

1

Arianism: Is Jesus Christ divine and eternal or was he created?

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What is Arianism?

Arianism is the heresy which denies the full divinity of Jesus Christ. It is named after Arius, who was born about 270 and died in 336. He was a priest in charge of one of the principal churches at Alexandria and he appears to have believed that the Son of God was not eternal but was created before the ages by the Father as an instrument for the making of the world. Arius's teaching was opposed chiefly by Athanasius, a deacon at Alexandria, and was eventually condemned by the First Ecumenical Council, held at Nicea in 325. It became an article of 'Nicene' orthodoxy that the Father and the Son were equally eternal, and the famous term *homoousios* ('of the same substance') was used to express this belief.

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Key Scriptures

Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death,

even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2.5–11)

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.’

Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. The doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’ Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.’ (John 20.19b–29)

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In my first term at university 35 years ago, I was invited to a Bible study. I’d never been to one before; I hadn’t been to church for ages, and I didn’t know what to expect. At one point in the meeting, I came face to face with the Christian claim that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. And for the first time in my life, I stopped to think about it. I decided I couldn’t believe that, so I walked out of the group in the middle of their study.

My problem was with the notion that a man could be God. Arius's problem was more the other way around – how could God in all his fullness become a man?

Unlike me, Arius started from a position of strong faith and orthodoxy; he was a well-educated presbyter in one of the leading churches in Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century. He reacted against what he perceived to be the heretical teaching that left no room for distinguishing the divinity of God the Father from that of God the Son, for if there was no such distinction wouldn't the limitations of the incarnate Son (God the Son made human in the person of Jesus Christ) have to be ascribed to the Father as well? Arius also wanted to preserve the sharp distinction between creator and creation. Above all, like later Muslims and Unitarians, he sought to protect monotheism and the unity of God.

The issue for Arius was, simply, this: how could God, the unknowable, immutable, transcendent one, become fully human without being changed in the process? Driving the question for him was a strong Neoplatonic cosmology that sharply distinguished between an unchanging, heavenly sphere of existence and the changeable created order. This dualistic philosophical starting point, together with an assumption that monotheism could allow no distinction between a Father and Son within God, ultimately led him to press certain biblical passages over against others. Arius minimized the teachings of some scriptural texts in order to produce a version of Christianity more consistent with his presuppositions. In the process, orthodoxy was sacrificed on the altar of philosophy.

Even though he gets a lot of bad press, Arius was, as far as we can tell, scrupulous and careful in his study of the Bible. Like many others before and after him, he was struck by passages which could imply that in one way or another the Son of God was limited or was subordinate to the Father. After all, didn't Jesus say, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? One there

is who is good' (Matthew 19.17)? And in John's Gospel didn't he say, 'the Father is greater than I' (John 14.28)? The fact that Jesus prayed to God seemed to imply inferiority: how could one who was co-equal with the Father pray, 'not my will but thine be done' (Luke 22.42)? Surely the man who hungered, thirsted, slept and wept, suffered and died could not have shared directly in the very essence of God. It's not what we'd expect, much less fully comprehend.

Arius didn't deny the Fourth Gospel's teaching that 'in the beginning was the Word' and 'the Word was God' (John 1.1). He could still say that the Son was both human and even, in a sense, 'divine', but he qualified that assertion in a crucial way: the divine Word that existed before all creation was himself also created. According to Socrates (c. 380–c. 439), an early Church historian, Arius put it in the following nutshell: 'There was when he was not.'

Instead of pre-existing for all eternity with the Father, the Word had a beginning before himself going on to create the world and become a man. He was therefore a lesser, inferior deity, a 'demiurge', close in some ways but exterior to God himself. The *Logos* (the Greek word that John uses in his Gospel and that is translated into English as 'Word') was a creature who, precisely because he was created and begotten, could not fully know or comprehend the mind of God. In other words, Jesus was fully human, but not fully God.

Arius combined this basic distinction with something no orthodox Christian would dispute – a great ethical emphasis on moral advancement through obedience, after the example of Jesus. But the logic of Arian teaching meant that Jesus, the perfect creature, only *models* for us the way to salvation. We follow his example in order to learn how to win grace and to achieve for ourselves deliverance from our predicament. Arius appealed to the people of his day because he was a stubborn man of principle with strong ascetic discipline, impressive in appearance, confident and persuasive in his speech. There

was something very attractive about such a noble religion which protected God's unity and transcendence and which upheld human effort and perseverance in the manner of the Stoics (those Greek philosophers who taught self-control and detachment). Knowing that what people sing influences what they believe, Arius set his ideas to verse in a composition called the *Thalia* so that his followers could more easily remember his teachings. This sensible blend of philosophy, theology and exegesis almost won the day.

But Alexander, Arius's bishop, disagreed, and so did Athanasius, a local deacon, who distinguished between 'generation' and 'creation'. The Son, Athanasius said, was *generated*, begotten by God from eternity, but he had no beginning. This generation was eternal and internal to God, whereas creation was in time and external to God. The Son was therefore *homoousios* (being of the same substance) and co-eternal with the Father, not simply *homoiousios* (being of similar substance to God) as some of the Arians claimed. The only difference between those two Greek words is the letter 'iota'. But it is the difference between Christ being God and Christ being like God.

In the year 325 the Council of Nicea rejected Arianism and put the words into the creed we say today: 'very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father' (see p. 11). That did not settle the issue. The Arian controversy continued until the language of the Nicene creed became widely established in 381 by the time of the Council of Constantinople.

So what? What's really at stake? Isn't this splitting hairs over a dogma, a fine point for theologians to debate in seminars? Well, folk on the street don't decide their Christology with an iota any more (if they have a Christology), and belief in a demiurge doesn't preoccupy the average grocery-shopper. But most people outside the Church, and quite a few within, don't believe that Jesus Christ was and is the one and only God before whom one day every knee will bow, to the glory of the

Father. For many he remains simply a great moral teacher and example.

If Arianism is right it makes a difference in many ways; I'll mention briefly three. First, God did not send a creature in order to show us how we could bridge the gap between heaven and earth by learning how to follow a wonderful example. Both the human predicament and the divine solution are far more profound than that. It's the difference between a religion that simply says to us 'try harder', and the belief that God is the one who has done what it takes to deliver us, through the incarnation and the cross. As one of my students put it, the Son cannot be a bridge between God and humanity if the bridge doesn't fully reach to both ends. The nature of Christ directly affects how we can be restored and put right with God.

Second, revelation is also at stake. Arianism denied that God the unknowable can be known; even the Logos didn't have perfect knowledge of God because, as a mere creature, he was separate from the divine being. In orthodox Christianity, however, Christ offers us not secondhand, indirect knowledge, but the direct experience of relationship with the eternal God who calls us to know him. If Arius was right, the love we find in Christ (and by analogy, what we experience in the Spirit) is really external to that God. If Christ does not fully know God, can we fully trust him to deliver us?

Third, why should we want to emulate, much less to praise, the God of Arius? This God does not give of himself, but sends a lesser, created being to show kindness. God remains an isolated, insulated ruler who cannot involve himself intimately with his creation. Orthodoxy is far more radical (and personal) than that!

The texts cited by the Arians certainly remind us that, in so far as the Son was fully human, he did experience all of the weakness and limitations we know, yet without sin. None of these texts however addresses or denies the divine essence of the Son. For each of them there are other passages that

reflect belief in the full deity of Christ (such as John 1.1, 18; 1 Corinthians 8.6; Colossians 1.15–20; 2.9; Titus 2.13; Romans 9.5) – texts by Jewish Christians who did not compromise their monotheistic faith. The biblical writers were apparently not that interested in speculations about the metaphysics of ontology (the science of being); they focused on the concrete reality that they experienced in the person of Jesus.

In the passage from Philippians 2 at the head of this chapter we catch a glimpse of the early belief in the pre-existence of the Son as deity when Paul says, ‘who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped’ (Philippians 2.6). That belief is consistent with what we find in other New Testament texts, for example, John 1.1f., 14; 2 Corinthians 8.9; Galatians 4.4. But the main point in Philippians is precisely the wonder that Christ emptied himself in humiliation, even to the shame of death on a cross. The eternal Son did not take advantage of his status, but poured himself out in obedience for our sake. The magnitude of such a sacrifice may be something we cannot fathom, but it fully coheres with the very nature of our self-giving God.

Paul goes on to say that this man, whose obedience won our life, has been given the name which is above every name (Philippians 2.9–11). That name is not Jesus, as some popular choruses assume. ‘Jesus’ or ‘Yeshua’ was simply a form of ‘Joshua’, a very common name in his day. The given name that Paul refers to is the tetragrammaton (YHWH) revealed in the Old Testament, the sacred name of God, the four consonants which orthodox Jews do not dare to speak for its holiness and which most Bibles print as ‘LORD’.

What is particularly striking here in Philippians 2.9–11 is the way that Paul combines two Old Testament passages, both of them from Isaiah. Isaiah 45.22–23 reads: ‘Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: “To me every

knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.” Six times in that same chapter of Isaiah comes the refrain about God, ‘There is no other’ (verses 5, 6, 14, 18, 21, 22), emphasizing his uniqueness.

The second passage comes from Isaiah 42.8: ‘I am the LORD, that is my name. My glory I give to no other.’ Paul in his letter to the Philippians is applying some of the strongest affirmations about the unique sovereignty and identity of God in the Old Testament to the person of Jesus Christ, before whom every knee will bow in worship. This sort of adoration and authority belongs to no mere creature, not even an angel.

That brings us to John 20.19b–29 (also quoted at the head of this chapter), the resurrection appearance in the upper room. I like Thomas, the questioning, doubting disciple. In John’s Gospel he’s apparently an intelligent, thoughtful man, not wishy-washy but loyal to what he knows to be true. Like a good scholar, he doesn’t want his information secondhand, but insists on getting the facts from the primary source. He has the stubbornness of Arius, but he lacks the arrogance.

When Christ appears to Thomas in the climactic scene of the Gospel, this doubter makes the simplest and most direct affirmation of the deity of Christ one could ask for: ‘My Lord and my God!’ (John 20.28). It doesn’t get much clearer than that, especially when we recognize that this passage is one half of an *inclusio* (or bracketing), the other half being the Johannine prologue. Together, like bookends, these verses emphasize the identity of Christ (1.1; 20.28). Who Jesus is makes all the difference in the world.

So what’s the best way to avoid Arianism? How do we maintain faith in the full deity of Jesus? Is it Bible study? That helps as we discover how strong a scriptural case there is for orthodoxy, but it’s not the ultimate answer: Arius was a well-trained exegete with a keen eye for detail. In fact, he led two weekly Bible studies, on Wednesdays and Fridays.

Is the best preventative a ‘consistent’ theology? A consistently high view of God’s sovereignty is part of what led to Arius’s

conclusions in the first place. Our presuppositions, the ideas we bring to a discussion of what God is like, can keep us from discovering the fullness of his self-revelation in the person of Christ. Upholding both the full humanity and deity of Jesus is no less important than maintaining the trinity and unity of God, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, justification by grace and judgement according to works, and a host of other apparent paradoxes that we may be tempted to resolve by emphasizing one side of the truth over another. To demand philosophical 'consistency' is to carve the reality of God down to fit within our small world of thought, rather than to allow his revelation to stand and reform our own thinking.

I think the best defence against Arianism is precisely what hastened the development of a high Christology in the earliest Church – real, personal encounter with the risen Christ, and attentive participation in a worshipping community. Meeting Jesus and reflecting together with others on what he has accomplished for us makes us want to worship him. It's hard to worship a mere man, or even a demiurge.

As I was leaving that Bible study so long ago, a girl in the group said to me, 'The next time we meet, you'll believe.' She was right. A few weeks later, I came to faith. Not because I had sorted out some syllogisms or developed a watertight philosophical system or exegeted my way into orthodoxy. No, someone had simply shared the gospel with me, helping me to see that, in Christ, God had come to do for me what I could never do for myself. He fully bridged the chasm that separated us, died to deal with my sins, and brought me back to himself. My natural instinct was to thank him, to praise him, and to worship him in the company of other Christians from whom I could learn more of my new faith. And I found that as a result I had no problem with the deity of Christ. I can't pretend that I can get my mind fully around that doctrine. If I did, I guess I'd be God. But I believe it.