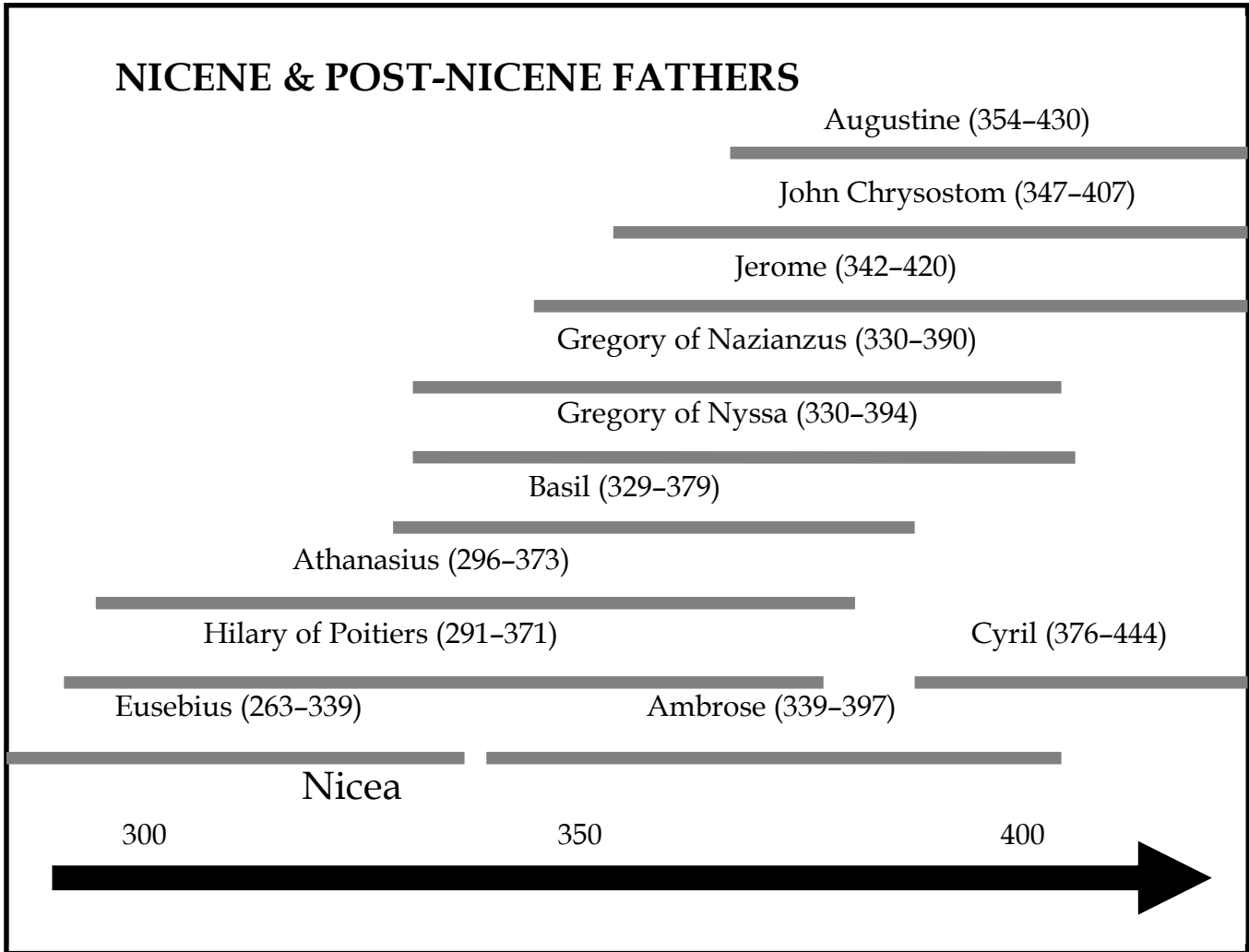


THE NICENE & POST-NICENE FATHERS

Christian Leaders of the 4th and 5th Centuries

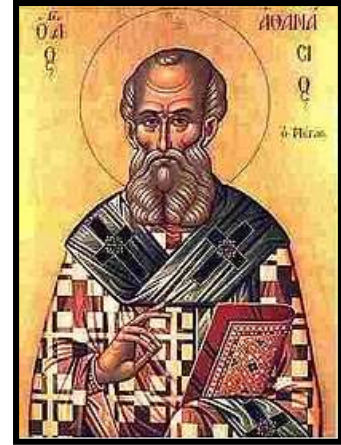


Mark Ellingsen: “Augustine was far from isolated in his greatness during his own lifetime. He was more or less a (younger) contemporary of Athanasius, as well as a full contemporary of the famed preacher Ambrose (ca. 339-97), the bishop of Milan; the equally renowned preacher and bishop of Constantinople John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407); and the eminent biblical scholar and translator of the Bible Jerome. Another group of famed contemporaries was the Cappadocians: Basil the Great, his sister Macrina (ca. 327-379), their brother

Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. These four friends/relatives served the Church in the region of eastern Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) that bears the name of Cappadocia” (*Reclaiming Our Roots* [Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press, 1999], 1.125)

I. Athanasius

- **Athanasius of Alexandria** (c. 296–373) was a Christian bishop, the Patriarch of Alexandria, in the fourth century.
- Primary defender against Arianism (the heresy which taught that Jesus was created by the Father at some point in time); taught that the Son was of identical essence as the Father



His Life

- Born to wealthy parents in Egypt in 296; died 373.
- He was well-educated and influenced by the martyr-mindset of his day.
- Small in stature yet had a keen mind – a skilled theologian and a prolific writer.
- His writings were very influential during and after the Council of Nicaea.
- Because of his stand against Arius, he became widely known – he was made a bishop of Alexandria at age 33 when his teacher, Alexander, died.

Athanasius after the Council of Nicaea

- Though he was a deacon at the time of the Council of Nicaea (325), Athanasius spent most of the fourth century fighting Arius. He became the bishop of Alexandria just a few years later (in 328).

John Piper: “Within two years after taking office as Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius became the flash point of controversy. Most of the bishops who had signed the Creed of Nicaea did not like calling people heretics,

even if they disagreed with this basic affirmation of Christ’s deity. They wanted to get rid of Athanasius and his passion for this cause. Athanasius was accused of levying illegal taxes. There were accusations that he was too young when ordained, that he used magic, that he subsidized treasonable persons, and more. Constantine did not like Athanasius’s hard line either and called him to Rome in 331 to face the charges the bishops were bringing. The facts acquitted him, but his defense of the Nicene formulation of Christ’s deity was increasingly in the minority” (*Contending for Our All*, 50).

Bruce L. Shelley: “No career better illustrates the way in which imperial power took over actual control of the church than that of Athanasius. As a young advisor to Alexander, he had won a resounding victory at Nicea over his elderly opponent, Arius. Soon after that, at the age of 33, he succeeded Alexander as bishop of the great see of Alexandria. For the next 50 years, however, no one could predict who would win in the struggle with Arianism. During these decades, Athanasius was banished no less than five times, each banishment and return to Alexandria representing either a change in emperors or a shift in the makeup of the palace ecclesiastical clique that had the emperor’s ear. At times Athanasius was so completely out of imperial favor that he felt deserted by all his supporters. During one such hour he uttered his famous defiance, *Athanasius Against the World*. He would stand alone, if need be, against the whole empire” (*Church History in Plain Language* [Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 2008], p. 103).

➤ Athanasius’ affliction:

Made bishop in 328	Exiled 336
Restored in 338	Exiled 339
Restored in 346	Exiled 356
Restored in 361	Exiled 362
Restored in 363	Exiled 365
Restored in 366	Died 373

- **First Exile (336–338)**

- Athanasius was falsely accused of kidnapping another bishop (named Arsenius) and cutting off his hand for use in magical incantations.

John Piper: “[Athanasius’s enemies] bribed Arsenius, a bishop in Hypsele (on the Nile in southern Egypt), to disappear so that the rumor could be started that Athanasius had arranged his murder and cut off one of his hands to use for magic.

Constantine was told and asked for a trial to be held in Tyre. Meanwhile one of Athanasius’s trusted deacons had found Arsenius hiding in a monastery and had taken him captive and brought him secretly to Tyre.

At the trial the accusers produced a human hand to confirm the indictment. But Athanasius was ready. ‘Did you know Arsenius personally?’ he asked. ‘Yes’ was the eager reply from many sides.

So Arsenius was ushered in alive, wrapped up in a cloak. When he was revealed to them, they were surprised but demanded an explanation of how he had lost his hand. Athanasius turned up his cloak and showed that one hand at least was there. There was a moment of suspense, artfully managed by Athanasius. Then the other hand was exposed, and the accusers were requested to point out whence the third hand had been cut off” (*Contending for Our All*, 50–51).

- In spite of Athanasius’s innocence being proven, he was still sent into exile when his opponents accused him of interfering with wheat shipments from Alexandria to Rome. He was sent to Treveri (near modern-day Luxembourg).
- He was able to return to Alexandria after Constantine died and his sons came to the throne.
- **Second & Third Exiles (339–346 & 356–362)**
 - Eusebius of Nicomedia convinced Constantius II (Constantine’s son) to get rid of Athanasius. This resulted in the second two exiles of Athanasius.

Stephen Nichols: “Even though Athanasius was on the right side of the line between heresy and orthodoxy, and even though he enjoyed

overwhelming support throughout the church, Constantius II saw to it that Athanasius would have his troubles.

Sensing that Arianism had not been rooted out of the church, Athanasius applied the bulk of his energies to making sure that what the council decided at Nicea in 325 would stand and be the only accepted teaching in the churches.

He used his pulpit to preach sermons on the orthodox view, directly and vehemently condemning the teachings of Arius. He used his skill with words to write letter after letter on the issue, as well as major treatises such as *On the Incarnation* (335 or 336). And whenever Athanasius's crusade against Arianism was gaining traction, Constantius II stepped in.

He would dispatch some troops to have Athanasius exiled – one time Athanasius was carried away during a Communion service. When the public and clerical outcry grew too large for Constantius II to ignore, he would reluctantly let Athanasius return to his post as bishop. As Athanasius returned to his mission of proclaiming the orthodox view of Christ, Constantius II would dispatch the troops again." (*For Us and For Our Salvation*, 64)

- **On one occasion, Roman soldiers stormed the church during a communion service.**

Athanasius: "It was now night, and some of the people were keeping a vigil preparatory to a communion on the morrow, when the General Syrianus suddenly came upon us with more than five thousand soldiers, having arms and drawn swords, bows, spears, and clubs, as I have related above. With these he surrounded the Church, stationing his soldiers near at hand, in order that no one might be able to leave the Church and pass by them.

Now I considered that it would be unreasonable in me to desert the people during such a disturbance, and not to endanger myself in their behalf; therefore, I sat down upon my [chair], and desired the Deacon to read a Psalm, and the people to answer, 'For His mercy endures forever,' and then all to withdraw and depart home.

But the General having now made a forcible entry, and the Clergy and those of the laity, who were still there, cried out, and demanded that we too should withdraw. But I refused, declaring that I would [not] do so, until they had retired one and all.

Accordingly I stood up, and having bidden prayer, I then made my request of them, that all should depart before me, saying that it was better that my safety should be endangered, than that any of them should receive hurt.

So when the greater part had gone forth, and the rest were following, the monks who were there with us and certain of the Clergy came up and dragged us away. And thus, while some of the soldiers stood about the sanctuary, and others were going round the Church, we passed through, under the Lord's guidance, and with His protection withdrew without observation, greatly glorifying God that we had not betrayed the people, but had first sent them away, and then had been able to save ourselves" (cited from Leithart, 12).

- **Fourth & Fifth Exiles (362-364 & 365-366)**
 - The fourth exile took place under Emperor Julian who attempted to take the Roman Empire back into paganism. When it became obvious that Athanasius was resolute in his Christian conviction, Julian drove him out of Alexandria. The exile ended when Julian died.
 - The fifth and final exile occurred under Emperor Valens who simply evicted Athanasius because he had been earlier exiled by Julian. When Valens realized that the people of Alexandria loved Athanasius, he had him restored to his office (in order to garner popularity with the citizens of Alexandria).
 - During these times of exile, Athanasius often lived with some of the early monks of the Egyptian desert. These monks, particularly *Antony*, left a life-long impression on Athanasius.

The Legacy of Athanasius

What lessons can we learn from the man nicknamed “the saint of stubbornness”?

1) We ought to be willing to fight for fundamental Christian doctrines.

Stephen Nichols: “One has to ask why Athanasius endured so much for so long. Why did he wrangle for decades over one word, over one letter, *i*?

- Recall: the varying positions on the deity of Christ at the Council of Nicea:
 - **Homoi-ousios** (“of a similar substance”) – This view was an attempt to mediate between the other two views. It taught that the Son was divine but not deity in the sense of being of the same nature as the Father. Eusebius of Caesarea, for example, was one who held this view but then (upon fully understanding the Arian position) was convinced of the orthodox position.
 - **Homo-ousios** (“of the same substance”) – This was the view of Alexander of Alexandria as well as Athanasius.
 - Logos (Christ) is co-eternal with the Father, never to change.
 - The 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, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousios consubstantialem*] with the Father.

**Original 4th century Nicaean text:

ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ = of one substance with the Father

[By the way, people have been asking when we’ll have a NT Greek class. Wanted to get a feel for who might have a fancy for that??]

Nichols: The reason comes in a phrase also found in the Nicene Creed, a phrase that is attributed to Athanasius. It may not be too much of a stretch to claim this phrase to be one of the most profound, if not beautiful,

phrases in all of theological literature, the phrase “*for us and for our salvation.*”

[[Who for us men and for our salvation came down [from heaven]]]

Athanasius wrangled with the best minds of the day and endured persecution at the hands of the most powerful politicians of the day, all for the sake of the gospel.

The *person* of Christ, Athanasius believed, had everything to do with the *work* of Christ. If the church got it wrong on the person of Christ, the church would be wrong on the work of Christ. Athanasius spent six decades **contending for a letter** and contending against the world for the sake of the gospel.” (*For Us and Our Salvation*, 66–67)

- 2 Timothy 1:13–14 Retain the standard of sound words which you have heard from me, in the faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. 14 Guard, through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us, the treasure which has been entrusted to you.

2) **At times, being faithful means you will also be unpopular.**

C. S. Lewis: “His epitaph is Athanasius contra mundum, ‘Athanasius against the world.’ We are proud that our own country has more than once stood against the world. Athanasius did the same.

He stood for the Trinitarian doctrine, ‘whole and undefiled,’ when it looked as if all the civilised world was slipping back from Christianity into the religion of Arius – into one of those ‘sensible’ synthetic religions which are so strongly recommended today and which, then as now, included among their devotees many highly cultivated clergymen.

It is his glory that he did not move with the times; it is his reward that he now remains when those times, as all times do, have moved away.”
(Preface to *On the Incarnation*)

- John 6:60–66 Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard *this* said, “This is a difficult statement; who can listen to it?”⁶¹ But Jesus, conscious that His disciples grumbled at this, said to them, “Does this cause you to

stumble? ⁶² “What then if you see the Son of Man ascending to where He was before? ⁶³ “It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing; the words that I have spoken to you are spirit and are life. ⁶⁴ “But there are some of you who do not believe.” For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him. ⁶⁵ And He was saying, “For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” ⁶⁶ As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore.

- 2 Timothy 1:15 You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes.

3) The key to honoring God is to hold firmly and faithfully to what the Bible teaches.

Steve Lawson: “When the cardinal doctrines of the faith were under siege, Athanasius held tenaciously to biblical fidelity in his day. This African Father faithfully guarded the high ground of Christian truth at a time when others retreated amid rising persecution. No matter what, the bishop of Alexandria was willing to stand firm upon Scripture and, whenever necessary, defend Scripture with Scripture.

The need is the same in this hour of history. Nothing has changed. The truth is always under ruthless assault and the stakes are always high. In every generation, men of God must follow in the footsteps of this magnificent Church Father, remaining faithful to the text of Scripture.

We must not shy away from doctrinal disputes that strike against the very heart of the gospel. We must not flinch in the face of divisive attacks. The ever-changing tides of popular fads that are sweeping through the church today must not prevail over God-authored doctrines. We must lift high the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.” (*Pillars of Grace*, 156)

- 1 Kings 22:13–14 Then the messenger who went to summon Micaiah spoke to him saying, “Behold now, the words of the prophets are uniformly favorable to the king. Please let your word be like the word of one of them, and speak favorably.” ¹⁴ But

Micaiah said, "As the LORD lives, what the LORD says to me, that I shall speak."

- 2 Timothy 4:2 preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.
- Charles Spurgeon: "It is very pretty, is it not, to read of Luther and his brave deeds? Of course, everybody admires Luther! Yes, yes; but you do not want any one else to do the same to-day. When you go to the Zoological Gardens you all admire the bear; but how would you like a bear at home, or a bear wandering loose about the street? You tell me that it would be unbearable, and no doubt you are right.

So, we admire a man who was firm in the faith, say four hundred years ago; the past ages are a sort of bear-pit or iron cage for him; but such a man to-day is a nuisance, and must be put down. Call him a narrow-minded bigot, or give him a worse name if you can think of one. Yet imagine that in those ages past, Luther, Zwingle, Calvin, and their compeers had said, "The world is out of order; but if we try to set it right we shall only make a great row, and get ourselves into disgrace. Let us go to our chambers, put on our night-caps, and sleep over the bad times, and perhaps when we wake up things will have grown better." Such conduct on their part would have entailed upon us a heritage of error. Age after age would have gone down into the infernal deeps, and the pestiferous bogs of error would have swallowed all. These men loved the faith and the name of Jesus too well to see them trampled on.

Note what we owe them, and let us pay to our sons the debt we owe our fathers. It is to-day as it was in the Reformers' days. Decision is needed. Here is the day for the man, where is the man for the day? We who have had the gospel passed to us by martyr hands dare not trifle with it, nor sit by and hear it denied by traitors, who pretend to love it, but inwardly abhor every line of it. The faith I hold bears upon it marks of the blood of my ancestors. Shall I deny their faith, for which they left their native land to sojourn here? Shall we cast away the treasure which was handed to us through the bars of prisons, or came to us charred with the flames of Smithfield?"¹

¹ <http://teampyro.blogspot.com/2007/07/encouragement-for-narrow-minded-bigot.html>

4) Superficial unity is false unity. True unity is founded on doctrinal truth.

John Piper: “Athanasius would have grieved over sentences like ‘It is Christ who unites us; it is doctrine that divides.’ And sentences like: ‘We should ask, Whom do you trust? rather than what do you believe?’

He would have grieved because he knew this is the very tactic used by the Arians bishops to cover the councils with fog so that the word *Christ* could mean anything.

Those who talk like this - ‘Christ unites, doctrine divides’ - have simply replaced propositions about Christ with the word *Christ*. It carries no meaning until one says something about him.

They think they have done something profound and fresh, when they call us away from the propositions of doctrine to the word *Christ*. In fact they have done something very old and worn and deadly.” (*Contending for Our All*, 64)

- 1 Corinthians 11:18-19 For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. ¹⁹ For there must also be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident among you.

5) The examples of faithful men in generations past should motivate us to stand faithfully *against the world* in our own generation.

John Piper: “Thank you, Athanasius. Thank you...for a lifetime of exile and suffering for the glory of Christ. Thank you for not backing down when you were almost alone. Thank you for seeing the truth so clearly and for standing firm. You were a gift of God to the church and the world.” (*Contending for Our All*, 74-75)

- Hebrews 13:7 Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.
- Mr. Valiant-for-Truth