



Tim Pauley  
PO Box 58403, Charleston, WV 25358  
304.767.8430  
[tim.pauley@capitolcom.org](mailto:tim.pauley@capitolcom.org)

### Great Words of the Faith The Trinity “Contra Mundum”: Athanasius and the Trinity

*There are many heroes we look up to in our nation’s history. We think of the signers of the Declaration of Independence who took a valiant stand for liberty. There were wise leaders who formed our constitution, establishing a system that sought to safeguard the freedoms of Americans. We remember the leaders of the civil rights movement who stood up for the equality of all our country’s citizens. We often decry the lack of knowledge and appreciation people have today regarding these heroes in our nation’s history.*

*In our Christian faith we have many heroes we look up to. The “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11 lists many Bible heroes who demonstrated their faith in God by how they lived and acted. Hebrews 12:1 calls these heroes a “a cloud of witnesses” that should help spur us on to live out our own faith in Christ.*

*We not only have these Bible heroes of the faith to admire and appreciate. There are also many figures from Christian history who make up our “cloud of witnesses” that can greatly encourage us in our faith. We should certainly lament the lack of knowledge many Christians have about the heroes of our faith we find both in the Bible and in Christian history.*

*As we consider the great word of our faith “Trinity”, there is one figure from Christian history who stands out – Athanasius. His battle for the truth of the Trinity was so fierce he became known as “Athanasius Contra Mundum” (Against the world). We can learn from his fight the importance of the truth of the Trinity and how we should stand for biblical truth as well.*

In our previous lesson we studied the great word of the faith, **The Trinity**. We can hardly consider this subject without thinking about one of the great heroes of the faith who spent his life defining and defending this great truth – a church leader from Egypt named Athanasius. His lone stand for the Trinity led him to be described as “*Athanasius against the World*”.

During the first 300 years of the church, believers faced great persecution throughout the Roman Empire. This changed drastically when the emperor of Rome, Constantine, converted to Christianity and in 313 declared tolerance for this religion throughout the empire. While this offered relief for believers who had suffered greatly, it brought about something which would have implications for years to come – the close relationship between the church and the state. Church leaders now had great influence with government leaders. Civil or criminal charges would be levied over church issues.

While the external threats of suffering and persecution had ended, the church faced internal threats in the form of doctrinal error from heretics and false teachers. In 319 a church leader in Alexandria, Egypt named Arius presented a letter to the Bishop of Alexandria, Alexander, claiming that if Jesus, the Son of

God, were truly a son, then He must have had a beginning. There must have been a time when He did not exist. He asserted Christ was a created being – the highest created being – but a created being, nonetheless. In 321 a meeting was held to discuss his views. Arius’ teachings were declared heresy and he was removed from leadership. (We should note that heresy is a serious charge. It is a teaching or a conviction that contradicts something so central and precious to the Christian faith that it disqualifies a person from belonging to the church and thus disqualifies the person from being viewed as a person in Christ and in salvation.) During these events, Bishop Alexander had a young assistant, a deacon named Athanasius.

An influential church leader in the Eastern part of the empire took up Arius’ teachings and soon that entire part of the empire became “Arian” in their view of Christ. The Western part of the empire remained faithful to the biblical teaching of the Trinity due to the faithful influence of Alexander, and his young assistant, Athanasius.

The disagreement over this issue became so intense that Emperor Constantine was afraid it would harm the unity of his empire. In 325 he called a church council in the city of Nicaea to discuss the issue. The

council lasted four months and ended with a statement that has defined Christian belief about the Trinity to this day, the Nicene Creed. 318 leaders attended the council along with others, including Arius and Athanasius. All but two of the leaders signed on to the creed, although many did so deceitfully.

Three years after the council, Alexander died and Athanasius, though just 30 years old, was chosen to be the Bishop of Alexandria. What followed was a 45-year battle for the biblical truth of the Trinity. Within two years of becoming Bishop, Athanasius was caught up in controversy. Many leaders agreed with Arius' views. Even those who signed the creed did not think those who disagreed should be labeled heretics and resented Athanasius' hard line stand. He was maligned as too young to be in the role of bishop. They resorted to false accusations and intrigue. He was accused of treasonous acts, even of murder! Constantine was convinced to arrest Athanasius and he was forced to flee into exile, the first of five. In all, Athanasius would spend a total of 17 years in exile from the churches he loved because of his stand for the truth that Jesus Christ was eternally God.

During these exiles, Athanasius would continue to teach and write about the truths of the Trinity, primarily defending that Christ is eternally God. It seemed he was fighting a losing battle as churches throughout the empire embraced the Arian error. It was at some point during this time a colleague exclaimed, "The whole world is against you". Unfazed, Athanasius made his famous response, "Then it is Athanasius against the world".

Athanasius did not live to see victory in the battle for the truth of the Trinity. He died in 373 and the fight against the heresy of Arianism was not finally settled until another church council in 381. All the abuse, suffering, and persecution Athanasius endured for the sake of biblical truth make him one of the greatest heroes of Christian history. We can learn much from his persistence and courage.

### **What Can We Learn from Athanasius' Life?**

#### ***Knowing Bible Truth***

Athanasius helps us realize how important it is to know Bible truth. We often call such truth "doctrine" or "theology". "Doctrine" is simply another word for a particular truth or Bible teaching (such as the doctrine of the Trinity). "Theology" is simply all that we know about God or other biblical subject taught throughout the whole Bible. We are tempted to downplay the importance of doctrine and theology for the sake of unity and to avoid conflict. Athanasius reminds us there are truths we must know and hold to if we are to be true followers of Christ. He and the Nicene Creed both taught that to reject the truth that Jesus Christ was eternally God come in human flesh meant you could not

be truly saved. In John's first letter he warned us, ***"Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also"*** (1 John 2:23). Jesus, God the Son, came in human flesh to live a perfect life, suffer and die for sin, raise from the dead, so that those who repent and put their faith in Him could have their sins forgiven. These are truths we ***must*** know and believe in if we are to be truly saved. Athanasius fought so that believers around the world might be taught the proper truth of God's Word. We should commit ourselves to study, learn, and know the truth for which he fought so valiantly.

#### ***Fighting for Bible Truth***

Athanasius spent his life fighting for biblical truth. As followers of Christ we are called to fight for truth as well. Jude, the half-brother of Jesus wrote:

***"Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints." (Jude 3)***

We are to "contend earnestly", even in the face of trials and persecutions. "The faith...once for all handed down" are the truths which have been given to us in God's Word, truths such as the Trinity. This also referred to as "the pattern of sound teaching" (Rom. 6:17); "the good deposit entrusted to you" (2 Tim. 1:14); "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). While you may well have folks knocking on your door who do not believe in the Trinity – that Jesus Christ is eternally God, there are many Bible truths today that believers will be called to defend. Athanasius was a pastor and a leader of pastors, of course he would fight. Jude was challenging "regular believer like you and I to fight – to contend for our faith!

#### ***Persisting in Bible Truth***

Athanasius set the example for not giving up in the fight for Bible truth. In our studies during the session we saw how in Ephesians 6 Paul exhorted us to ***"Take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm"*** (Eph. 6:13). Two of our pieces of armor are the "belt of truth" and the "sword of the Spirit – the Word of God". In our day of increasing persecution of those who would hold to biblical truth, we must arm ourselves and be ready to take our stand "Contra Mundum" – Against the world – for our Savior Jesus Christ!

#### **CAPITOL BIBLE STUDIES**

Thursdays,

12:00 PM McManus Conference Room (M252 by House Min Ofc)