

CPC Church History I
March 8, 2009
Arianism and Nicene Orthodoxy

Arianism

The Arian controversy marks a shift in the focus of Trinitarian theology. Both Modalism (the idea that the three persons were really one) and Monarchianism (the notion of a hierarchy among the three) proceeded primarily from the problem of three persons. Now, with Arianism, the problem proceeds from considerations about the divine nature itself.

The Problem

The following are premises that everyone, Orthodox and Arians alike, share:

[T1] The divine nature is ungenerated and self-existing.

[T2] The Father is ungenerated and self-existing.

[T3] The Son is neither ungenerated nor self-existing, for he gets his being from the Father.

Therefore, either a) the Son is not God (from T1 and T3) or b) the divine nature must undergo some change in order for the Son to be God (it must go from ungenerated to generated). Everyone admits that the divine nature cannot change, therefore “a) the Son is not God” must be true.

The following premises are accepted by Arians, but not necessarily by the Orthodox:

[T4] Because the Godhead is unique, transcendent, and indivisible, it cannot be shared or communicated, for this would involve a division and a change in the Godhead, which is impossible.

- Note that the Arians assume that the only way of communication and sharing is one which causes the division of that which is shared; an assumption Orthodoxy will not accept.

It follows from T4 that anything that has come into existence must have come into existence not by communication of God’s being, but by having been called out of nothing (*ex nihilo*).

This leads to the following 4 propositions, accepted by Arians:

1) The Son must be a creature (from T3 and T4), created not out of God’s being, but out of nothing.

- This means that when we say that the Son is “begotten,” we are speaking metaphorically; what we should say is “made” or “created.”

2) The Son must have had a beginning, because all creatures have beginnings.

- First they are not, then they are (this is what it means to come out of nothing). Christ was not created in time, in fact, he created time; but before time, Christ was created. The Arian slogan is “there was when He was not.” This cannot mean “there was *a time* when he was not, for that is false. But before time, in the space of eternity, at one point the Father is alone, and at a subsequent point He has a Son. Arius felt that to claim that the Son was co-eternal with the Father would be to say that there are two self-existing principles, and therefore two gods.

3) The Son cannot know the Father directly.

- As a creature, even the most noble of all creatures, the Son is still finite, and therefore is not capable of knowing an infinite God.

4) It is possible for the Son to sin.

- Or rather, it was at his creation. But God foresaw that He would not sin, and therefore made him unable to sin. Remember, “Son” here doesn’t mean the human nature of Christ, but the divine nature.

The Arians amassed an impressive array of Scriptural quotations to support their views, basically all those that seem to suggest that the Son is a creature, or where the Son seems to be deferring to the Father:

- Proverbs 8:22, LXX: “The Lord created me...”
- Acts 2:36: “God has made Him Lord and Christ...”
- Romans 8:29: “The firstborn among many...”
- Colossians 1:15: “the firstborn of all creation...”
- Hebrews 3:2: “Who was faithful to Him Who made him...”

In what sense, then, is the Son called God? He is only called God out of courtesy, not because he really is God. Thus, the Son is more of a demi-god than a god, much less God. This doctrine is really the logical end of Monarchianism, which claims that the persons of the Trinity are not of equal dignity. For if they are not, because the divine nature does not admit of greater or lesser degrees (because it is simple), then the lesser members of the Trinity will have to be dropped from the rank of divinity.

Nicene Response

The Ecumenical Council called by Constantine and held at the city of Nicea in 325 (the first of seven, the last of which was also to be held in Nicea in 787) condemned the Arian heresy in all its forms. At this council, a creed was formulated, which later came to be called the Nicene Creed. This is *not* the creed you probably think of when you think of the Nicene Creed—that creed is a refinement effected at the Council of Constantinople, which we will study next week. The Nicene Creed reads as follows:

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, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth; Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, and became man, and suffered and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say, There was when he was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change—these the Catholic Church anathematizes.

- The notion of being “of one substance” with the Father, which in Greek is *homoousion*, is to become the decisive point of Nicene theology. When someone refers to Nicene theology, it is almost always this point that is meant.
 - Nevertheless, it is not clear exactly what this is to mean. The specification of its meaning will be the subject of a debate that will last much of the rest of the 4th century. It was clearly meant by the Fathers at the Council to emphasize the full divinity of the Son; it is not clear that they meant it to mean that the Son’s being and the Father’s being were one (which is ultimate interpretation it is given in Orthodox theology). The last idea was probably only implicit in their thought.
- Note how little attention is paid to the Holy Spirit here. All that is said is that we believe in him; he is not asserted to be God, co-equal to the Father and Son. This lack means that the Nicene formula falls short of being a fully Trinitarian expression.

Athanasius Against the World

The life of St. Athanasius, the first man in the West to be declared a doctor of the Church, one of the 4 great doctors of the Church according to Eastern Orthodoxy, exiled 5 times for his staunch defense of Nicene Orthodoxy, stands as witness to the widespread and powerful influence of Arian thought. Athanasius stood at the head of the party that developed Nicene doctrine into full-blown Trinitarian theology. The chief characteristics of his thought are as follows:

- Athanasius began, not from a philosophical conception about the nature of the Godhead, as did Arius, but rather from the nature of redemption. For him, Christ had to be God, otherwise he could not have caused men to share in the divine life (the concept of divinization, that men are made like God through Christ’s saving work, is a common one in the Early church, and will become even more important in this period).
- If Christ is the Son of God, he must be of the same nature as God (just as human parents don’t give birth to goats).
- Athanasius clarifies that *homoousion* means that Christ and the Father have not just the same type of substance, but the same substance. He will say that “the divinity of the Father is identical with that of the Son.”
- As much contra-Sabellian as contra-Arian: The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father, but there is one supreme principle, one indivisible, unique Godhead, which both the Father and the Son have. Because it is indivisible, they must have it in its entirety, so each is fully God. Thus, “if the Son as offspring is other than the Father, He is identical with him as God.”
- Athanasius also argues the full consubstantiality of the Spirit with the Father and Son. Among other reasons, if the Spirit is to make us partakers of the divine life, he must himself be divine. Only with this assertion does Trinitarian doctrine come to a flowering—here at last we have a statement about the full divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with an equal commitment to their unity of essence.

Cappadocians

3 Greek Christian writers championed Athanasian Trinitarianism, writing in depth about its philosophical and theological meaning.

- Gregory of Nazianzus (329-389 AD)
- Basil the Great (c. 330-379 AD)

- Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-395 AD)

Further Trinitarian Considerations

- Why did Christians feel the need to go beyond the Scriptures in the language of the Trinity?
 - The questions asked are implicit in many Scriptural passages, such as baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This Scriptural formula drives us to ask the question of their relation and how that is to be understood.
 - They found that people were asking the questions, and they couldn't afford *not* to have an answer for them.
- The Rule of Prayer
 - This is a principle that, in addition to the authority of the Scriptures, the authority of prayer was to be considered in doctrinal disputes. In other words, the Church's early liturgies and prayers had been formed by the apostles and those who learned from them, and therefore represented a direct line back to their teaching. Such things, even if they weren't in Scripture, were demonstrably associated with apostolic teaching, and thus taken to be normative.