

“ATHANASIUS AGAINST THE WORLD.”

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Scripture Texts: Acts 20:28-31; Jude 1:3-4

Introduction.

Now I know how Donald Trump feels after giving a speech and all the fact checkers come along. Yes, I do know its 2018. I hope that doesn't make me a false teacher, just a fallible pastor.

Actually the people who corrected me were doing a good thing. If pastor's can't be corrected then the church is in danger. No less an apostle than Paul submitted to being corrected by the Bereans in Acts 17:11 who examined the Scriptures daily to see if the things Paul said were true.

A few years later Paul was in Ephesus speaking to the elders of the church he planted there.

Acts 20:28-31.

Elders are actually critical to the health and survival of a flock. Pastors come and go, but elders are there for the long haul. Paul was a pastor and church planter, but he was moving on. He didn't say, good luck, or hope you remember everything I taught you.

He knew that perseverance in the faith was crucial and to persevere it was crucial to have men of faith and discernment to guide and protect the flock. Sometimes that meant fighting off wolves.

Wolves who attack doctrine and wolves who attack practice, orthodoxy and orthopraxy, what we believe and how we live.

Paul begins with a general command.

First, watch yourself, your own life and doctrine. If you don't do that you can't do it for those under your care. Character matters and truth matter and both must be watched and defended.

Second, watch over the flock. Like a shepherd among sheep. There are great dangers, be wise, vigilant, on duty.

First, the church is like a flock of sheep in need of shepherds.

Second, the elders are the shepherds.

Third, it is the duty of shepherds to care for and defend the sheep.

John 10:11-13 The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

Then Paul gives them three incentives for doing their work and being diligent in it.

First, the flock is bought by the blood of Jesus and precious to Him. He gave His life for her and now He is asking you to look after her.

Second, the elders are called by the Holy Spirit and equipped for this important work.

Third, the enemy is a very great enemy and the danger is real and present. This danger comes in so many forms.

Twisting doctrine, denying great fixed truths, following experience over the Word, giving in to the pressures and temptations of the culture, bending to what is politically correct.

Jude.

About twenty years after Paul Jude writes another warning to the churches. Why must we contend? Jude gives three reasons:

First, there is a faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Second, this faith is repeatedly threatened from within the church.

Third, this faith is worth contending for.

If you read the NT you see that contending for the faith is all through it, especially the letters written by the apostles to the churches. They continually warn against false prophets and false teachers and false pastors.

We are all called to contend for the faith. Above all else and by all means, pray that we not fall prey to a false gospel or false doctrine.

II Peter 3:17 You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability.

To this we should add *pray for those who contend for the faith*. Without them we would be lost.

Athanasius.

Athanasius was one man God raised up to contend for the truth. He was born around 298 AD. He was ordained a deacon in 320 and then at the age of 30 became bishop of Alexandria, Egypt after Bishop Alexander died in 328. The people of Egypt viewed him as their pastor/bishop until he died on May 2, 373 at the age of 75.

Athanasius had many enemies in the church and was exiled five times for a total of 17 years out of his 45 years of ministry. These exiles were for his defense of the deity of Christ.

He was one of the greatest defenders of the orthodox Christian faith and preserved the fundamental truths of our faith. He is called the father of orthodoxy.

He didn't contend and fight because he loved to fight, he fought because he loved Jesus and precious truth about Jesus in Scripture. He knew Jesus was both man and God, and being equal with God was worthy to be worshiped as God. He gave his entire adult life to this battle, without any regrets.

There were times when it seemed like he was like Elijah, the only one left on the side of truth, when it seemed everyone had abandoned orthodoxy.

That is where the phrase "Athanasius contra mundum" (against the world) came from. He stood steadfast against overwhelming defection from orthodoxy, and only at the end of his life could he begin to see some glimmer of hope that the truth would prevail.

Eight years after his death in 381 at the Council of Constantinople the Nicene Creed was refined and confirmed. The doctrines of the Trinity and of the full humanity and full deity of Christ were finally set in stone in large part because of the faithful steadfastness of Athanasius.

Thank God for faithful men who didn't go along with the modern sentiment to agree to disagree, or say people have been divided over this for so long we just need to allow for both views.

How did Athanasius stand strong against this spirit of the age that dominated his time? St. Gregory of Nazianzen said Athanasius "possessed all virtues." He practiced all the virtues, without compromise. He wasn't above us, he practiced what is available to all of us.

II Peter 1:5-8 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly

affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

“That’s the true lesson of St. Athanasius. We often find excuses for not practicing virtue. . . . we just go along to get along with our sins. . . . While he warred every step of the way with people over doctrine, he warred against the flesh to always overcome the laziness we are prone to. Without that laziness, he was able to do great things. If we follow that example, we can stand against the world just as he did. We might not be exiled or persecuted, but we can still celebrate alongside him because, like him, we always practiced the virtues of our faith” (Kevin Tierney, *The True Lesson of St. Athanasius*).

Athanasian Creed.

The Athanasian Creed is one of the least known of the ancient creeds of our faith.

The earliest copies come from around 500 AD, well after Athanasius’ death. Athanasius most likely didn’t write it. It was written in Latin, he wrote in Greek. But it is so named because it reflects Athanasius’ faith and the theological points dear to his heart.

He loved propositions, clear statements about God and Christ, to answer the many false propositions being offered up.

The creed was counted as one of the three classic creeds of Christianity by the time of the Reformation, along with the Apostles’ Creed and Nicene Creed. Both Lutheran and Reformed confessional statements recognize its authoritative character.

It is divided into two parts. Verses 3-28 set forth the doctrine of the Trinity, and verses 29-43 are on the doctrine of the incarnation and the union of the two natures of Christ in the person of the Son of God.

These are two of the most central doctrines of our faith and departures from these two doctrines are what define most cults and non-Christian religions. The creed is very clear and concise to avoid all the heresies of the day.

“The creed does not hesitate again to affirm a doctrine which in human experience is paradoxical, that in the incarnation there was a union of two distinctly different natures, the divine and the human, each complete in itself, without either losing its identity. Yet the result of this union is a single person. The creed thus repudiates the teachings that Christ had but one nature (Sabellianism), or that the human nature was incomplete (Apollinarianism), or that the divine nature was inferior to that of the Father (Arianism), or that in the union of the two natures the identity of one was lost so that the result was

simply one nature (Eutychianism)” (<https://www.monergism.com/athanasian-creed-quivicunque>).

While the Creed positively summarizes what Christians believe, it equally fences out what we negatively do not believe.

Implications and application.

If we are going to persevere as a Biblically grounded, doctrinally pure church we must know the *Word* of God, and know it so well we can spot a fraud. Read and re-read the Scriptures to reinforce and to be equipped to fight the arrows of the enemy.

We must never cease *praying* for the pulpit and the classroom, pray for wisdom, pray for discernment, pray for boldness and clarity, pray for strong preaching, pray for protection from evil and the evil one. Pray for your pastors, your denomination, your Christians Schools.

Leaders and congregations must exercise extra special discernment when nominating and electing officers and hiring staff. This requires great care and much prayer.

Church members must be more vigilant than ever who they listen to and support on TV, where you send your money.

Let me close with five lessons and applications from the life of Athanasius (taken in part for a blog post by William P. Farley).

First, theological debate and doctrinal controversy is good and necessary. Most people hate controversy and avoid it all cost, but it has been through controversy that truth has been brought to light and the darkness of falsehood exposed. Listen carefully to Paul:

I Corinthians 11:18-19 I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, 19 for *there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.*

Factions painfully serve the church. They provide opportunity to differentiate between real and false Christians. We see it all through church history from the first century on. It was error and heresy that gave us every one of our great creeds and confessions of the church. God uses it to separate the wheat from the chaff.

“God allows evil men to come among his people who would lead away from God and his order, to try and test who among them are faithful and true to him....This was permitted to prove and to show who could stand firm and steadfast under temptations to turn away from God. God tests them on the point of fidelity to him in faith and doctrine....These are

God's tests to purify the churches. He desires only true and tried and faithful subjects in his kingdom. Those who cannot stand the test must be purged out. So divisions come to every church to make manifest those who are approved. It is God bringing the churches to judgment in this world, that those who are approved and true may be manifest. All we have to do is to stand true and firm to God and his word, and leave the results with him” (David Lipscomb, A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles, on I Corinthians 11: 19).

“Some controversy is crucial for the sake of life-giving truth. ... Historically, controversies that have swirled around the meaning and implications of the gospel, far from damaging the Church, have contributed to its vitality. Like a refiner’s fire, intense theological debate has resulted in clarified belief, common vision, and invigorated ministry” (John Piper).

Gresham Machen (1881–1937), a man embroiled in great controversy, wrote, “In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.”

Second, truth is not determined by majority opinion. Crowds are often wrong. For decades Athanasius was in the minority. “The world against Athanasius and Athanasius against the world.” “They have the people, but we have the faith.”

We must know the Word of God well so when it is opposed we won’t go along with it.

Third, theology matters and the central doctrines are worth living for and dying for. The Trinity, substitutionary atonement, justification by faith alone, the inerrancy of Scripture, the Incarnation, and Original Sin are a few such doctrines.

Fourth, theological conflict will never cease in this fallen world. It is only necessary to contend for our faith for as long as there is sin in the world and an enemy of our faith and for as long as there are false teachers and false prophets and pastors. Every generation of Christians will have their new battles, new lines in the sand. We are fighting battles today Christians 500 years ago would never have dreamed would have to be fought.

Fifth, God protects His church. Why were men like Athanasius present at the Council of Nicaea? Why did the fourth-century majority opinion not prevail? Because the gates of hell will not prevail against Christ’s church (Matthew 16:18). The Holy Spirit raises up faithful contenders for the truth who will stand against evil

For that we give God praise, honor, and glory.