

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 8 – The Battle Over A Word

Introduction

A riot broke out in the ancient city of Alexandria. People were in the street yelling, “There was a time when Christ was not.” Meanwhile another crowd opposing them claimed “that Christ is the eternal God along with the Father.”¹

What became a dispute within the twelve parishes of Alexandria soon spilled over into the whole Roman Empire. In Alexandria, the leaders of the two opposing factions was a senior presbyter by the name of Arius and the Bishop Alexander (Handbook, p156). The year was 318 A.D. Arius was promoting the view:



“The Father alone was God; the Son was essentially different than the Father. He did not possess by nature or by right any of the divine qualities of immortality, sovereignty, perfect wisdom, goodness and purity. He did not exist before he was begotten by the Father. The Father produced him as a creature.”²

“Arianism adopted the idea that the Son is a semidivine being created, not begotten, by the Father and having an origin in time, or at least a definite beginning before the creation of the material world.”³

Arius’ argument was “for God to implant His substance to some other being, however exalted, would imply that He is divisible and subject to change, which is inconceivable. Moreover, if any other being were to participate in the divine nature in any valid sense, there would result a duality of divine beings, whereas the Godhead is by definition unique.”⁴

Arius’ view did hold that Christ was the Creator but he was created by the Father before that. This is called by many The Arian Controversy.

¹ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 87). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

² Eerdman’s Handbook to the History of Christianity, Ed. Dr. Tim Dowley, Lion Publishing, Herts, England, 1977, Page 156

³³ Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 106

⁴⁴ J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 1978), Page 227

The Arian Controversy

Arius was influenced by many false sources emphasizing the humanity of Christ rather than his divinity. These may have been attempts to explain the difficulties of Christ's incarnation to the human mind. "Based partly on Origen's teachings on the Trinity, Arius developed a theory of the nature of God that firmly separated Jesus from the Father. Since part of Arius's responsibility as presbyter was to direct a school of biblical interpretation for priests and laypersons who wished to teach, his theories quickly gained traction with the next generation of Christian leaders."⁵

Arius' opponent, Alexander, called a synod of bishops to discuss whether Arius's views were orthodox. More than a hundred bishops from various parts of the eastern Roman Empire listened to Alexander critique Arius's teachings. Alexander insisted that salvation depends on God's uniting himself with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ so that we can be saved. After hearing this, the synod decided that Arius's view was heretical. Arius and a dozen other clergy, including two bishops were excommunicated, but that did not end the Arian heresy.

The Arian division caught Emperor Constantine's attention. His desire for unity caused him great consternation that his Empire was split over a theological "trifle". Constantine hoped to use Christianity as a glue to hold the already shaky empire together. He called an ecumenical council that was eventually held in Nicaea, near Nicomedia. More is known about the end result than about the debates that followed, but again Arius was quickly condemned. The Council produced its own creed which we call today, The Nicene Creed.

They added to the Apostle's Creedⁱ precise wording to clearly denounce Arianism with the following: "We believe . . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father [only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God], Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, being of one substance with the Father . . ."

Only two bishops refused to subscribe to the Creed. Constantine rejoiced in this accord which had the traction to divide his Empire. "However, even this council could not quell the rising popularity of Arianism. In fact the council served as a catalyst for it to grow even more rapidly! So much so that Constantine began to doubt the wording of the Nicene Creed and thought about rewriting it in favor of Arianism. One man stood in his way: Athanasius (ca. 296 – 373)."⁶

Athanasius

"Defending his arguments proved to be a difficult task for Athanasius. In 332, Constantine restored Arius to his position as presbyter under immense political pressure. Athanasius was asked to accept this, but he refused."⁷

⁵ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 88). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (pp. 91-92). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁷ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 94). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

Athanasius argued the point on several levels:

1. Only God could save mankind from sin. If Jesus is not God, there is no salvation.
2. Since the record and liturgy of the early church reflected worship to Jesus, he argued that if the Son was only a creature then the Church was and has been in serious error.
3. He believed as the Bible teaches that those who are called, justified, sanctified, will be glorified. He argued that it was illogical that a created being could bring believers to glorification.

Athanasius ended up being exiled five time. He served as bishop 46 years but only lived 17 in Alexandria. Upon his death others carried the torch against Arianism and Semi-Arianism through to the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. However it wasn't until 451 A.D. that some stability to the doctrines of the Trinity and Christ were stabilized (Brown p105). The most significant achievement of the Chalcedon Council was the statement that Jesus is "perfect both in deity and in humanness; this selfsame one is also actually God and actually man." The council's judgments and definitions regarding the divine marked a significant turning point in the Christological debates.

"The Arian controversy divided Christendom for a half a century . . ."8 It took several hundred years before the Church finally condemned all shades of Arianism. But there are still shadows of Arianism today.

Modern Arianism

Some modern groups which currently appear to embrace some of the principles of Arianism include Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses. Although the origins of their beliefs are not necessarily attributed to the teachings of Arius, many of the core beliefs of Unitarians and Jehovah's Witnesses are very similar to them. As Brown states, "Modern theology is not interested in such speculation [as Arianism] and consequently has only a denial of the deity of Christ." (p106)

Mormons would not say they are Arian but they do not hold to the Trinitarian position of the Nicene Creed. There are others, not very well known, that hold to unbiblical Trinitarian views including *Iglesia ni Cristo*. This is a Church of Christ that we see in the Philippines.

Here is a summary chart:

	God or Man?	Who Was Jesus?
Christianity	Both: "fully God and fully man."	Second person of the Trinity, incarnation of God, Son of God, Savior.
Arianism	A created divine being.	A divine being but created by God and inferior to Father. Son of God. Savior.

⁸ Brown, Harold O.J., *Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 107

JW	An archangel	Son of God, Word of God, God's first creation, Archangel Michael.
LDS	Man	Son of God, Savior, originally one of the spirit beings that all humans used to be. Has a physical body. They teach that incarnation was the result of a physical relationship between God the Father and Mary. Mormons believe Jesus is a god, but that any human can also become a god.

One Word – One Letter – One Iota

I think it is important to see that the Arian argument was essentially over one word. Arius argued that the Son was not the same as God but similar. In Greek that word for another substance *hypostasis*. The orthodox position as the Creed affirms is based on the term *homoousious*, meaning, “of the same substance.” So the debate boiled down to which word describes the nature of Jesus.

Constantine never saw the end of this debate and when his son Constantius came to the throne he suggested a compromise. He thought a Semi-Arian view could make everyone happy. He proposed replacing the word *homoousious* (meaning “of the same substance”) with the word *homoiousious* (meaning “of similar substance”).

Some people today might quibble over a little word. I have had well-meaning people argue with me over the importance of the word “alone” or *sola* that was so critical to the Reformation. To Athanasius, this was no small matter. That little letter made all the difference in the world in understanding how the Father relates to the Son. Salvation depends on Christ’s being God, not “like God.”

He wrote, “He took to Himself a body, a human body even as our own. Nor did He will merely to become embodied or merely to appear; had that been so, He could have revealed His divine majesty in some other and better way. No, He took our body . . . Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death instead of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die, and the law of death thereby be abolished because, having fulfilled in His body that for which it was appointed, it was thereafter voided of its power for men.”⁹

Why One Word Matters

“We are saved from God by God. Only a divine Savior can bear the weight of God’s wrath in atonement. Only Jesus as the God-man can satisfy the enormous debt and penalty caused by human sin against God. No mere human could bridge that gap. Only a divine Savior can pay the costly price for redeeming us from our bondage to sin and death. Only the God-man can conquer all his people’s enemies. Our salvation is dependent on the infinite divine capacity of our Savior, Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

⁹ St. Athanasius the Apostolic. On The Incarnation (With Active Table of Contents) . Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 97). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

Application

There are some very practical considerations that we must consider as we come to grips with this Arian controversy. Here are 4:

1. Unity without truth. Constantine was zealous for unity within the Roman Empire. He was so concerned about unity that he was willing to compromise – to adopt a Semi-Arian belief about Jesus. We must realize that a unity brought to pass through toleration, compromise or accommodation is a façade. It is not unity. True unity can only be accomplished by Truth. The pursuit of Truth will unify. Unity without truth is a false dichotomy.

2. Words matter. Secondly words matter. One word divided the Church for nearly 500 years. And it was worth the battle. Whether Christ was God or like God matters. Heaven and Hell hang on the right understanding of that word. Do not despise the pursuit of precision in right doctrine.

3. Importance of Creedal solutions. From Acts 15 to the present, the Church has thought it wise to formulate creedal solutions (or in other words Statements of Faith) to summarize The Faith in the context of crisis and confusion.

4. Some debates took time and will take time! Lastly some issues will take time. In this the 21st Century we look at our Bible. It contains 66 inspired books. We look at cardinal doctrines like the Scripture; like the Trinity; like salvation by grace through faith; etc., and we think that the canon of Scripture and the glory of Christ in the Gospel was just accepted in a moment of time.

ⁱ The Apostles' Creed, is an early statement of Christian belief. The Apostles' Creed is Trinitarian in based on Christian theological understanding of the New Testament. It is very basic and it does it address many other theological questions which became objects of dispute centuries later. The earliest known mention of the expression "Apostles' Creed" occurs in a letter of AD 390 from a synod in Milan. There is no evidence that it was actually written by the Apostles or that it is inspired. It is called the Apostles' Creed because it is supposed to be a record of what the apostles taught.

The Apostles' Creed is a good summary of Christian doctrine. However, there are two primary concerns with the Apostles' Creed. First, in regards to the phrase "He descended into hell"; and in regards to "the holy catholic church," this does not refer to the Roman Catholic Church as we know it today. The word *catholic* means "universal." The true "catholic" church is all those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation.