the entire world. So we take the Biblical Gospel and we preach it and teach it as often as we can to as many people as we can using every means available. And then we struggle against the lusts of our flesh by the Power of the Holy Spirit to be in humble and joyful submission to the Authority of Scripture in our own daily lives- all to the Glory of God.

So the Christian Church on the earth today is *not* supposed to have a single *original* Belief or Teaching. *Everything* that we believe and teach should be *identical* to that which was believed and taught by the Apostles.

And so any belief, any teaching, any doctrine, any philosophy from any person or group for any reason that is contrary to that Biblical Gospel, or that seeks to minimize it or that seeks to undermine it- is confronted and exposed and rejected by the Christian Church. And we do that so that what we believe and teach remains purely Biblical, and thus pleasing to God and honoring to our Lord Jesus Christ.

In our day- we are confronted with a resurgence of the twin heresies of both Legalism and Antinomianism along with the dominance of the Humanistic concept of “Human Free Will” concerning how lost people are saved. We are also living in a time of a great pervasive willingness to compromise on serious and eternal issues, and we are bombarded with feministic and emasculating teachings that attack both the Institution of Marriage and the concepts of Biblical Manhood and Womanhood. And the result of these attacks is a great diminishing of Biblical Holiness in the lives of the average Church goer- and an almost total collapse of sexual morality among God’s people.

But whereas we struggle to condemn all false teaching and to reject compromise and to remain faithful to fight against it- we are *not* the first generation of believers who have done so. Athanasius lived and

led the Christian Church a little over 1700 years ago and the Church of his day resembles ours in many aspects.

Now Athanasius was born into wealth and security approximately 269 years after the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead and about two hundred years after the death of the Apostle John. So Athanasius was literally and physically as close- in years- to Jesus and John as we are to George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.

He was born *again* at a young age; entered the Ministry and became the Bishop of Alexandria on June 8, 328AD at the age of 30. And the people of Egypt viewed Athanasius as their Bishop until he died on May 2, 373 AD at the age of 75.¹

And I say he was "viewed" by the people as their Bishop during these years because Athanasius was driven out of his Church and office five different times by the powers of the Roman Empire. Seventeen of his 45 years as Bishop were spent in exile. But the people of Egypt deeply respected him and deeply loved him, and they *never* acknowledged the validity of the other Bishops sent to take his place. He was *always* their Bishop- even in exile as far as his flock was concerned.

Gregory of Nazianzus (AD330-389) gave a memorial sermon in Constantinople seven years after the death of Athanasius and described the affections that the Egyptian people had for this man. At the end of the *third* exile from his homeland, when Athanasius returned in 364 AD, after six years away, Gregory tells us:

"... amid such delight of the people of the city and of almost all Egypt, that they ran together from every side, from the furthest limits of the country, simply to hear the voice of Athanasius, or feast their eyes upon the sight of him."²

So from *their* standpoint- no one was their valid Bishop over that 45 years- except one man- Athanasius. This devotion was owing to the kind of man Athanasius was. Gregory remembered him like this:

¹ Timothy D. Barnes, *Athanasius and Constantius: Theology and Politics in the Constantinian Empire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.

² Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21: On Athanasius of Alexandria*, in Gregory Nazianzus, *Select Orations, Sermons, Letters; Dogmatic Treatises*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [hereafter *NPNF*], vol. 7, 2nd Series, ed. P. Shaff and H. Wace (repr.: Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), 277 ¶27.

"Let one praise him in his fastings and prayers . . . , another his unweariedness and zeal for vigils and psalmody, another his patronage of the needy, another his dauntlessness towards the powerful, or his condescension to the lowly. . . . [He was to] the unfortunate their consolation, the hoary-headed their staff, youths their instructor, the poor their resource, the wealthy their steward. Even the widows will . . . praise their protector, even the orphans their father, even the poor their benefactor, strangers their entertainer, brethren the man of brotherly love, the sick their physician".³

This single-minded love for Jesus Christ expressed itself in a lifelong battle to explain and defend Christ's Deity *biblically*- so the Church might continue to worship Christ as both Lord and God. Athanasius stood steadfast against overwhelming defection from Orthodoxy, and only at the end of his life did he begin to see the dawn of triumph.

But in a sense it is strange to use the word "Orthodoxy" this way- to say that the world had *abandoned* Orthodoxy. Was Orthodoxy really there to abandon in the first place? Biblical Truth is *always* there to abandon. But "Orthodoxy" generally refers to a historic, or official, or universally held view of what is true to Scripture. So was *that* there at that time- to abandon? The answer is suggested in the other great name given to Athanasius, namely, "The Father of Orthodoxy."⁴ And that phrase seems to say that Orthodoxy came to be- precisely *because* of Athanasius. And in one sense that is true in regard to the Trinity. The relationships between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit had not received any formal statement in any representative Church Council before the time of Athanasius.

Early on in the 20th Century- R.P.C. Hanson, the Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham wrote,

"Before Athanasius- there was not as yet any orthodox doctrine [of the Trinity], for if there had been, the controversy could hardly have lasted sixty years before resolution."⁴

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 21*, 272 ¶10.

⁴ R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), xviii-xix.

And the "sixty years" Hanson has in mind is the time frame between The Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and The Council of Constantinople⁵ in 381. The Council of Nicaea established the battle lines and staked out the Deity of Christ, and The Council of Constantinople confirmed and refined the Nicene Creed. And the fifty-six years between those two Councils was war over whether the Nicene formulation of the full Deity of Jesus Christ was, in fact, biblical, and would stand the test of scrutiny and become "Orthodoxy."

And this was the war that Athanasius himself fought- almost single handedly for 45 of those 56 years. And it really lasted his entire life, but the Orthodox outcome was just over the horizon when he died in 373. And under God- this outcome was owing to the courage and consistency and work and writing of Athanasius. No one even comes close to his influence in the cause of Biblical Truth during his lifetime.⁶

Now the "war" which allowed Athanasius to shine God's Glory the best began in AD319 when a deacon in Alexandria named Arius, presented a letter to Bishop Alexander arguing that if the Son of God was a "Son" in the truest sense of the word- then He *must* have had a beginning. In other words- Arius argued that there must have been a time when the Son did *not* exist.

Now part of the problem early in the fourth century Church that would even allow such blasphemy to even be considered in the first place was the fact that the persecution of the Church that had begun on day one was now letting up. You must remember that for the first three centuries after the first prayer meeting in the Upper Room, when the Church was born- Christianity was an *illegal* religion. So the Christian Church had endured three hundred years of living under the constant threat of total annihilation.

Now if you remember from your high school history- in the year A.D. 312, the Emperor of Rome, Constantine, suddenly made a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ. Now, I have no idea whether Constantine actually got saved or not, but history shows that he did make a public profession and that his sudden conversion was big news. And in the following year, A.D. 313, Constantine issued what was called

⁵ See the chapter on "The Council of Constantinople" in Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2004), 167-183.

⁶ "The Nicene formula found in Athanasius a mind predisposed to enter into its spirit, to employ in its defense the richest resources of theological and biblical training, of spiritual depth and vigor, of self-sacrificing but sober and tactful enthusiasm; *its victory in the East is due under God to Him alone.*" *NPNF* 4:lxix.

the "Edict of Milan", which for the first time ever- ended the persecution and granted *toleration* for Christianity within the Roman Empire. This Edict even gave the Christian Church some special tax breaks. And the net effect of this Edict was that the people of the Roman Empire now had a financial incentive to follow their Emperor and convert to Christianity themselves. And this is how Christianity became the de-facto official religion of Rome- almost overnight. So for three hundred years- people were afraid to convert because it meant certain punishment- and now people converted to the Faith left and right- *not* because they were truly born again- but because it put them in right standing with the Emperor.

Now Constantine was supposedly converted because of a vision that he had supposedly seen. During the battle of the Molivian Bridge, Constantine said that he looked up in the sky and saw the Christian monogram. The Christian monogram is used in many Eastern Churches today, you may have seen it, it is a cross that looks like an "X", superimposed on a "P".

Constantine said that he saw this symbol in the sky and under the symbol was the words, "By this sign, conquer". So he converted to Christianity and from that time on the Church was no longer persecuted like it had been.

Now, it is good when God's people are *not* persecuted. I am certainly *not* in favor of persecution against the Church. But because we are carnal creatures- when we are given an abundance of Peace and Safety and Prosperity- most people- most Christians- most good Christians- will get fat, dumb, and happy. It is simply human nature to get relaxed when all is well.

And this is the biggest problem with the American Church today. We have too much money and too much spare time, and we feel far too safe and far too peaceful, and we have a sense of security and warmth that tends to make us apathetic, relaxed, and more in tune with *keeping* our prosperity and our materialism and our safety intact than we are to earnestly seek after the things of God.

And that is why I tell you that the unprecedented Peace and Prosperity that we have enjoyed in this country over the last 70 years is *not* of God. It is a trap of the devil to divert our minds and our hearts away from the things that matter most- to things that moth will corrupt and that rust will take away.

And that is why teaching about physical health and materialism and financial prosperity is so enormously popular in our day. But we have to understand that this turning away from Biblical Christianity to materialistic idolatry is destroying the Church and the people in the Church. And, so, at the very same time that we have enjoyed this unprecedented Peace and Prosperity in this Country- we have also seen an almost total collapse of Biblical Holiness in the people of the Church and the two things are connected.

But the very same thing that is happening to us today- happened to the Church back in the fourth century. The great persecution of the Church was now over. Women were no longer being made widows because of the Gospel. Little children had their fathers come home every night because their fathers were no longer being thrown into jail for serving Christ.

And at first, the Church rejoiced at this new found Peace. But soon, human nature took over. Soon prayer meetings went unattended- because the people no longer saw the need to pray. When things were hard- the people were earnestly praying that they could live just long enough to declare the Gospel to just one more soul. But now because they were living in a time of peace and prosperity- they saw no need to pray at all.

And because of the new tax breaks, Christians began to actually prosper more than the non-Christians. So with this prosperity came more stuff, and with more stuff came the need to tend to all the stuff, and that left less time to study the Bible, less time to pray, less time to witness, less time to fast, and less time to be inconvenienced in their service of God. In the fourth century Church, some even preached that fasting had been done away with because the need to draw close to God had passed. Some even went so far as to declare that since Constantine was so good to the Church- that he must be the second coming of Christ.

And the result of all this was- you couldn't pay people to do what they had done before the Peace and the Prosperity had come. They simply were too busy, too occupied, and too involved in making this world their home and making earthly possessions the focus of their hearts.

And so the heretics took this opportunity to rush into the Church to deceive the sheep. And they almost succeeded. The people of God were so busy becoming important in this life that they forgot about

defending the Faith. But please don't look down on them. Who among us would today would trade a week long cruise to a resort location with a week of fasting on water and weeping between the porch and the altar? Very few today. Very few then. Which Churches today have seen a growth in attendance to prayer meetings and Bible Studies? We simply don't see the need and we simply don't have the time.

So the entire mood of the fourth century Church as a result of their new found liberty and prosperity was *"Let's just go along to get along. Let's just love everyone and God will sort it all out. It's not my job to defend the Faith- let the Pastor do that. It's not my responsibility to preserve the Church- let the Elder Board do that- I've got places to go, things to do, and people to see"*

"Well, Brother Blair, are you saying that it is better to be poor than to be rich?" No, I am not saying that at all. But, I *am* saying, and I am saying it very *clearly*, that it *is* better to be poor and to be saved and to be on fire for God and to be faithful to Jesus Christ and to go to heaven than it is to be rich and lose your convictions lose your fire and lose your desire to serve God and go to hell.

"Well, can't we just do both? Can't we be blessed and still be on fire for God?" Maybe so- but very few actually do that. All throughout the Bible, there were no more than a handful of souls that didn't allow their prosperity to destroy their faith- very, very few. So if you can do both- knock yourself out- but if you have to be lukewarm and deny Jesus to keep your blessings- better to be poor.

So for the first 300 years of its existence- Christianity was an *illegal* religion. Christians were routinely persecuted and killed, and their goods and possessions confiscated as an official act of the Roman Government. So for three centuries- it had been "open season" on Christians, and now the leader of the mightiest Empire in the world at that time has now officially converted to this persecuted Faith.

And like so many of us- Constantine was naïve and he thought that since *he* had now converted- that all would be well in the world. And yet as he entered the Church to worship the one true living God- Constantine found the Church neck deep in controversy about an obscure theological point that nobody at that time really seemed to care anything about- whether Jesus was of the very "same" or a "similar" substance or Essence of the Father.

Arius said that the only way to truly put down the heresy of Modalism was to teach that Jesus had a *similar* but completely *different* Nature than the Father.

But Bishop Alexander said that the true Doctrine of the Trinity was enough to reject the error of Modalism, and that Jesus was different from the Father in Person and Function, but that Christ has the very same Nature and Essence of the Father because there is only one God.

So Arius made a common error that many make today. We must be careful that we do not react to one heresy by creating another one. We need to say what the Bible says and we must not take anything away from what it says. But we must be careful, beloved, that while we don't take anything *away* from what the Bible teaches- that we also do not *add* anything that the Bible doesn't say.

In this case- the Modalists⁷ had taken *away* from what the Bible clearly taught about Christ being Deity. Arius however made the fatal mistake of *overreacting* to Modalism by creating *another* heresy by *adding* to what the Bible says about Christ. And what is amazing is that this mistake happens all the time.

The Bible clearly teaches many things. But in our effort to honor what the Bible says and reject what it does not say- we tend to add things or take away things, and this "adding" and this "taking away" brings *us* into conflict with Scripture.

In Arius' effort to reject Modalism and affirm the differences of the Persons of the Godhead, Arius denied the full Deity of Jesus Christ. And even when carefully counseled about this error- Arius doubled down and refused to recant, and in his refusal- Arius drifted further and further away from Biblical Truth about Christ and went deeper and deeper into heresy. Alexander tried over a series of years to bring Arius back to a Biblical view of the Deity of Christ, but Arius became more arrogant and more resistant to what the Bible revealed about Christ's Divinity.

Now the Arian controversy centered around one single Greek word. Actually it centered around one single *letter* of that single Greek word. Now you may have heard the phrase, "*There is not one iota difference between them*". This phrase means that there is no *real*

⁷ Modalism was an attack against the Trinity late in the third century and early in the fourth.

difference between two things. And this phrase, that is common today, came from the Arian Controversy in the fourth century.

Now the "iota" in this phrase is the letter "I" in the Greek. And so the word that Bishop Alexander used to describe the Deity of Jesus Christ was the Greek word *homoousia*, which is a combination of two Greek words: "*homo*"= *the same* and "*ousia*"= *substance/essence*. So Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria correctly taught that Jesus was *homoousia* with the Father- in other words- that Jesus was "of the same Substance/Essence" with the Father.

Arius added a single Greek letter- the letter "I", which the Greeks called the "iota", to the word *homoousia*, and it became *homo*i*ousia*, which was a combination of two words: "*homoi*"= *similar* and "*ousia*" = *substance/essence*. So by adding just one letter to just one word- Arius had changed the Nature of Christ from being the very *same* as God the Father to being *similar but different* from the Father.

And so even though it was just one letter of one word- this changed *everything*! You see, if Jesus Christ was *similar* but *different* from the Father in His Essence or Substance- then either Christ was not Deity at all, or else Christianity had more than one god and was not monotheistic but was polytheistic. And if Christianity was polytheistic, then Christianity could not be correct because the Old Testament clearly teaches that God is "one".

So this was the very essence of the issue. Now I want to say this again. The difference between what the Bible actually said and the heresy that Arius was teaching was a single letter of a single word. Let me say this again- the argument that consumed the Christian Church for 56 years and that Athanasius fought for 45 years- was a single letter of a single word!

Now I don't believe for a second that the modern Church would argue over something like this for 56 *minutes*- much less 56 years. And that is *not* because this is *not* a very serious issue that has eternal ramifications. It is *not* because we are more loving or more spiritual than they were. And it is *not* because we have advanced so far above seemingly insignificant theological issues that we would not debate this issue today. No, the reason why the modern Church would not expend even a single day in the effort to uphold Biblical purity against damnable heresy is the worst of all possible reasons- we simply do not care. And that was the main reason why Arianism almost overtook the

Church back then. Leader after Church leader rose up to speak or to write letters saying in essence, *"Who cares? This is silly! It doesn't make any difference! People in the Church can believe either way- this is not something over which we should divide."* Thank God that Athanasius cared. And at one point in the long debate- every single leader of the Christian Church had been deceived by the heresy of Arius, and Athanasius stood alone against all of them. And the basis on which he continued to fight was the clear and repeated words of Scripture that firmly held for Jesus being of the very *same* Nature and Substance and Essence of the Father. Athanasius said that Scripture taught that Jesus was God Almighty in human flesh while the rest of the Church yawned. So, in reality, it was the tireless work of Athanasius that kept this controversy alive. If he had not been determined to maintain Biblical Purity- the rest of the leaders of the Church would have capitulated long ago.

So something had to be done. And the Emperor became deeply distressed that the divisive effect of the Arian controversy was going to literally dismantle the Empire. Constantine wrote a joint letter to both Arius and Alexander which said this in part:

"Give me back my quiet days and carefree nights. Do not let me spend the rest of my days joylessly."

And here was Constantine's proposed solution. He said,

"Set aside your differences. Drop this argument over Doctrine."

So in essence, Constantine was telling these men that he believed that the *external* unity of the Church among those *outside* the Church was more important than Sound Doctrine *in* the Church. That it was more important that the Church *appear* to be in unity to the world than it was that the Church was faithful to Scripture. Constantine was saying that to him- it was more important that Arius and Alexander and Athanasius liked each other and put forth a show of unity than it was that they taught what the Bible actually said. Boy, that sounds familiar, doesn't it? This is *exactly* the prevailing sentiment in the modern Church today. Many today feel as though no point of Biblical Truth- no matter how critical or crucial it is- is worth fighting over.

That somehow if we all just try to get along- it really doesn't matter what we believe. That is exactly what Constantine was saying.

Constantine was baffled by the division. He had just ended 300 years of persecution against the Church. Christianity had a chance now to flourish and prosper, and here these men were arguing over one letter of one word. And even Eusebius the historian, who was also the Bishop of Caesarea wrote this:

“Who knows how the soul is united with the body and how it leaves it, and yet we venture to inquire into the eternal Essence of the Godhead? Christ said, ‘he that believeth on me hath everlasting life’ - not he who understands how Christ is begotten of the Father. Were the latter the case, no man could attain unto Salvation.”

So we can see that the mood in the fourth century Church was very similar to the mood in the Church today. Doctrine divides, doctrine splits people apart; so let's *minimize* Doctrine or eliminate it altogether- because as long as you believe on Jesus- nothing else matters, right?

So in A.D. 325- even though he held no official authority in the Church- the Emperor Constantine himself called the Church to come together in a Council in the city of Nicaea- which is near to modern day Istanbul. According to Church history⁸ 318 bishops, plus other attenders like Arius and Athanasius, neither of whom was a Bishop, were assembled to the Council.

The Council of Nicaea lasted from May through August of that year and concluded with a “summary statement” or a “Creed of Orthodoxy” that has defined Christianity to this day- called “The Nicæan Creed”. And that conclusion was based upon what the Bible teaches in **John 1:1-3,& 14:**

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

⁸ Archibald Robertson estimates the bishops at something over 250, and attributes the number 318 to the symbolic significance it had. “According to Athanasius, who again, toward the end of his life (*ad Afr.* 2) acquiesces in the precise figure 318 (Gen xiv. 14; the Greek numeral *tiē* combines the Cross [*τ*] with the initial letters of the Sacred Name [*ιē*]) which a later generation adopted (it first occurs in the alleged Coptic acts of the Council of Alexandria, 362, then in the Letter of Liberius to the bishops of Asia in 365), on grounds perhaps symbolical rather than historical. *NPNF* 4:xvii n. 1.

3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

And Athanasius himself wrote the middle part of the Nicene Creed which had to do with the Nature of Christ that says that Jesus was:

And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
The only-begotten Son of God,
Begotten of the Father before all worlds;
God of God,
Light of Light,
Very God of very God;
Begotten, not made,
Being of one substance [homoousia] with the Father,
By whom all things were made.
Who, for us men for our salvation,
Came down from heaven,
And was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,
And was made man;
And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered and was buried;
And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures;
And ascended into heaven,
And sits on the right hand of the Father;
And He shall come again, with glory,
To judge the quick and the dead;
Whose kingdom shall have no end.

Now, when Athanasius' mentor, Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria died, April 17, 328, three years after the Council of Nicaea, the mantle of Egypt and of the cause of Orthodoxy fell to Athanasius. He was ordained as Bishop on June 8 of that year. Now this bishopric was the second in all of Christendom after Rome at that time. And it had complete jurisdiction over all the Church leaders of Egypt and Libya. And so under Athanasius's leadership- Arianism died out entirely in

Egypt. And from Egypt, Athanasius wielded his Empire-wide influence in the battle for the Deity of Christ.

But even though 300 Bishops had signed the findings of the Council of Nicaea, and even though Arius and his followers had been excommunicated from the Church, and even though Arianism was officially and formally declared to be a heresy- within two years after taking office as Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius's life was turned upside down.

This man- the hero who stood alone against the evil teachings of Arius and who had successfully defended the Christian Faith against the heresy of Arianism became embroiled in controversy almost immediately. And over the next 17 years- Athanasius was exiled five different times for no other reason than the leaders of the Church simply didn't have the stomach to continue to guard the Church against false teaching.

And each time they brought him back to see if he had learned his lesson and would tone down his rhetoric against Arianism- as soon as they gave Athanasius a chance to speak- he rose up and said,

John 1:1, 2 & 14:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Now, I wish I could tell you that the heresy of Arianism that God used Athanasius to so thoroughly defeat 1700 years ago was dead and gone. But that is not what happens to false teaching. False teaching never really goes away- it simply lies dormant until it can deceive another generation of people who do not know the Bible properly. And that is why each successive generation must be taught the Word of God and learn Biblical Truth, or else they will be sitting ducks for the false teachers.

So although Arianism is an ancient heresy- it is not extinct. Arius and his followers were excommunicated from the Church and his false teaching was thrown into the waste bin of history. And there they laid until 1879- when a lukewarm Baptist preacher by the name of Charles

Taze Russell uncovered the ancient teachings of Arius, was deceived by them himself, and then went about to deceive as many people as he possibly could. In 1881- Russell bought a small printing company in New York to publish his heretical teachings and renamed it "The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society", and he renamed Arianism to be "Jehovah's Witnesses". And as of 2014- the Jehovah's Witnesses- who are the modern manifestation of the ancient heresy of Arianism- number over 8 million deceived souls, worldwide.

Athanasius was brought back the last time on February 1, 366AD. And he spent the last years of his life fulfilling his calling as a Pastor and as an overseer of other Pastors. He carried on extensive correspondence, and he continued to give great encouragement and support to the cause of orthodoxy around the empire. Finally, on May 2, AD 373- some 1,642 years ago- the hero that God used to rescue the Christian Church from terrible heresy died.

So now I want to turn to the lessons that we may learn from this remarkable life and ministry.

1. Defending and explaining Biblical Truth is for the sake of the Gospel of Christ's Glory and our everlasting Joy.

When Athanasius was driven into his third exile, he wrote an open letter called "To the Bishops of Egypt." In that letter- he referred to the martyrs who had died defending the Deity of Jesus Christ. Then he said, "*Wherefore . . . considering that this struggle is for our all . . . let us also make it our earnest care and aim to guard what we have received.*"⁹ One historian wrote, "The Arian controversy was to [Athanasius] no battle for ecclesiastical power, nor for theological triumph. It was a religious crisis involving the reality of both Revelation and Redemption."¹⁰ So Athanasius said, "We are contending for our all!"

So what was at stake was *everything*! Oh, how thankful we should be that Athanasius saw things so clearly! The Incarnation has to do with the Gospel. It has to do with Salvation. It has to do with whether there is any hope at all for sinners. And the Creed that Athanasius helped craft, and that he embraced and spent his life defending and explaining, says this plainly.

⁹ David Wright, "The Life Changing 'Life of Antony,'" in *Christian History* vol. XVIII, no. 4 (1999): 234

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, lxvii.

In other words, the full Deity of the Incarnate God is essential because the Gospel of our Salvation is essential. And there would be no Salvation for anybody if Jesus Christ was not fully God. And the Church of Jesus would not know today that Jesus was God if Athanasius had not fought like he fought.

Athanasius saw very clearly that there are Truths in the Holy Bible that are worth fighting for and dying for and living for. Because they are the very “Ground” of our Life. They are the heart of our Worship. And the Divine and Human Nature of Jesus Christ in one Person is one of those Doctrines.

2. Joyful Courage is the Calling of Faithful Shepherds.

Athanasius stared down murderous intruders into his Church. He stood before Emperors who could have killed him as easily as exiled him. He risked the wrath of parents and other clergy by consciously training young people to give their all for Christ, including martyrdom. He celebrated the fruit of his ministry with these words about those who followed him and who had been taught by him: “... In youth they are self-restrained, in temptations endure, in labors persevere, when insulted are patient, when robbed make light of it: and, wonderful as it is, they despise even death and become martyrs for Christ”—martyrs not who kill as they die, but who love as they die.¹¹

The phrase “Athanasius *Contra Mundum*” should inspire every Pastor and Elder and Deacon to stand your ground meekly and humbly and courageously whenever a Biblical Truth is at stake. But be sure that you always “out-rejoice” your adversaries. Because if something is worth *fighting* for- then it is worth *rejoicing* over. And this Joy is *essential* in the battle, because *nothing* is worth fighting for- that will *not* increase our joy in God. And God's people must see that.

Courage in conflict must mingle with Joy in Jesus Christ. And *this* is what Athanasius sought to be himself. This was part of Athanasius' battle strategy with his adversaries:

“Let us be *courageous* and *rejoice* always. . . . Let us consider and lay to heart that while the Lord is with us, our foes can do us no hurt. . . . But if they see us *rejoicing in the Lord*, contemplating the bliss of the future,

¹¹NPNF 4:65.

mindful of the Lord, deeming all things in His hand . . . —they are discomfited and turned backwards”.¹²

So, my friends- even if at times it may feel as though we are alone against an almost insurmountable wave of compromise and heresy- let us stand courageous and make sure that we “out-rejoice” our adversaries.

3. Loving Christ includes loving true Propositions about Christ

What was clear to Athanasius was that Propositions *about* Christ in Scripture carried convictions that could send you to either Heaven or Hell. There were propositions put to Athanasius like: “There was a time when the Son of God was not,” and, “He was not before He was made,” and, “the Son of God is created.” And these propositions were damnable. And if they were spread about and believed- they would damn the souls who embraced them. And, therefore, Athanasius labored with all his might to formulate propositions that were actually taught in sacred Scripture- propositions that would lead the soul to faith and worship and heaven.

There is no doubt in my mind that Athanasius would have abominated, with tears, the contemporary call for “diminishing Doctrine” that you hear among many of the so-called “reformists” and “the emerging church.”¹³ Athanasius would have said, *“Our young people in Alexandria die for the Truth of Propositions about Christ. What do your young people die for?”* And if the answer came back from the leaders of the modern Church, *“We find nothing worth dying over.”* Athanasius would answer, *“That’s exactly what Arius says.”*

Athanasius would have grieved over sentences like “It is Christ who unites us; it is doctrines that divides.” And sentences like: “We should ask, Whom do you trust? rather than what do you believe?”¹⁴ He would have grieved because he knew this is the very tactic used by the Arian bishops to cover the councils with fog so that the word “Christ” could mean *anything*. Those who talk like this—“Christ unites, doctrine

¹²Ibid., 207.

¹³ See the critical interaction with these movements in Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjos Helseth, Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2004).

¹⁴ These sentences are from E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon, 1925), 155-157. I cite this older book because it is being used with enthusiasm by some today to buttress a vision that beclouds the importance of doctrine.

divides”—have simply replaced “Biblical Propositions” with a “word”. They think they have done something profound and fresh, when, in fact, they have done something very old and stale and very deadly. And this leads to a related lesson . . .

4. The Truth of Biblical Language must be Vigorously Protected with Non-Biblical Language.

Athanasius’ experience was critically illuminating to something I have come to see over the years, especially in liberally minded baptistic and pietistic traditions, namely, that the slogan, “The Bible is our only Creed” is often used as a cloak to conceal the fact that Biblical language is used to affirm things that the Bible simply does *not* teach. And this is what Athanasius encountered so insidiously at the Council of Nicaea. We must understand that those who seek to undermine what the Bible actually says in our day- use biblical sentences.

But Athanasius saw through this “post-modern,” “post-conservative,” “post-propositional” strategy and saved for us not just Bible words, but Bible Truth. May God grant us the discernment of Athanasius for our day because very precious things are at stake.¹⁵

5. A Widespread and Long-held Doctrinal Difference among Christians does not mean that the Difference is Insignificant or that we should not seek to Persuade toward the Truth and Seek Agreement.

What if someone had said to Athanasius, “Athanasius, people have disagreed on this issue for 300 years, and there has never been an official position taken in the church to establish one side as orthodox and the other as heresy? So who do you think you are? Most of the bishops in the world disagree with you and they read the same Bible you do. So stop fighting this battle and let different views exist side by side.”

We may thank God that Athanasius did not think that way. He did *not* regard the amount of time that had elapsed or the number of Christians who disagreed to determine what Doctrines are important

¹⁵Another way that Athanasius and the orthodox bishops at Nicaea protected the truth was to include denials as well as affirmations. In their case they were called anathemas. The point here is this: When mistaken teachers are looking for a way to have their views accepted in the mainstream, they are often willing to agree with Biblical affirmations- while they give those affirmations different meanings.

and which we should strive to teach and spread and make normative in the Church.

And so today we should not conclude that the absence of consensus in the Church means doctrinal stalemate. God may yet be pleased to give the blessing of unity on some crucial areas of doctrine that are not yet resolved in the Christian church. I think, for example, of the issue of Manhood and Womanhood, the issue of Justification by faith, and the issue of how the death of Christ saves sinners, and the issue of the sovereignty of God's Grace in converting the soul. I don't think we should assume that because much time has gone by and many people disagree it must always be this way. Who knows but, by God's amazing Grace, wrong views on these things could become as marginal as the Arianism of the Jehovah's Witnesses is today?

6. Don't aim to preach only in categories of thought that can be readily understood by this generation. Aim at creating Biblical Categories of thought that are not present.

Another way to put it is to use the terminology of Andrew Walls:

“Don't embrace the ‘Indigenous Principle’ of Christianity at the expense of the ‘Pilgrim Principle’”

The “Indigenous Principle” says, **“I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” (1Corinthians 9:22)**. But the “Pilgrim Principle” says, **“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” (Romans 12:2)**.

Some of the most crucial and precious Truths of the Scripture are counter-intuitive to the fallen human mind. They don't fit easily into our heads. And the orthodox understanding of the Trinity is one of those. If the Indigenous Principle had triumphed in the fourth century, we would all be Jehovah's Witnesses today. So we must not shy away from hard, deep, and profound issues- simply because they are hard, deep, and profound. Because it is much easier for the human mind to say that “the Son of God, like all other sons, once was not, and then came into being”, than it is to say, “Jesus has *always* been God with the Father, yet there is only one God”. But the Bible will not let its Message be fit into the categories that we bring with our fallen, finite, carnal minds. It presses

us to *relentlessly* create *new* categories of thought to contain the profound Mysteries of the Gospel.

Archibald Roberts points out that with the conversion of Constantine and the Edict of Milan (313) which gave legal status to Christianity,

“The inevitable influx of heathen into the Church, now that the Empire had become ‘Christian’, brought with it multitudes to whom Arianism was a more intelligible creed than that of Nicaea.”

And so if you want to grow a Church today- the temptation is to give the people what they already have- and then to rejoice over that. But once a Church like that is grown- it thinks so much like the world that the difference is not decisive. The radical Biblical Gospel is blunted and the Glory of Jesus Christ is obscured.

Rather, alongside the indigenous principle of accommodation and contextualization, Athanasius would plead with us to have a deep commitment to the “Pilgrim Principle” of confrontation and transformation and brain-boggling, mind-altering, re-categorization of the way people think about Eternal Things.

And we must not treat these two principles as sequential. They start and continue together. We must *not* assume that the first and basic Truths of Christianity fit easily into the fallen mind of unbelievers. We must also *not* assume that these powerful and awe inspiring mind blowing Truths about Jesus and God and Salvation can be contextualized in categories of thought that are already present in the minds of 21st century human beings, and that only later, after they have become Christians, we can begin to alter the way they think with more *advanced* Truth.

That is simply not the case. From the very beginning, we must speak to God’s people about God-centered, Christ-exalting Truths that absolutely shatter fallen human categories of thought and render them speechless. And we must never shy away from this. We must do all we can to advance it and to help people, by the Grace of God, to see what is happening to them (the shattering of their categories) as the best news in all the world.

From the very beginning, and in the best way possible, we must not hesitate to herald glorious Truths to the most uneducated sinners

like this: “God rules the world of bliss and suffering and sin, right down to the roll of the dice and the fall of a bird and the driving of the nail into the hand of His Son, yet, though He wills that such sin and suffering exist- He Himself does not sin, but is perfectly Holy”. Or a Truth like this: “God governs all the steps of all people, both good and bad, at all times and in all places, yet in such a way that all humans are always accountable to God and will bear the just consequences of God’s Wrath if they do not repent and believe in Jesus Christ.” Or this Truth: “All are dead in their trespasses and sins and are not *morally able* to come to Christ because of their rebellion, yet, they are responsible to come and will be justly punished if they don’t come.” Or: “Jesus Christ is one Person with two Natures- fully Divine and fully Human- such that He upheld the world by the Word of His Power while living in His mother’s womb.” Or this: “Sin, though committed by a finite person and in the confines of finite time is nevertheless deserving of an infinitely long punishment because it is a sin against an infinitely Worthy God.” Or this: “The Death of the one God-Man, Jesus Christ, so displayed and glorified the Righteousness of God that God is not unrighteous to declare ungodly people “Righteous- who simply believe in Jesus Christ.”

These kinds of mind-boggling, category-shattering Truths demand our *best* thoughts and our *most* creative labors. We must aim to speak them in a way that, by the Power of God’s Word and Spirit, a place for them would be created in the minds of those who hear. We must not preach only in the categories that are already present in our listeners’ fallen minds, or we will betray the Gospel and conceal the Glory of God. And that is a legacy that Athanasius left to the Church.

So thank you, Athanasius. And thank You, Father God. And thank You, Holy Spirit. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Let’s pray.

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The Covenant of Peace Church 13600 John Clark Road Gulfport, Mississippi 39503 228.832.7729 www.covenantofpeace.net

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.