

HEROES AND HERETICS:
An 8-Week Course on Early Church History

WEEK 6 **February 21, 2016**
Teacher: **Pastor Grisham**

C.S. Lewis' Introduction to *On the Incarnation*, by Athanasius of Alexandria

It is a good rule after reading a new book never to allow yourself another new one till you have read an old one in between. If that is too much for you, you should at least read one old one to every three new ones. Every age has its own outlook. It is specially good at seeing certain truths and specially liable to make certain mistakes. We all, therefore, need the books that will correct the characteristic mistakes of our period. And that means the old books. All contemporary writers share to some extent the contemporary outlook – even those, like myself, who seem most opposed to it. Nothing strikes me more when I read the controversies of past ages than the fact that both sides were usually assuming without question a good deal which we should now absolutely deny. They thought that they were as completely opposed as two sides could be, but in fact they were all the time secretly united – united *with* each other *against* earlier and later ages – by a great mass of common assumptions.

The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books. Not, of course, that there is any magic about the past. People were no cleverer then than they are now; they made as many mistakes as we. But not the same *mistakes*. They will not flatter us in the errors we are already committing; and their errors, being now open and palpable, will not endanger us.

ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA (b. 298, in Alexandria; d. May 2, 373, in Alexandria)

At the Council of Nicea in 325, the orthodox statement of the Trinity was formulated and affirmed. But for the next forty years, there was an immense and violent reaction by those who subscribed to **Arianism**, and much persecution of orthodox Christians. During this entire generation, **Athanasius stood for orthodoxy**, which got him constantly into trouble (e.g., suffering **five periods of exile under four different emperors**), which earned him the title ***Athanasius contra mundum*** (“Athanasius against the world”).

He was Egyptian by birth, but Greek by education; born into a wealthy family in Alexandria, the second largest city in the Empire, and the center of intellectual, cultural activity. He received a solid Christian education at the Catechetical School of Alexandria (where Clement and Origen had gone as well).

THE NORTH AFRICAN INFLUENCE IN THE EARLY CHURCH:

Alexandria: Clement, Origen, (Arius), Athanasius, Cyril
Carthage (and Hippo): Tertullian, Cyprian, Augustine

The last and longest persecution by pagan Rome against the church, that was started by Diocletian in 303 and continued by his successor until 311, was particularly intense in Egypt. As one author put it: “The church in Alexandria, already so rich in martyrs, became richer yet.” **Athanasius**, between his fifth and thirteenth years, would have been a witness to these things, and **would have known people who suffered and died for their faith.** **These persecutions**, that the church had endured for hundreds of years, finally **came to a definitive end with the Edict of Milan, in 313.**

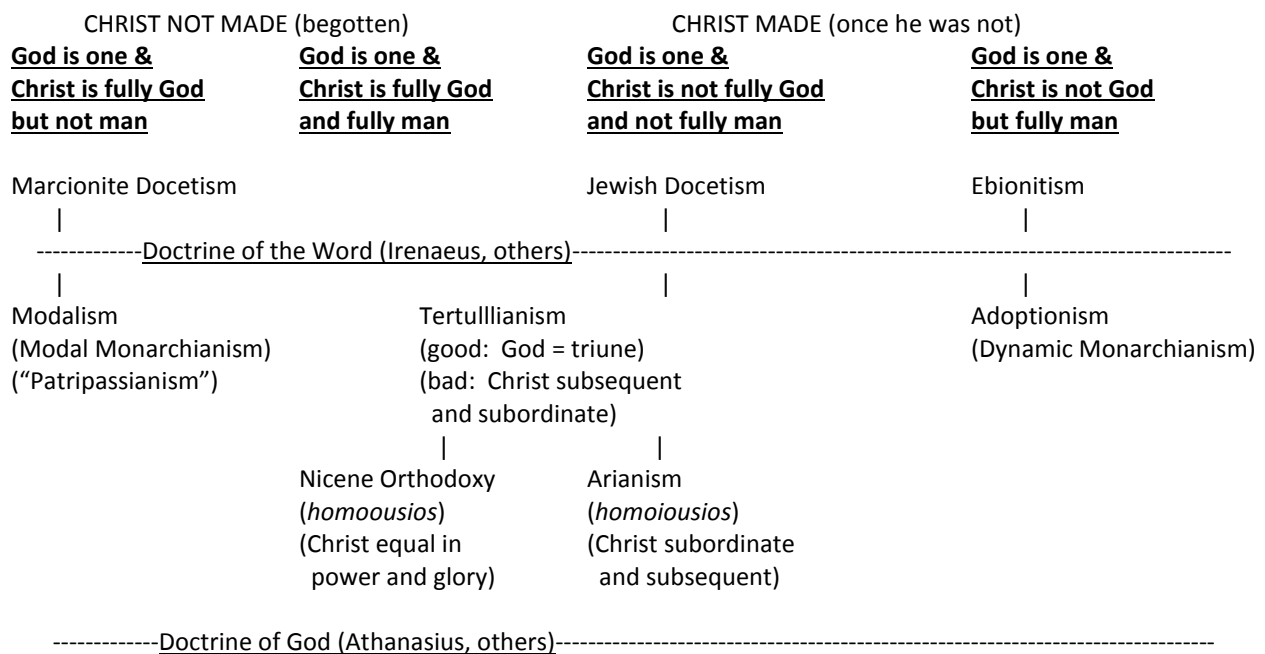
Many who had fled from persecutions through the course of the second century had gone into **the desert**, where a vigorous and **rigorously ascetic monasticism** was born. Foremost among these desert monks was **a young Copt named Anthony** (Antony), who had gone into the desert and been a “solitary” for twenty years, but then remained there in the desert training and disciplining others. **Athanasius**, who would later write a **Life of Saint Anthony**,

served as Anthony’s attendant as a youngster. He **enjoyed a deep and reverent relationship with Anthony** until he died, and **retained strong connections and sympathies for the monastic movement**.

By **318, Athanasius was a member of the Bishop of Alexandria’s household**. It was in that context, at the age of about 20, that **he wrote *On the Incarnation***, one of the greatest books in the history of Christendom. In a book full of great depth and exuberant confidence in the truth, beauty, and power of the Christian worldview, it sets forth the Christian doctrine of the incarnation.

The following year, **Arius**, a presbyter of Alexandria originally from Libya, **began teaching concerning Christ that “once he was not.”** From Arius’ perspective, he was protecting the church against what he perceived to be the error being promulgated by the Bishop of Alexandria which confounded Christ’s being with that of God. While Christ was surely great – **while he may have been the only begotten Son of God – he was still only begotten!** He was made. There was a time when he was not. And to say that this one who was subordinate to and subsequent to God himself, who was but the greatest of God’s works, was to undermine God’s utter transcendence. This teaching would set off the movement called **Arianism**, which **would rend the unity of the church and cause conflict and mayhem for several decades**. And **Athanasius found himself at the very epicenter of this conflict**.

REVIEW – THE HISTORY OF HERESIES CHART:



The **Council of Nicea** was called by the emperor in **325** to formulate the orthodox position and to restore unity to the church and empire. **Athanasius was but a Deacon with no vote**, but factually he was the aide to the Patriarch of Alexandria, and therefore had great influence. It was the Council of Nicea which **formulated what we now confess as the orthodox language concerning the Trinity**, that God is **one being** (or one substance) **with three distinct hypostases** (or persons), **each equal and eternal**. The Son was not made, but was **“eternally begotten”** of the Father.

But though the **Nicene Creed** ultimately came out of the council (which we still recite and confess today), the Arians did not give up their fight, but intensified it during the course of the next generation. **The fight could be distilled to the letter “I”!** Athanasius and the orthodox party used the term ***homoousios* (same being)** to describe the Son’s relationship to the Father, and insisted that affirming this was the litmus test for orthodoxy. Against this,

the Arians used the term **homoiousios (similar being)**, and insisted that this was the proper term. There were also advocates of a position called *heteroousianism* (different being):

HOMO + *OUSIOS* = same + being
HOMOI + *OUSIOS* = similar + being
HETERO + *OUSIOS* = different + being

Tertullian: consubstantial; **one substance, three persons**
Greek: homoousios; **one ousios** (essence, or being), **three hypostases** (distinct instances of being)

Nicene Creed: I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.
And 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 (homoousios)** with the Father,
by whom all things were made.

Westminster Confession:

WSC 4: What is God? God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable,
in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.

WSC 5: Are there more Gods than one?
There is but one only, the living and true God.

WSC 6: How many persons are there in the Godhead?
There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost;
and these three are one God, **the same in substance**, equal in power and glory.

Athanasius was made Bishop of Alexandria only three years after Nicea (328). With great reluctance he was convinced to accept this responsibility that had been placed upon him. He **continued in this position**, through turmoil, exiles, plots, and persecutions **for forty-five years, until his death in 373**. Through it all – driven at times to spend time in the desert with the monks, driven to Rome, where he planted the seeds of monasticism in the West – he remained utterly certain of the truth and believed completely that it would in the end prevail.

QUOTES FROM ON THE INCARNATION:

We also, by God's grace, briefly indicated that the Word of the Father is himself divine, that all things that are owe their being to his will and power, and that it is through him that the Father gives order to creation, by him that all things are moved, and through him that they receive their being.

We will begin, then, with the creation of the world, and with God its maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: *the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning*. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation; for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it in the beginning.

For God is good – or rather, of all goodness He is Fountainhead, and it is impossible for one who is good to be mean or grudging about anything. Grudging existence to none, therefore, He made all things out of nothing through His own Word, our Lord Jesus Christ; and of all these His earthly creatures, He reserved especial mercy for the race of men. Upon them, therefore, upon men who, as animals, were essentially impermanent, He bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked – namely, the impress of His own Image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God,

even as He does, though in limited degree, they might continue forever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise.

For God had made men thus (that is, as an embodied spirit), and had willed that he should remain in incorruption. But men, having turned from the contemplation of God to evil of their own devising, had come inevitably under the law of death. Instead of remaining in the state in which God had created them, they were in the process of becoming corrupted entirely, and death had them completely under its dominion. For the transgression of the commandment was making them turn back again according to their nature; and as they had at the beginning come into being out of non-existence, so were they now on the way to returning, through corruption, to non-existence again. The presence and love of the Word had called them into being; inevitably, therefore, when they had lost the knowledge of God, they lost existence with it; for it is God alone Who exists, evil is non-being, the negation and antithesis of good. By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt.

That is to say, the presence of the Word with them shielded them from natural corruption, as also Wisdom says: "God created man for incorruption, and as an image of His own eternity; but by envy of the devil death entered into the world." When this happened, men began to die, and corruption ran riot among them and held sway over them to an even more than natural degree, because it was the penalty of which God had forewarned them for transgressing the commandment. Indeed, they had in their sinning surpassed all limits; for, having invented wickedness in the beginning, and so involved themselves in death and corruption, they had gone on gradually from bad to worse, not stopping at any one kind of evil, but continually, as with insatiable appetite, devising new kinds of sins.

Man, who was created in God's image and in his possession of reason reflected the very Word Himself, was disappearing, and the work of God was being undone.

He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for his very own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, when He had fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men. This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection. Thus He would make death to disappear from them as utterly as straw from fire.

By the offering of His own body, He abolished the death which they had incurred, and corrected their neglect by His own teaching. Thus by His own power, He restored the whole nature of man.

For by the sacrifice of His own body He did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way; and He made a new beginning of life for us, by giving us the hope of resurrection. By man death has gained its power over men; by the Word made Man death has been destroyed and life raised up anew.

What, then, was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ? Men could not have done this, for they are only made after the Image, nor could angels have done it, for they are not the images of God. The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, Who could recreate man after the Image. In order to effect this recreation, however, he had first to do away with death and corruption. Therefore, He assumed a human body, in order that in it death might once for all be destroyed, and that man might be renewed according to the Image. The Image of the Father only was sufficient for this need.

IN SUMMARY: By the Incarnation of the Word, God:

- **Removed the corruption** of our nature
- **Restored his image** in creation
- **Renewed our knowledge** of God our Creator and Savior

We were disappearing: Christ by his obedience on our behalf **died, removing death and remaking us**

We were dehumanizing: Christ by his obedience on our behalf **lived, revealing God, teaching and renewing us**