

EPWORTH LEAGUE TOPICS

Epoch Makers in Church History

III. Athanasius, the Creedmaker

JULY TOPICAL STUDY FOR THE THIRD DEPARTMENT.

Lesson—Col. 1: 9-23

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Among the great bishoprics of the fourth century there were three that by their splendor and antiquity outshone all the others. These were Rome, Antioch and Alexandria. Of these Alexandria was in many respects the most important. At this period the Alexandrian Bishop was the only Bishop in the world who bore the name of Pope. An ancient writer says of him: "The head of the Alexandrian Church is the head of the world."

The Egyptian capital was not only the most powerful city in the East at this time, but it was the greatest centre of religious and educational activity as well. One evidence of the greatness of the Christian Church there is seen in the number of great men it gave to the world. In the third century it gave Origen, and in the next century it produced a still more remarkable man—Athanasius.

Athanasius was born in Alexandria, about 296 A.D. We have no sure knowledge of his race or his lineage, but we know that his parents were Christians. He received his education in the common schools of the city, studying among other things the Greek philosophers and poets. At a very early age he attracted the attention of Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, who took him under his patronage, ordained him deacon, and later made him archdeacon—a position of importance in those days, as the archdeacon became the bishop's private secretary and frequently succeeded him in his episcopal office. It was in the capacity of bishop's assistant that Athanasius first came into public notice.

Those were days of great intellectual activity. Every body was a theologian—sailors, millers, travellers, shop-keepers, barbers, all discussed theology. Every street corner, every shop was a scene of animated and often heated discussions. Quite naturally men differed in their views on many questions. The Greek free spirit of enquiry seems to have taken possession of all the Eastern world.

Now, at Alexandria, at this period, a controversy was raging over the question of the relation of Jesus Christ to God the Father. Was the second person of the Trinity co-eternal with First? Was he created or uncreated? In what sense was he the Son of God? Did his Sonship give him equality with the Father, or was he on a lower plane? Was he more than man and less than God, or was he very God. These were the questions men were asking. And they were intensely interested in them.

We can have little idea to-day how strongly they held their various views on these questions and how vehemently they opposed each other. To-day men still differ in their opinions on these same questions, but the creeds of the various Christian Churches put Jesus Christ in a position of equality with the Father.

At that time one man led the thought of the Christian world in another direction. That man was Arius.

Arius was a Lybian by birth, but he had received his education at Antioch

under a remarkable presbyter named Lucian. From Lucian he seems to have imbibed his views about the person of Christ. At Alexandria, where he was in charge of a church, he began quite late in life to teach his views. He denied that the Son was co-eternal with the Father, though affirming that he was begotten before time and that by him the Father created all things. He thought this would prevent the idea that there were two Gods.

Arius was a man of fine intellect. He was enthusiastic in his preaching, and had won a strong following by the earnestness of his efforts and by the purity of his life. But Alexander, the bishop, regarded him as a heretic and excommunicated him from the church. He refused to give way, and sought help among the Bishops of other churches. He took a unique way also of winning a following among the people. He explained his doctrine in verses set to music, and soon people everywhere were singing the words of Arius. We know the power of singing and the influence of hymns, and the Bishops of other churches, who were spread the views of Arius would soon be by this clever method.

The controversy soon reached Rome. Constantine the Emperor had become Christian, and the Christian religion had been made the religion of his empire. The supreme idea of the Roman Empire was the idea of unity. Constantine feared that this controversy would disturb the unity of the church. In the church of the West the minds of men were turned more to government, more to the practical ends of life. They were less given to speculation.

The Emperor, not understanding the gravity of the question, tried to mediate between Arius and Alexander, but failing in this he called a great Council of the Church in the year 325 at Nicea. Nicea lies across the Bosphorus from Constantinople, and about forty-four miles distant. Here assembled in the spring of the year 325, representatives from all the churches of Christendom. Dean Stanley has given us, in his History of the Eastern Church, a vivid account of this great Council. It was the first and greatest of the seven great Councils. It is said that 318 bishops, with their attendant deacons and presbyters, were present. The Emperor presided. Arius and his followers presented their views. Alexander and his followers met and refuted these. But Alexander, who had been the strongest opponent of Arius. His deacon Athanasius was the real defender of orthodoxy.

It must have been a stormy conference, for hot words and even violent deeds marked the proceedings. Men seemed to forget that they were followers of the meek and lowly Christ, over whose person they were disputing.

Arius was at this time sixty years of age. He was a tall, thin, eager, excitable man. There was something strange about his appearance. Yet he had great goodness of voice in his calmer moods, and he was a good debater.

Athanasius was twenty-seven years of age. He was a man of very small stature (Julian taunted him with being a dwarf), but he had a face of almost angelic beauty. He had remarkable mental powers, and the energy and ability with which he defended the orthodox cause awakened the jealousy or admiration of all who heard him. Arius, defeated by

the cogent reasoning of Athanasius, withdrew from the Council. His book was burned. He was banished.

The Council formulated what is known as the Nicene Creed, in which the views of Arius were distinctly denied. This Creed is the only Creed that is common to Greek, Romanist and Protestant Churches alike. The Apostles' Creed was in use in various forms before this, but just what it meant was not so well known. Later, in the fifth century, there appeared what is known as the Athanasian Creed, which is believed to be a later development of the teaching of the great Alexandrian deacon.

The work of Athanasius did not end with the Council of Nicea. In 328 he was elected bishop as successor to Alexander; but he was not allowed to rule in peace. The controversy was not closed by the Council of 325. For fifty-six years it raged. The Emperor Constantine died an Arian. His successors sided now with one party, now with the other. Bishops were deposed and restored accordingly. Arius died in 337, but his followers continued the strife. It was more than a war over words. Athanasius felt this, and for forty-six years he continued the defence of his views. During that time he did not know the comfort of a peaceful day. He was deposed again and again. He was called before Council after Council. He was accused of all sorts of crimes, from witchcraft to murder. But in the end the cause for which he gave his life triumphed. Arianism died out, and the Church became again orthodox on this point.

Athanasius has been called "The Father of Orthodoxy." He was the chief theologian of his age. A writer of the sixth century said of him, "Whenever you meet a man who would have fished and have not paper at hand, write it down on your clothes."

Gibbon, the historian, regarded Athanasius as the most remarkable man the early church produced. He says of him that he displayed a superiority of ability and character that would have fitted him far better than the degenerate sons of Constantine to rule the Roman Empire.

Honesty

Micah 6: 10-16.

FOR CITIZENSHIP MEETING—FOURTH WEEK IN JULY.

REV. SAMUEL T. TUCKER, B.A., B.D., ODESSA.

"Full measure, just weights, true samples, full service, strict fulfilment of engagements are some of the manifestations of honesty." The prophet Micah was arraigning the spirit of dishonesty rampant in his day. The "worse of wickedness," the "lean ephah," the "balances of wrong" and the "bags of false weights" were the examples of social dishonesty to be found in the days of the prophet. To-day the desire to make money quickly, the heartless competition, and the rivalry between capital and labor have developed a spirit of dishonesty similar to that of the prophet's day.

UNFAIR COMPETITION.

To supply the public with necessary goods is an honorable business. We spend most of our energy crowding out the other man, we are dangerously near questionable ground. Keen competition leads to adulteration, false measures and false weights. The Secretary of Agriculture of the United States testified that in the thirty per cent of food products are adulterated goods. "Competition defrauds the customer who buys the goods, drains and brutalizes the workman