

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Chapter 13

Athanasius, Ambrose and Arianism

During my third year of law school, I clerked for the Lubbock city attorney, John Ross. John was a good lawyer and a fine gentleman. He took his job very seriously, including his responsibility to mentor young clerks like me. I still remember several lessons he taught me, and have been quick to pass them on.

While John was not likely the reason I landed my job in Houston coming out of law school, he certainly helped! Once he learned of my interview set at Houston's Fulbright and Jaworski, he pulled me aside and said,

“Listen, at every job interview, they always ask you whether you have any questions for them. When they do that for you, I want you to ask them this question. Say, ‘Have you found a persistent problem you have with incoming lawyers? Something that I could work on *before* I get here, if I am fortunate enough to get the job?’”

“That,” he said, “is a winner!”

I *really* liked that question, and not only used it 31 years ago, but have taught it to my children and others to use as well.

Another memory I have of John Ross was the t-shirt we got him for his birthday. It seemed to encapsulate his humorous yet jaundiced view of the world. The t-shirt was black. In white letters it said, “Life is Hard and Then You Die.”

That slogan has never left me. Some days life seems easy, but there are days where we might as well don the t-shirt. Because life IS hard... and yes, you do die!

This is not new. The difficulties of getting a job, the difficulties of work, and the harshness of life confront us all. Having the faith to stand in those difficulties sets apart the believer. The believer doesn't have to fear the realities of life, of work, or of death because the road is already set forth and paved by the author of our destiny – all made possible by Jesus. So in faith we stand *especially* when turmoil besets us.

THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Last week we discussed Constantine and the Council of Nicaea (325AD). We pick back up there in brief review.

The variety of issues discussed in this council ranged from how to date Easter to whether to ordain eunuchs as priests, but everything was secondary to settling the Arian controversy. Arius taught that Jesus was made by God and was not divine on the same level as God. Only 28 of the 318 bishops attending the council were clearly Arians at the outset. Since Arius was not a bishop, he was not present for the entire council, but he was represented by Eusebius of Nicomedia and the bishop of Nicaea, Theognis.

Eventually, the council produced what is now known as the Nicene Creed.¹ Constantine himself, probably prompted by his personal chaplain Hosius, proposed a key word for the creed, *homoousios*, which literally means “one substance.” When applied to Jesus, it meant he is “consubstantial” with the Father, of the same substance. It was accepted by the bishops to mean the Father and Son share all the same essential attributes of deity.

The phrase “begotten not made” is an example of wording deemed necessary to eliminate Arianism. The point? Jesus was not created! And, with this creed, Arius was condemned as a heretic. Only Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis refused to sign it, putting their leading positions in the East at risk. They were sent into exile, but later restored in 328 and their followers became known as Eusebians.

ATHANASIUS

What may surprise you is that despite all this, council and creed, Arianism raged on for many more decades before the church finally and definitely condemned it in 381, and even that did not stamp it out! It is really amazing that during those years, there were times when Arianism regained such momentum that it seemed

¹ “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And, in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us humans and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead; And in the Holy Spirit. Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was made out of nothing; or who maintain that He is of another hypostasis or another substance, or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, the Catholic Church anathematizes.”

about to become the orthodox doctrine. Were it not for a little man named Athanasius, it might have. He had assisted Alexander, the orthodox bishop from Alexandria, in a key role at Nicaea. Just three years later, Athanasius became the new bishop of Alexandria in 328. Once made bishop, he devoted incredible energy and devotion to fighting in defense of the Nicene Creed and its key terminology for the rest of his life.

Soon after the council, opposition began to rise over the special word *homoousios* in the creed. Later, after the son of Constantine, Constantius, was in full control of the empire in 353, the word *homoousios* became even more of an issue. Constantius wanted that word replaced with *homoiousios*, which means of a similar substance (not the same substance). Those who lobbied for such a change became known as “semi-Arians” and they became quite influential around 360. Athanasius condemned it as rank heresy and emerged as the key figure in the triumph of orthodox theology.

What a difference one letter can make in the meaning of a message! Perhaps you’ve heard the story Roger Olson tells from Millard Erickson. A wealthy woman supposedly traveled to Europe and found an expensive necklace she wanted to buy. She telegraphed her husband back home to tell him the price. He replied, “No! Price too high,” but the telegraph operator dropped the exclamation mark. She bought the necklace and caused financial ruin and the end of the marriage. It’s probably apocryphal, but it illustrates the importance of something small, like the “i” in *homoiousios*.

It did not help Athanasius’s cause that Constantine began to switch sides after the Council of Nicaea because of pressure from secret sympathizers to Arius. Constantine tried to get Athanasius to accept Arius back as a presbyter, but Athanasius refused. As a result, Athanasius was exiled!

This did not have the desired effect. While Athanasius was away, the Alexandrian church refused to replace him. Moreover, Athanasius spread the influence of the Nicene faith everywhere he went. Also while Athanasius was away from Alexandria, Arius died. A few months later Constantine died in 337. Olson wrote that “Constantine lived as a pagan and died as an Arian. Hardly an admirable *curriculum vitae* for ‘the first Christian emperor!’”² Constantine’s son Constantius (the same one referenced earlier suggesting *homoiousios* rather than *homoosios*) allowed Athanasius to return, but not for long. Athanasius soon had to flee again in 339, this time to Rome.

² Olson, Roger, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Apollos 1999).

Repeatedly during these years, the enemies of Athanasius trumped up charges against him and appealed to a synod of like-minded church leaders to condemn him. They also appealed to the emperor to draw his power into the mix. At various times Athanasius was charged with abuse of power, financial improprieties and even murder. Not surprisingly, he was cleared of murder when the named victim showed up physically unharmed. He was also cleared of the other charges eventually, but only after great opposition and interruption to his work.

On one occasion in 356, Roman troops invaded while he led worship in order to arrest him and possibly kill him. His congregation protected him and he slipped away to live with the desert monks for 6 years. It was during this period that he likely wrote his *Apology to Constantius, Apology for His Flight, Letter to the Monks, and History of the Arians*.

Athanasius's main treatises were *On the Incarnation of the Word* and *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, the latter of which was probably written between 356 and 360. In the first of these, which is still in print and considered a classic, he tried to make clear that the Son is begotten and not made. He emphasized the necessity of a real incarnation of God in humanity for human salvation and stressed the deity of Jesus. The latter is obviously a polemical work, attempting to deconstruct radical subordinationism. (In other words, the Son is not subordinate to the Father.) Two other writings, *The Life of Anthony* (the basis for last week's lesson) and *Against the Heathen*, were less important. W.H.C. Frend stated that "as a pamphleteer, he outdid the emperor Julian himself."³

The emperor Constantius died in 361 and was succeeded by Julian. His accession seemed to prompt a pagan outbreak against the dominant Arian faction in Alexandria and the bishop replacing Athanasius was imprisoned and murdered. An edict from Julian permitted exiled bishops to return home and Athanasius came back again, only to be expelled by Julian as an exception to the general amnesty for bishops. Athanasius returned home *again* once Julian was replaced as emperor by Jovian. In another turnabout, however, the accession of Valens after Jovian gave fresh life to the Arian party and meant another expulsion for Athanasius. In 364 he hid for 4 months in his father's tomb, but eventually Valens allowed him to return to his see in order to prevent a popular outbreak and rebellion.

Athanasius was able to call a council at Alexandria in 362, which prepared the way for a large one in Constantinople in 381. The bishops reaffirmed *homoousios* and specifically rejected the semi-Arian *homoiousios* as heresy. Athanasius proposed a statement and the bishops accepted it, that the Father, Son and Holy

³ Frend, W.H.C., *The Rise of Christianity*, (Fortress 1984).

Spirit were three distinct but not separate *hypostases* of the one God. This was intended to make clear that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, though one substance, are not the same identical person or subsistence. With this, they seemed to agree wholeheartedly with Tertullian's trinitarian formula, *una substantia, tres personae* ("one substance, three persons").

Athanasius died in 373, after spending the last seven years of his life in relative peace and quiet. He died in his own bed, surrounded by those who loved and admired him. Justo Gonzalez seems to express the consensus of most Christian theologians when he says that "Athanasius was without doubt the most remarkable bishop ever to occupy the ancient see of Alexandria, and . . . he was as well the greatest theologian of his time."⁴ Frances Young wrote that he "was a bit of a tyrant, and violent acts were committed in his name," but then she places him on a pedestal as "the pillar of the church; he cleansed the temple in imitation of Christ, not with whips but with persuasive arguments."⁵

AMBROSE

Before we leave the Arian controversy in the 300's, we need to spend some time discussing St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. Ambrose was active both before and after the Council of Constantinople, which expressly placed Arianism into the category of heresy. Ambrose famously took stands based on his faith that could easily have cost him his position, if not his life.

Ambrose was born around 339⁶ in Treves (modern Trier, Germany). He lived about 58 years, dying April 4, 397. His family was of Roman nobility, his father being "Praetorian Prefect" of the Gauls, a high position of authority. Ambrose had one brother and one sister.

While Ambrose was still a young boy, his father died. Ambrose and his siblings were then brought to Rome where Ambrose received an excellent education in both law and the broader liberal arts. Latin was the common language for Ambrose, but he was also well trained in Greek both at home and at school. There is some indication that Ambrose's family was originally of Greek origin.

⁴ Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought: From the beginnings to the Council of Chalcedon* (Abingdon, 1979), 299.

⁵ Young, Francis. *From Nicaea to Chalcedon*. (Fortress Press, 1983), at 82.

⁶ As with so many others from the early church, we are uncertain of the precise date of Ambrose's birth. At this time in history, people did not celebrate births. Instead, they celebrated deaths! Hence with Ambrose, as with so many others, we do not know with certainty even the year of his birth, but we know his death down to the very day.

Ambrose was reared in a Christian home. His sister went into virgin service to the church (read that “became a nun”). Ambrose, at the age of about 26, started practicing law in a governmental position. Five years later (around 370), Ambrose was appointed governor of several regions in Northern Italy. He lived and headquartered in Milan (which at the time served as the capital of the Roman Empire.)

As an administrator, Ambrose had a sterling reputation for not only his skill, but also his virtue. He was a hard working and honest Governor. The Bishop of Milan at the time was Auxentius, an Arian.

When Auxentius died, a serious fight ensued between those we would call orthodox and the Arians regarding who would be named Auxentius’s successor. Should the successor be a Trinitarian or an Arian? As pathetic as it may seem, there were violent confrontations between the two camps on the appropriate successor. As Governor of the region, it fell upon Ambrose to stop the violence and maintain control.

Ambrose must not have been clear in declaring his record on the divinity of Christ, because during this time both sides pressured Ambrose to take on the role of Bishop. Ambrose did not want the job, but ultimately made the decision to accept it anyway. On December 7, 374, Ambrose became the Bishop of Milan.

The first real task Ambrose undertook as Bishop was selling his family wealth and distributing it to the poor and the church. He set the example of asceticism (living without personal riches or indulgences/conveniences), and then required the same of his other church staff.

Ambrose next set himself to a conscientious study of theology, most of which was then written in Greek. God had Ambrose well prepared for this task. Both his studies and his fluency in Greek paved the way for his ease of understanding and study. Ambrose studied many of the people we have covered in this class, including Origen, Athanasius, and Basil of Caesarea.

Ambrose wrote a fair bit, especially considering his busy administrative schedule as the Bishop of such a major area. His writings greatly emphasized moral uprightness, even more than he emphasized theology. Ambrose wrote and preached to encourage and exhort his readers to live holy lives before God. We have a great deal of his writings available for reading today, including (i) sermons, (ii) commentaries, (iii) letters, and (iv) even several funerals he preached.

Ambrose did a lot for people, as he was a pastor who genuinely cared for his flock. Within the confines of church history literacy, however, we need to focus on a major conflict Ambrose had with the government. In very Old Testament fashion, Ambrose called governmental rulers to account as being under God's authority.

To see this story, we need to pick back up with the Roman ruler Valentinian II, who took the throne ten years after Athanasius's death. Valentinian ruled from 375 to 392, but he was a mere boy (age 4 when he ascended the throne), and the real power behind the throne was his mother, the Empress Justina. Justina was a staunch Arian, and was none too pleased with the decree handed down from the Council of Constantinople that clearly branded Arianism as heresy.

Somehow mixed between Justina's staunch Arian views and her concern over the strong influence Ambrose seemed to have over her son the Emperor, Justina decided to take Ambrose out of the picture. She manipulated a scheme where Ambrose would either be shown a rebel, or would have to capitulate his values that he had recently expressed at the Council of Constantinople.

Justina organized a number of people to demand that Ambrose give one of the church basilicas over to be used in worship by the Arians. Ambrose refused to deliver the basilica and as a result received a summons to the Imperial Palace. The demand on Ambrose to deliver the one church building over was repeated, and again Ambrose refused. Rioting broke out in the city following Ambrose's second refusal, as pressure continued to mount on Ambrose from those folks that Justina had worked behind the scenes.

Several weeks passed, and once more Ambrose was summoned to the Imperial Palace. This time Justina herself confronted Ambrose, blaming Ambrose and his obstinacy for the rioting and civil unrest. One can easily imagine Justina's points to Ambrose: (i) if Ambrose had simply followed his instructions rather than rebelling against the state, (ii) if Ambrose had freed up simply one of the many church buildings for those who saw things slightly different, (iii) if Ambrose had simply remembered that ultimately it was the government who had built many of the churches, then none of the violence and civil unrest would have occurred. Justina then brought down the hammer. Because Ambrose had stubbornly refused to follow orders, Ambrose no longer had a choice of which church building to give to the Arians. Justina required Ambrose to give up his own church building!

Ambrose never hesitated! He curtly proclaimed that he would “render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and render unto God what is God’s.” Ambrose then said if Justina demanded Ambrose’s money or property or even clothes, then Ambrose would give them. Ambrose said Justina was demanding what was God’s possession, not Ambrose’s. Ambrose stood on his conviction that he had no authority to give up what belonged to God!

Justina then sent in Imperial troops to forcefully take what she could gain through her orders. The troops clashed with the church members, as the congregants rallied around the buildings and Ambrose. The congregants stood their ground until ultimately the troops withdrew. Justina lost, but did not give up! She went to plan B!

Plan B involved getting her son to sign an edict that - in spite of the Council of Constantinople’s clear ruling of Arianism as heresy - held the official Roman position to be contrary to the Trinitarian view of God. Ambrose was then called to court to justify his teaching and view in light of the new law. To assist in taking on the Bishop (who we should remember had legal training as well as governmental experience), Justina brought in a renegade Bishop who was an Arian.

Ambrose never showed up for court! He refused, explaining his position on the Trinity as well as the propriety of the law. Justina sent for Ambrose’s arrest, but he remained in the church building where the soldiers did not dare enter and arrest him. The forces surrounded the church for days, but Ambrose would not come out. Instead, Ambrose wrote songs for his congregants and taught them antiphonal singing (where one group would sing to a second group which would then respond in song... sort of an early form of singing-in-the-round!).

Ambrose then delivered a forceful sermon using his powerful skills and knowledge as both a preacher and a lawyer. In his sermon, Ambrose appealed not only to scripture, but to the legal system itself in arguing that the church was over the government in issues of morality and doctrine, not the other way around. Soon, the edict was rescinded by public pressure and Justina lost again!

Shortly thereafter, Justina died. Ambrose bore the son no grudge, and in fact became like a father to the son until the son’s murder in 392 at the age of 21 (some called his death suicide). Ambrose performed the funeral services for the young man in Milan.

The death of Valentinian left a vacuum of authority in the Roman west that was soon taken by the Roman ruler in the east, Theodosius. Theodosius had his start as a Roman general, and was ruling the Eastern section of the Roman Empire while Valentinian ruled the west. Eventually, Theodosius became emperor of the

entire Empire. Once emperor, Theodosius and Ambrose had two incidents where Ambrose stood his ground in the face of imperial orders.

In the first instance, some anti-Semitic church members in Callinicum burned a Jewish synagogue to the ground. Evidently, the local Bishop (not Ambrose) had worked in the background to encourage commission of the arson. Theodosius ordered the church to rebuild the synagogue at the church's expense. Ambrose strongly opposed the order. Ambrose argued that for the church to rebuild the synagogue was an act of apostasy. The Emperor acceded to Ambrose's argument and withdrew the order. Sadly, to our knowledge, Ambrose did not use his legal skill and his creativity to devise an alternative way to see that justice was done, for justice demanded that the synagogue be rebuilt.

The second instance was a first in the history of Rome! Theodosius had participated in a military action that resulted in the slaughter of 7,000 innocent defenseless people in the Macedonian city of Thessalonica. Ambrose wrote a strong and blunt letter to the Emperor telling him that the Emperor would be excommunicated from the church unless the Emperor repented publicly and did penance publicly! The bizarre part? The Emperor complied and did his public penance!

In 395, Theodosius died and again, it was Ambrose who organized the viewing and services for the emperor before the final burial in Constantinople.

CONCLUSION

Whether in the confines of City Hall in Lubbock, Texas, or the Imperial Hall of Rome or Constantinople, the simple truth of life is *sometimes it's hard*. Difficulties arise, even for those who stand for God and his truth. In fact, it is standing for God and his truth that sometimes produces the difficulties! This brings our points for home.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."* (Prov. 3:5-6).

It is a marvelous thing to trust in the Lord. We have the Almighty Creator, Provider, Sustainer, Protector, and Deliverer taking a very personal and vested interest in us. With that, we have the assurance, that as we trust him, as we acknowledge him, as we seek his direction, he will make our paths

straight. That doesn't mean that the paths won't be hard. It means that the paths will be RIGHT! Right by his purposes and will. Right by his kingdom. And that is all we want!

2. *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."* (Jn. 16:33).

Here is the rub of City Attorney John Ross's t-shirt. Yes, life is hard. And yes, then you die. But that is the point! Jesus has overcome the world and death! So even as we have tribulation, we have good cheer. For we serve the one who has overcome the world! Death no longer has the final say over the believer. Death is merely a transition into a new world prepared by the Savior!

3. *"If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you."* (1 Pt. 4:14).

Sometimes the harshness and difficulties of life come because we profess the name of Jesus. There is a special blessing here. We should not be the complainers who wonder why things happen to the faithful. We should be the faithful who count it a privilege to suffer, even a little, for the cause of Christ. We worship a suffering Savior, and if he counts us worthy of suffering for his cause, we have reason to rejoice!

Amen!

HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-2:26. This week we add 1 John 2:27-28. We provide all verses below for your help!

1John 1:1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you

too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

1:5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

1John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. **3** And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. **4** Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, **5** but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: **6** whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. **7** Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. **8** At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. **9** Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. **10** Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. **11** But whoever hates

his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

12 I am writing to you, little children,
because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake.

13 I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

I write to you, children,
because you know the Father.

14 I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God abides in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. **16** For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. **17** And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

18 Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. **19** They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. **20** But

you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.

21 I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. **22** Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. **23** No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. **24** Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father. **25** And this is the promise that he made to us—eternal life.

26 I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. **27** But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—just as it has taught you, abide in him. **28** And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears we may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming.