

## **Learning from the Church Fathers (13)**

### **Athanasius (ca.296-373 A.D.) Against the World. The World Against Athanasius**

More than once I have been told: "I don't go to church, but I believe in God. I am a spiritual person." But who is this God? It makes a great deal of difference whether God is some generic Being or the infinite personal God of the Holy Scripture. In recent years churches show a growing enthusiasm for multi-faith worship and for imprecisely defined doctrinal teachings. "Interfaith service is a sign of hope: prayers, music united nearly 450 participants of diverse beliefs", declared a Grand Rapids Press report on the annual Community Interfaith Thanksgiving service held at Ahavas Israel Synagogue in Grand Rapids. Participants were children chanting Hindu prayers, a Muslim Imam, who recited from the Koran, a Jewish cantor, a Christian choir, and a Christian speaker. But the practice of Muslims and Hindus and Christian worshipping together is going too far. What does an interfaith service suggest? It gives the impression that one religion is as good as another. It indicates, not so much the sophistication of modern Christianity, as its loss of confidence, its failure of nerve. But the claims of Christ are exclusive. All religions are not of equal value. To claim that all religions eventually lead to God is heresy. But heresy is now an outmoded concept to many in the Church, and in secular opinion, it suggests witch-hunting and extremism. Yet heresy is a reality, under whatever name it appears.

### **Constantine the Great (280-337 A.D.)**

Despite the persecutions the early church suffered, it did not lose confidence in the Gospel. It was active in spreading the Gospel. By 300 A.D, there were churches in every province of the Roman empire, with perhaps 10 per cent of the population as its adherents. Persecutions ceased by the order of Constantine the Great. In 313, the Edict of Milan proclaimed freedom of worship for all. And Christianity became the religion of the state. To the end of his reign, Constantine showed partiality toward Christianity in every way. Constantine's goal was to protect the one empire, under the one ruler, with the favour of the one God and His church, against external enemies and to cause it to blossom within. Only one official religion was allowed. Other religions and confessions could be tolerated alongside it only to the extent that they did not endanger the welfare of the state. Christians no longer had to fear persecution, but they had to come to terms with the fact that the emperor, the sole ruler of Rome and Constantinople, now considered himself to have jurisdiction over the church as well. For this reason, Constantine promoted the cause of the unity within the Church as an essential condition of the unity and prosperity of the Empire. He was convinced his mission was given by God to keep the Church one. He wrote, that divisions in the church "should not be kept from me, for by them the high God may be moved only against the human race, but also against me myself, to whose care His heavenly will He has entrusted the guidance of all the affairs of earth, and so may in anger decide things otherwise then hitherto." But instead of unity, Christianity in his time was torn by serious heresies.

### **No Doctrinal Indifference**

The early church was not indifferent to doctrine. The opposite was true. Everyday fourth-century life was permeated with theology, particularly the debate concerning the nature of

Christ. It seems everyone had an opinion. One eyewitness put it like this: "Garment sellers, money changers, food vendors – they are all at it. If you asked for change, they philosophize about the Begotten and Unbegotten. If you inquire about the price of bread, the answer is that the Father is greater and the Son inferior. If you say to the attendant, 'Is my bath ready?' he tells you that the Son was made out of nothing." The fierce debates concerning Christ were caused by the rise of Arianism, the most challenging heresy in the history of the church.

Arius (250-336), from whose name comes Arianism, was probably of Libyan origin. In 311 he was ordained as presbyter in Alexandria. An eloquent preacher, Arius captivated his large congregation in Alexandria with his ideas. He expressed his ideas in a series of popular poetic hymns, setting them to music adapted from old, familiar tunes of the ancient Egyptians. These hymns about how the Son was inferior to the Father could be heard in the shipyards and all over Alexandria.

Arius argued that the scriptural titles for Christ, which appeared to point to his being of equal status with God, were merely courtesy titles. He taught that the Father created the Son from nothing. Jesus had been created before time began, and everything else had been created through him. He takes precedence over all of creation (Prov. 8:22-31). According to Arius' model, the Son is God, though not "true God" because he does not share in the Father's nature, and therefore is subordinate in terms of rank, authority, and glory. Like earlier heretics the Arians appealed to Scripture and, in fact, insisted that all discussions be restricted to the text of Scripture. Arius quickly gained popularity. A synod in Alexandria excommunicated him (323A.D.). Refusing to submit to those who condemned his teachings, he toured the Roman empire to drum up support.

### **Athanasius contra Arius**

Athanasius the bishop of Alexandria, considered to be the greatest theologian of his time, was a fierce opponent of Arius. He was an Alexandrian and raised in a non-Christian family. We have virtually no reliable information on his origin, childhood, and adolescence. He has been called one of the "four great ecclesiastical teachers of the East", as well as "the Father of the Orthodox Faith". He did not water down his convictions. He felt the overwhelming greatness, the transcendent and august majesty of the only God to such an intense degree that every deviation in thought hurt him like a wound. Athanasius charged: "Arius denies the Godhood of our Saviour and preaches that He is only the equal of all others. Having collected all the passages that speak of His plan of salvation and His humiliation for our sake,...[his followers] ignore all together the passages in which His eternal Godhood and unutterable glory with the Father is set forth." He pointed out that the doctrine of the deity of Christ is not an invented doctrine, it is the heart of the Christian faith. To deny Christ's divinity is to deny the whole basis of salvation. Christ has to be God to be our Saviour. According to Athanasius, salvation involves divine intervention. He explained the meaning of John 1:14 by arguing that the "word became flesh". In other words, God entered our human situation, in order to change it. Therefore, Christians were right to adore and worship Jesus Christ. By doing so, they recognized Him for what he was – God incarnate. And Athanasius did not hesitate to affirm that "the Eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1:20) is the Son of God. To imagine "'times when He was not' is to blaspheme His majesty."

Athanasius argued that Arius' heresy would never have arisen if he had remained faithful to the church's interpretation of Scripture. In his entire debate with the Arians, Athanasius never appealed to any plural "traditions". He appealed to the sufficiency of the Holy Scripture as interpreted within the context of the apostolic faith. He also gave specific instructions on what books were considered apostolic and thus authoritative. In his Easter Letter of 367, he outlined the present-day twenty-seven books of the new Testament as the canon, and then stated that "these [books] are fountains of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness. Let no man add to these, neither let him take aught from these."

## **The Five Exiles**

Athanasius formed the head of the anti-Arian resistance for four decades, as a result he had to leave his diocese no less than five times and four Arian anti-bishops were appointed in succession in his place. He spent seventeen out of forty-six years as bishop in exile. Even in the face of imperial opposition, he clung tenaciously to the belief in the equality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is probably not an exaggeration to say that if it were not for his efforts, the heretical view known as Arianism would have won the day. From the time of his return to Alexandria until his death in May 373, Athanasius was occupied by disputation against the Arians, by the building of new churches, and in writing some of his final works.

## **Writings**

While Athanasius was still in his twenties he wrote the treatise "The Incarnation of the Word of God", which is still one of the most widely read works of the church fathers. It explains and defends the Gospel to those who might raise sceptical questions. It is a powerful defence of the idea that God assumed human nature in the person of Jesus Christ. By the union of God the Logos with manhood in the person of the Son, Jesus restored the image of God to fallen humanity. By his death and resurrection, Jesus overcame death, which was the consequence of sin. Athanasius argues for the reality of the resurrection on the ground that Christ is presently active in the world. All His disciples, says Athanasius, despise death as an enemy already overcome. Since the time of Christ, the pagan oracles have fallen silent, the shrines of the idols are being abandoned, the heroes and gods of the pagans are being exposed as mere mortals. Athanasius points out that if Christ were not fully God, it would be impossible for God to redeem humanity, as no creature could redeem another creature. No one in the ancient church was more clear on this point than Athanasius. His main emphasis is not negative and polemical but positive and doctrinal. His warm and eager commitment to Christ is more winning than the vitriolic eloquence of Tertullian.

## **The Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.)**

How is error to be recognized? The early Councils of the Church were all called in order to identify heretical ideas. When Constantine became convinced that Arianism was not a dispute of various theological schools, as initially was assumed, but a split in the church and hence a public one, he summoned the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) to solve the conflict. He took part in the ceremonies and chaired it. This first ecumenical council in the history of the church is important not only because it decided in a generally binding manner on an issue concerning

the entire church but also because its composition represented the church as a whole. Its main issue was to clarify the belief in the Trinity by confronting the theology of Arius, which was condemned by the council. The latter closed with the bishops' almost unanimous agreement on the council's creed; the emperor exiled the three objectors. This creed is now known as the Nicene Creed, which spells out the orthodox Christian beliefs regarding the human and divine nature of Jesus Christ. It is still regarded as a benchmark of orthodoxy within all the mainstream Christian churches, whether Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox. And it is also regularly used in worship services.

## **Post Nicaea**

The Council of Nicaea did not put an end to the powerful heresy of Arianism, nor did it eliminate the Arian party, whose teaching continued to spread. This inaugurated a period of theological strife between Arius and Athanasius. The situation was aggravated by the infiltration of Arianism into the imperial court and its increasing popularity among the populace, whose thinking was more open to the simple and pragmatic ideas of Arius. Emperor Constantine, eager to preserve the unity of empire, first accepted the verdict of Nicaea, but later wavered in his judgment. He was probably influenced by his Arian sister Constantia, as well as the expanding number of Arian followers. The emperor wanted Athanasius to be reconciled with his enemies and reinstate Arius in church communion. But Athanasius steadfastly opposed all endeavours of Constantine to reconcile with Arius. A synod of 335 A.D. formally confirmed the reconciliation movement. Some persuaded the emperor that peace might be best restored by reversing the decisions of Nicaea. In 336 A.D. Constantine duly ordered the church to receive Arius back into the fold. This was foiled only by the timely and rather gruesome death of Arius, who suffered a horrific haemorrhage in a public toilet at Constantinople. Athanasius continued to refuse a dubious reconciliation. He stood fast by his theology against a movement that survived Arius and kept on expanding. Constantine died on May 22, 337 A.D., without having resolved the Arian dispute. Successive emperors openly overruled Nicaea and supported the Arians. But eventually at the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D., the Nicene Creed would be restated as the official creed of the Church. Every council that came after would claim only to be explaining the Symbol of Nicaea, not adding to it. The ultimate failure of Arianism led to the far-reaching destruction of his works, a result of which hardly any of them has been preserved.

When Athanasius died in 373 A.D. he was perhaps the last survivor of those who had been present at Nicaea in 325 A.D. In the last fifteen years of his life he was the elder statesman whose authority had been enhanced by his record of unbending firmness.

## **Conclusion**

In the fourth century the saying was: "Athanasius was against the world. The world against Athanasius." In our age of undiscerning Christianity, when churches too often have bought into North American popular culture, nothing is needed more than believers like Athanasius who are willing to live boldly contra the world.

J.D. Tangelder  
August, 2008