



# HEROES + HERETICS

Alex Bunn considers the centrality of doctrine

## HERO 4: CONSTANTINE, ARIUS & ATHANASIUS

This series looks at great characters from Christian history. This time we will look at three giants of the fourth century, starting with the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine. Famously, it all started with a vision of a flaming cross in the sky and a voice telling him to 'conquer by this sign'. There is a curious ambiguity here, because in one sense the cross is a sign that we all need to have our sinful natures conquered. But Christ conquered by self-giving sacrifice, not the sword. Constantine was a military general on the rise, and probably saw the sign more as a lucky talisman, as he ordered his soldiers daub crosses on their shields. He governed with all the brutality of a pagan warlord, and his coins bore pagan images of Mars (the god of war) and the sun god. 'The unconquered Sun' was a deity whose birth fell on December 25th, a date he chose to fix for Christmas. In one sense, then, he was a heretic,

treating the God of the cross merely as an official sponsor of his worldly ambition.

However, he made some heroic changes too. To honour the God of the cross that gave him victory, he outlawed crucifixion, infanticide, the abuse of slaves and gladiatorial games. He banned facial branding, because 'man is made in God's image'. He also legalised Christianity, eventually merging church and state, a very mixed blessing. Enter two clerics from Alexandria in Egypt, Athanasius and Arius. Whereas Constantine embodied (like most of us) traits of hero and heretic, these two fought over basic Christian truths. Constantine convened the first 'world church council', to decide how we should describe Jesus' relationship with God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

### **Heretic: Arius (AD 250-336)**

Maybe you have heard the

trinity explained like this: just as it is possible to be a doctor, a husband, a landlord and a father all at the same time, so God takes on different roles or modes as he works inside and outside of creation. This is the idea that gave rise to the term 'modalism'. The analogy is tempting, as it is simple, and emphasises the biblical idea of God's oneness. It's a crucial biblical truth that there are not multiple competing gods (a pagan teaching). However, the analogy doesn't do justice to what the Bible says about Christ, who was God made man. And it begs the question of who was ruling the universe when Jesus was in the form of a finite human being, or even dying on a cross?

Worse still is the analogy of water, which can exist in three states; solid ice, liquid water and gaseous steam, 'just like the trinity'. It is not only dangerous to liken the God of Israel to anything created,<sup>1</sup> but

**HOW DO WE EXPLAIN THE TRINITY?**

View of God	God's oneness <---->	Both one and three<----->	God's diversity
Advocates	Modalism and Arianism	Athanasius and the Nicene creed	Pagans and polytheists
Problem	Denies the uniqueness and divinity of Christ	A mystery that is difficult to explain, and tempting to over simplify, but faithful to God's self disclosure	Denies the sovereignty of one God

such thinking again overstates the unity of God at the expense of three distinct persons<sup>2</sup> revealed in history and the Bible.

Arius tried to solve this mystery of three-in-oneness: it wouldn't be a problem if Christ was not the eternal equal of the Father. Christ he said, had a beginning, like the rest of us.<sup>3</sup> Arius was dangerous because he used the Bible persuasively to demean Christ. You may have met people like that on campus, dangerous because of their knowledge of what the Bible says, while rejecting what it means. Arius' creed said of Jesus that 'there was (a time) when he was not', thus denying the Bible's clear teaching on the divinity of Christ.<sup>4</sup> To reinforce his ideas he wrote song lyrics such as 'the essence of the father is foreign to the son'. Catchy stuff. But it's a reminder that songs can teach ideas better than books, because his views spread like wild fire.



**Hero: Athanasius (AD 296-373)**

But the god of Arius was simply not up to the job. If Jesus was not God incarnate but just a human being (however special), how could he free us from sin and death? How could he bestow eternal life? No, only if God became man could man be caught up into God and renewed in his image. Athanasius also saw the danger of trying to make the facts of divine revelation more 'reasonable'. After all, why should eternal reality be easy to grasp by finite creatures?

Yet there is always a need to teach to God's revelation faithfully, while finding new forms of words to bring clarity and freshness to each language and culture. Words to equip the seeker for saving faith and unify the believer in the essentials. The debates between clergy resulted in numerous synods, leading one pagan observer to comment sarcastically: 'The highways were covered with galloping bishops!'<sup>5</sup> Constantine saw the importance of unity, and called the council of Nicea (in modern day Turkey), in 325 AD.

It's easy to imagine that Athanasius had many allies in the newly established Christendom, but the reality is that faithful Christians always face enormous challenge. He was exiled five times. Troops interrupted his services in order to kidnap and silence him. On one occasion hostile bishops arrested him on a bizarre charge. They accused him of murdering another cleric and performing magic with his

## the Nicene Creed

'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 of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man.'

severed hand. But Athanasius produced the unharmed victim in court and asked 'when do you suppose I cut off his third hand?!' Thankfully, despite an attempt by Arius to win over the council in song, he was defeated by a document, which became the Nicene Creed. See if you can spot how Athanasius rejected Arianism.

## aren't creeds a bit dull and unnecessary?

Creeds are written for a specific debate and context. This one mainly deals with the nature of Christ, in opposition to the Arian heresy. They contain a tension between what Scripture says in its context and words we can understand in ours. Sometimes they stretch language beyond its usual limits. For instance, what does 'light of light' mean? Or

'begotten' for that matter? The writers are trying to communicate a truth from Scripture in new words. The sun generates or 'begets' the sun's rays, and we cannot have one without the other. Likewise we cannot not entirely separate the persons of the trinity. They are three-in-one, at the same time diverse and inseparable! The father and son are 'of one substance' (a phrase you won't find in the Bible) yet also distinct. The creed is so faithfully constructed and appropriately mysterious that it has remained a test of orthodoxy for 17 centuries.

But no-one can accuse Athanasius of being dull or obsessed with petty correctness. Rather, he said that we should out-rejoice heretics, because our God is a greater and more glorious God. He would have grieved over Christians today who dismiss doctrine when they say 'It is Christ who unites us; it is doctrine that divides'. This was the very tactic used by the Arian bishops to make 'Christ' mean anything. They think they have done something profound and fresh, when in fact they have done something very old and stale and very deadly.<sup>6</sup>

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## SUMMARY

### ATHANASIUS' GREAT EXAMPLE:

- Tirelessly worked to defend God's revelation of himself in Scripture
- Resisted simplistic explanations of the trinity
- Helped create new forms of words to explain key truths
- Out-rejoiced his enemies who worshipped an inferior god

## REFERENCES

- 1 Exodus 20:4
- 2 Matthew 28:19
- 3 Arius used some New Testament passages that talk of Christ being firstborn over creation, or firstborn amongst creation, such as Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:6. But these passages actually use the title of firstborn to show Christ's pre-eminence over creation, not his inferiority within it. In biblical times, the firstborn son had the highest status in the family while submitting to a father's will.
- 4 This is directly stated in at least eight passages of the NT. (John 1:1,2,18; 20:28, Acts 20:28, Romans 9:5, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, 2 Peter 1:1) and strongly implied in others (Matthews 1:23, John 17:3,5, Colossians 2:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:12, 1 Timothy 1:17, James 1:1, 1 John 5:20).
- 5 Tomkin S. A short history of Christianity. Oxford, Lion Hudson, 2005
- 6 I highly recommend John Piper's excellent MP3 biography on Athanasius and many others at [www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/resources/contending-for-our-all](http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/resources/contending-for-our-all)