

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

The Person of Christ The Humanity of Christ...Athanasius

Athanasius Contra Mundum, Athanasius Against the World; it's a marvelous epitaph. It is an epitaph that every one of us should strive to live out during our sojourn on earth. Yet, unless we are ever vigilant to hang on to the truth of Christ's person and work, our epitaphs may instead read Tom Shoulder to Shoulder with the World, or Mike Hip Deep in the World, or Bob Friend and Lover of the World.

I think our study has begun to reveal that Christ's church is poised perpetually on the edge of a vast chasm. It has been and will continue to be God's faithfulness that prevents us from tumbling headlong into the abyss of unbelief. That unbelief is not always purposeful. Sometimes it's the result of loss of heart; sometimes it's the result of ignorance. That's why I think Dr. Boice's comments at the initial Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals are so appropriate.

But our problem here is to talk about the weakness of the evangelical church as we see it, and that's not just a single issue, it is a very complex and widespread

matter. To put it in a word, it is the lack of theology in the church. People who have done surveys like Gallup and Barna have come back with statistics that just scare us to death. We cannot believe there is so much ignorance of basic theology out there. And as a result or consequence of that lack of a well-defined theology, we find evangelicals buying into all of the world's ways of doing things. I sometimes say what you've got in the evangelical church today is what a generation ago the liberal church was guilty of. They were guilty of pursuing the world's theology, the world's wisdom, the world's agenda, and the world's methods.¹

Today the evangelical church is struggling to stay upright. We are teetering on the edge. To use another metaphor, we are drifting. Drifting between the winds of rationalism, pragmatism, and emotionalism, we have no idea where we will come down. Gene Veith captured the heart of this particular issue at a recent conference.

The language of rational assent is replaced by the language of aesthetics. Instead of saying "I agree with what that church teaches," people say, "I like that church." Instead of saying, "I believe in Jesus," people say, "I like Jesus." Of course, they usually do not "like" the Bible's teachings on sin, Hell, and judgment. What they do not like, they do not believe. Truth gives way to pleasure; the intellect is replaced by the will. When people exclude truth, basing their faith on what they enjoy and what they desire, they can believe in literally anything.²

Obviously, part of our struggle is intellectual. We don't think the great thoughts of the faith. We may not even be aware that such thoughts have ever occurred. We want to be inwardly pure and clean and we do not want to struggle with ideas in the achievement of that purity. We are overtly pietistic. We study pietism for the sake of pietism. We have given up the struggle for the easier path. I love how C.S. Lewis noted the preoccupation with devotional literature in his own day. Writing an introduction to Athanasius' **On the Incarnation**, Lewis writes:

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

So, in our study we have been examining the church's great theological struggles. Not just any struggles, but particularly the struggles that the church faced concerning the person and work of Christ. We have been looking at the two great tethers that keep orthodox Christianity tied to the Scripture. They are:

1. Who was Christ?
2. What did He accomplish on behalf of His people?

Last week we saw the great struggles the church had concerning the biblical notion of Christ's deity. We noted the debate the church underwent as it struggled to resolve biblical monotheism and proper exaltation, devotion, and worship of Christ. We were introduced to the theological term "monarchianism".

First, we looked at "modalistic monarchianism" and the church's resistance to the idea that God simply displayed Himself at various times as different members of the Trinity. What the church was trying to understand was the biblical notion of three persons in one essence. Modalistic monarchianism offered the solution of God being one person.

Next we looked at the theology of “dynamic monarchianism”. It was different in that it viewed Christ as greater than man, but less than God. It viewed Christ as being in process. Dynamic monarchianism reflects perfectly the state of contemporary Mormonism.

Much of the LDS concept of godhood is expressed in a frequently cited aphorism written in 1840 by Lorenzo Snow, fifth President of the Church. At the time, Snow was twenty-six years old, having been baptized four years earlier. He recorded in his journal that he attended a meeting in which Elder H. G. Sherwood explained the parable of the Savior regarding the husbandman who hired servants and sent them forth at different hours of the day to labor for him in his vineyard. Snow continued, as recorded in his sister's biography of him: "The Spirit of the Lord rested mightily upon me - the eyes of my understanding were opened, and I saw as clear as the sun at noonday, with wonder and astonishment, the pathway of God and man. I formed the following couplet which expresses the revelation, as it was shown me.... As man now is, God once was: As God now is, man may be."⁴

Now the logical conclusion of this kind of theology leads invariably to polytheism and that is the issue that Alexander and Athanasius after him were trying to hammer out in their insistence on the word “homousias”. What we saw last time, was the church insisting on the term “homoiousias” at Antioch (267 AD) and switching to the term “homousias” at Nicea (325 AD).

It's not that the church changed its mind in the 58 years between Antioch and Nicea, it's rather that the face of heresy changed. Antioch insisted on “homoiousias” to counter the modalism of Sabellius. Nicea insisted on

“homousias” to counter the idea of Christ being inferior or subordinate in His essence to the Father.

Arius and his cohorts were insisting that Christ was created in time. Otherwise, they argued “begotten” did not mean anything. “Begotten” to Arius meant created. As a result, Arius argued that many biblical passages taught the inferiority of Christ to the Father. In particular, they used:

NIV Colossians 1:15...He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

Athanasius and the champions of Nicea were arguing that terms like “begotten” and “Son” stressed the relation of the one essence between Father and Son. They argued that while “beget” could mean create, Arius was missing the distinctly Hebrew overtones of the term. They countered with passages like:

NIV John 8:44...You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

NIV Acts 4:36...Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), ³⁷ sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles

So the battle raged until Nicea and Arius was turned out. The great Nicene Creed was formed and the church enjoyed peace, but only for a time. The Arians, with new leadership, continued the assault on the church in general and Athanasius

in particular. Athanasius continued to argue that only God could redeem; he argued that if Christ were not God, men were still in their sins. And he suffered for it.

During the next forty-eight years, Athanasius did battle with the Arians and at times he did battle with the various Emperors of Rome. He was sent into exile five times. Once, he was exiled for four years and finally recalled but before he could make his way back to Alexandria, he was exiled again. One historian related Athanasius' life in terms of his times of quiet. I like that. Athanasius' times of quiet were the times when he wasn't in exile. They were the times when he was able to be at home and minister to the saints under his charge. Let's look at them for a moment.

1st Time of Quiet was June 8, 328 to July 11, 335 (3 years)

2nd Time of Quiet was November 23, 337 to April 16, 339 (1.5 years)

3rd Time of Quiet was October 21, 346 to February 8, 356 (9.5 years)

4th Time of Quiet was February 21, 362 to October 23, 362 (8 months)

5th Time of Quiet was February 1, 366 to May 2, 373 (7 years)

If you look at Athanasius' forty-five years as Bishop of Alexandria and total up the years spent in exile, you find that approximately half of his time was spent hiding from his enemies. Much of time was spent in some of the ancient Egyptian tombs, or in caves, or in the desert. He was never very far from death. But God miraculously protected him.

Now, I've spent too much time on things historical and there is no need to do that since there are a great many books that relate the story better than I could ever do. Let me just recommend a few starting with the simplest. First, [Christian Theology: an Introduction](#) by Alister McGrath and [History of Theology](#) by Bengt

Hagglund are both really excellent. Both works give a good overview of the history and theology of the early church. Secondly, and more complex, is Early Christian Doctrines by J.N.D. Kelly. Lastly, is the massive Outline of the History of Dogma by Adolph Von Harnack. Also, the introduction to Athanasius by Archibald Robertson in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers is wonderful. However, before I leave Athanasius let me relate two quick stories to show the kinds of things he faced and how God protected him.

Once Athanasius was running from men who were trying to murder him. They were gaining on him as he and several of his companions were pushing up the Nile River. Athanasius was not aware that his pursuers were so close on his trail, yet he decided that he would be better off heading back to Alexandria. So, he turned the boat around and started back down the river. He quickly ran into his pursuers who pulled alongside his vessel. They asked if he had seen Athanasius and he replied that he had. He asked why they were looking for him and they openly related their intentions. Then they asked how far ahead Athanasius was on the river. Athanasius replied that he was sure Athanasius was very close by and that if they hurried they might still catch him. The armed band started fast up the river and Athanasius floated down toward home and safety.

Secondly, I want to look at a story related by Archibald Robertson on the kind of people the Arians were.

Eusebius of Caesarea accused Athanasius of being murderous. It seems a certain Arian Bishop, named Arsenius, had been rebuffed by Athanasius. Eusebius had started a rumor that Athanasius had had Arsenius killed and had cut off his hand for magical purposes. In fact, a dried, and withered hand was circulated that was purported to be the very hand in question. So, a complaint was sent to

Constantine and an inquiry was held. Athanasius was commanded to appear. In the meantime, Athanasius had sent out detectives to locate the murdered Arsenius. They found him and bound him and brought him back secretly to the inquiry.

At the inquiry Eusebius produced the hand and accused Athanasius of the foul act of murder. Athanasius rose and asked the judges whether they knew Arsenius personally. When they all replied that they did, Athanasius, calmly called his secret witness. Arsenius was rushed into the inquiry in a hooded gown. The judges were shocked to see Arsenius very much alive and then asked Athanasius to display Arsenius' arms. So Athanasius, in a great show of theatrics, walked over and raised Arsenius' arm, pulled back the long sleeve and revealed a perfectly attached hand. Then really milking the scene for all it was worth Athanasius pulled up Arsenius' other arm and slowly pulled back the sleeve to reveal, to a hushed silence, another perfectly attached hand. Athanasius turned to the judges and inquired as to whether he should search Arsenius for other arms from which the hand might have been severed. The crowd burst out in laughter and the Arians scattered like quail, except for Eusebius who calmly stated that Arsenius' hand had been restored by Athanasius' magic and that an attempt really had been made on Arsenius' life but that he had escaped and had been hiding out of fear.

Unbelievably, the inquiry continued and Athanasius had eventually to flee in order to save his life.

Now I love those kind of stories, but they can be a distraction. The point I want to make is that Athanasius took the deity of Christ very seriously. He knew that the nature of Christ was of crucial importance in the salvation of sinners. God used him to defend the biblical truth of Christ's divine person, yet Athanasius did not live to see the resolution of the conflict. He died May 2, 373 AD and it was not until the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD that the Arians were finally put to flight. So the church stood off the attack on Christ's deity, yet the peace of Constantinople had a very short life. Next, the church had to fight for the biblical notion of Christ's humanity. If Christ was of one essence with the

Father, how was humanity to be explained? It was clear He was fully God, but was He fully Man?

The fight started in earnest when Cyril of Alexandria used the term “theotokos” to refer to the virgin Mary. The term “theotokos” means Mother of God. Now Mary was beginning at even this early stage of the church to play a more and more important role, but that was not the issue for Cyril. For Cyril, the issue was the two natures of Christ. Cyril affirmed that Christ had a human nature and a divine nature and they were not confused into each other. There were two natures in one person. So, when Mary had Jesus, she did not have just the human nature of Jesus. She had a baby and that person was the God-Man Jesus.

Yet, a man named Nestorius took real exception to the term “theotokos”. Hence, you see in the Nestorian controversy the importance again of a single word. Nestorius wanted the term “anthropotokos” meaning humanity bearer, or “Christotokos” meaning Christ bearer to be used instead. His suggestions were met with cries of outrage and indignation, because it was argued that he was denying the deity of Christ.

How do you think the Reformers dealt with the term “theotokos” or Mary as the Mother of God?

Now there is a sense in which you can see Nestorius’ point. Nestorius spoke of the two natures standing in stark contrast to each other and there do seem to be Scriptures that speak of Christ’ humanity and not His deity.

NIV Luke 2:39...When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the

child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

^{NIV} **John 11:33**...When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ³⁴ "Where have you laid him?" he asked. "Come and see, Lord," they replied. ³⁵ Jesus wept.

^{NIV} **Luke 19:41**...As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-- but now it is hidden from your every side.

On the other hand, there are passages that speak clearly of His deity. He could read people's minds. He could still the winds. He could create loaves and fishes out of just a few fragments. He could raise the dead. He could forgive sins.

^{NIV} **John 1:47**...When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." ⁴⁸ "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." ⁴⁹ Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel."

^{NIV} **Matthew 8:25**...The disciples went and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" ²⁶ He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. ²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!"

^{NIV} **Matthew 9:6**...But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...." Then he said to the paralytic, "Get up, take your mat and go home." ⁷ And the man got up and went home. ⁸ When the crowd saw this, they were filled with awe; and they praised God, who had given such authority to men. ⁹ As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. "Follow me," he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him. ¹⁰ ¶ While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. ¹¹ When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax

collectors and 'sinners'?"¹² On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

So what are we think? Can we identify actions that relate to the human nature of Christ or to the divine nature of Christ? If we try, we wind up exactly where Nestorius did dividing Christ in His person. Oh, this was a human action of Christ and that was a divine action of Christ. When what we ought to say was that it was act of the God-Man Christ. Nestorius wound up with a schizophrenic Christ. It is not that Nestorius said to little; it is that he said too much. This is a deep and sacred mystery where our puny sin-laden minds cannot go. By his statements, he affirmed Christ to be divine in one of His natures but not in His person.

But more about that next week as we move toward the great Council of Chalcedon.

¹ James Montgomery Boice, ACE Conference at Cambridge

² Gene Veith, The ACE Conference at Cambridge

³ C.S. Lewis, *On the Incarnation*.

⁴ Eliza R. Snow, p. 46.