

UNIT TWO:

Arianism and the Christological Debate



Evangelical
Lutheran Church
in America

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QUICK CONNECT

Arius (256-336) was a priest and teacher in the city of Alexandria in northern Egypt. A person of sincere faith and great intellect, he formulated a theological perspective and vocabulary that affirmed the divinity of Jesus as the incarnate Logos of God while also affirming the absolute principle of monotheism (there is only one God). His key idea is that the Logos was like God but not the same essence as God. Unfortunately, though his system was very popular, it failed to affirm other essential aspects of the Christian proclamation, namely how Jesus offers salvation. Though he was condemned at the Council of Nicaea, his popularity increased after the council.

GLOSSARY/KEY TERMS

Logos: A Greek word referring to the “word” (sometimes “wisdom”) of God. A key term in Greco-Roman philosophy, it is also important in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g., in the Greek translation of Genesis, God creates the world through the Logos). It is the principle Christological claim about Jesus in the Gospel of John (“The Word [Logos] became flesh and lived among us,” John 1:14).

Homoiousios: “Of like/similar essence.” This specialized theological word summarizes Arius’ perspective that the Word was “like the nature of God.” This stands in contrast with the statement in the Nicene Creed, “of one being with the Father” (*homoousios*, meaning “the same essence”).

Arian: A broad umbrella term used to describe a theology and theologians that did not accept the Council of Nicaea. Generally “Arian” describes a theological perspective, influenced by Arius, that the Son/Logos is a created being and therefore subordinate (not equal) to God.

Septuagint: The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible from the second century B.C.E., most commonly used by both Jews and early Christians in the Mediterranean world. Much of the discussion about Scripture and theological terminology revolves around the Greek language.

NARRATIVE

One prominent scholar notes that “the [Christological] crisis of the fourth century was the most dramatic internal struggle the Christian Church had experienced thus far” and that, in the aftermath of that crisis, “Arius himself came more and more to be regarded as a kind of Antichrist among heretics.” Despite the controversy around him, Arius himself seems to have written only a few works. Most of what survives to our own time are a few letters and fragments on his main theological work, the *Thalia*. To speak of Arius as a “heretic” is to say that his theological ideas are not compatible with the proclamation of the universal church, that it is outside the mainstream of Christian thought and practice. It is necessary to begin with this clarification because so many of his opponents – of this time and in centuries afterwards – used the title “heretic” to imply someone of flawed moral character who intentionally distorted the church’s teaching and intended to promote knowingly false ideas to lead others astray.

Most historical theologians today would assert that Arius was part of a vigorous theological debate about a foundational Christian teaching. It is less that Arius deviated from the established consensus and more that the argument prompted by his ideas moved the broader church to formulate a central teaching more clearly. Precisely because the solution was not immediately obvious – Scripture and esteemed theologians

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could be quoted with equal zeal by both sides of the debate – we should avoid casting aspersions on his moral character. Moreover, most historical theologians would also say that Arius' ideas are outside what would become the mainstream of Christian thought – it would take some time for the Creed of Nicaea to be “tested” and “received” as an authentic expression of faith. The popularity of Arius' Christological perspective in his own time speaks to how much it made sense to a lot of people and reflected their own understanding (one that would endure for several centuries afterward). Likewise, historical theologians are aware of how nontheological concerns (political connections, personal animosity, administrative maneuvering, etc.) figured in the events around the Council of Nicaea. The champions of the Nicene faith (such as St. Athanasius) were at times guilty of slander and unscrupulous machinations in their efforts against Arius and the movement that bore his name (Arianism). Granting all that, we can both honor Arius' erudition and sincere faith while also acknowledging that his theology does not provide for a consistent narrative of God's work of salvation on our behalf through Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Word.

Arius' principle theological concern was to protect Christianity's affirmation of radical monotheism: that there is only one God and that God alone should be worshiped. This is the First Commandment (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5; see also the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone,” in Deuteronomy 6:4) and one that Jesus absolutely affirmed (Matthew 22:36-40). The keystone of Arius' Christological conviction was in upholding this principle clearly and consistently.

In our investigation of Arianism, it would help to identify the intellectual framework (or “theological worldview”) from which Arius operated. He and most of his colleagues took the humanity of Jesus as obvious. The deeper question was: “How best to explain the relationship between Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) and God?” Said another way: “If Jesus is the incarnate Logos, then how is the Logos like God?” While these questions may seem esoteric (something that only theologians with too much time on their hands would ponder), they get at fundamental, basic realities of Christian life: Can one pray to Jesus or should one pray only to God “the Father”? Do prayers to Jesus invite the charge of polytheism (a belief in and worship of multiple gods)?

Arius was clearly concerned that Christians who did not properly distinguish between God and Jesus (as the incarnate Logos) could indeed be in danger of one of two heresies: either polytheism (saying there are two gods, or three if we include the Holy Spirit) or Sabellianism (sometimes also called modalism): that there was no real distinction between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Rightly convinced that there was but one God and that there was an important distinction between the Logos and God, Arius established his perspective on the foundational idea that God is without beginning or end. That is, the very definition of God (affirmed in classical Greek philosophy but certainly consonant with Scripture) is that God is the “uncreated Creator.”

Arius searched the Bible for guidance to help explain the relationship between God and the Logos. Again, Arius focused on the relationship between God and the Logos (the Word) as his starting point because Scripture declares: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1-3, 14). As he continued to study the Bible, Arius found guidance from other passages, especially Proverbs 8:22. Here Wisdom (*Sophia* in the Greek Septuagint, which could be understood as a synonym for Logos) is personified and proclaims: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.” Arius, like many Christians, believed that one passage of the Bible can help explain another passage. From Proverbs, Arius focused on the word “created” (“The Lord God *created* me”). So here, Arius argues, the Logos itself proclaims to us its relationship

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to God. The Lord God (God the Father) is “uncreated.” The Logos of God is “created.” If the Logos is created, it is not fully divine since, by definition, God must be uncreated. Therefore, there is a ranking: God the Father (the only one who is God in the fullest sense) and the Logos (who is divine and the first, greatest creature, second only to God). From here, Arius makes one of his most noteworthy claims: “There was a time when the Logos was not.” If this is an accurate perspective, then Arius has defended monotheism while also carving out a way to assert the divinity of the Logos without confusing it with God. He has also not taken anything away from the Logos, since Arius asserts (with the Gospel of John’s reference to Genesis) that all things were created through the Logos. According to Arius, we can conclude that the Logos is *like* God – but not the same as God.

Finally, another set of biblical titles become helpful in shaping Arius’ perspective: “Father” and “Son.” Jesus consistently referred to God as *Abba* (an affectionate term for Father) and even taught his disciples to call upon God in the same way (Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:1-4). The logic of the created order underlines Arius’ understanding that the Logos is created. Just as “fathers” are naturally prior to “sons,” so it is between God (the Father) and the Logos (the Son, incarnate as Jesus). Therefore Arius could say, “God ‘the Father’ was not always ‘Father,’” insofar as “father” makes sense only in the context of offspring or a dependent (in this case, the Logos once it was created by God). Finally, Jesus’ own self-revelation as the Son of God affirms Arius’ distinction: biological sons often resemble their fathers, but the two are not confused, because they remain two distinct entities.

While many were convinced by the clarity of Arius’ thought and his faithfulness to biblical language, others were convinced that his system created more problems than it solved. Arius’ critics asserted that Arius misapplied biblical language, leading him to a conclusion that was fundamentally at odds with the collective testimony of Scripture. In particular, the critics of Arius noted that only God can give us our being in creation and only God can restore that nature to us in our salvation. If Scripture declares that “all things came into being through the Logos” and that through the incarnation of the Logos, we are saved, then the Logos must act with the same power and nature as God. By insisting (for the sake of monotheism) that the Logos must be subordinate to God the Father and not equal in power or nature to God, Arius has made the Logos a mere agent, intermediary or messenger of God. Certainly no mere messenger and no creature can affect the salvation of the cosmos – but Christians from the very beginning have proclaimed that Jesus, the incarnate Logos, saves. Those who opposed Arius noted that the key flaw in his understanding was that he began with a philosophical principle of God as “uncreated” (again, a characteristic of God they did not deny) instead of the primary biblical image of God as Creator and Liberator. In the end, Arius sensed a need to “protect” God’s divine nature from the incarnation; God could never truly be united with any finite, material reality (such as human nature). As such, Arius’ critics charged that he sidestepped the scandal of the gospel (1 Corinthians 1:18-29).

The Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 to address this theological controversy. Within their deliberations, two words emerged to summarize the competing positions: *homoiousios* (that the Logos is *like* God in nature/essence/being) and *homoousios* (that the Logos is of the *same* nature/essence/being as God). Those who affirmed that the Logos was *like* God but not the *same* nature tended to agree with Arius. Once again, these two terms emerge in the context of the Greek language. They were part of the Christian theological discourse in prior centuries but were not used in sacred Scripture. The question was: which perspective best captures the arc of biblical testimony about God?

By the end of the council, a creed was formed that specifically rejected the theology of Arius. Nonetheless Arius continued to garner support, even after the council, as some bishops and imperial leaders (including Constantine) searched for language and means that would foster compromise. Indeed, by the time Arius

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died in 336, he enjoyed official support from the emperor and the church whereas his opponents (especially St. Athanasius) were put into exile. When Constantine was baptized just before his death, it was at the hand of an Arian bishop (Eusebius of Nicomedia). The Christian Roman emperors that followed him (especially Constantius II, Valentinian and Valens) were either Arian or tolerant of Arian ideas. Most bishops followed suit. Just 20 years after the council, the Nicene faith was the minority position, certainly among those in power. It would take the deliberate and energetic work of some theologians (especially “the Cappadocians” – saints Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa) to help turn the tide and see the Nicene Creed restored under the Emperor Theodosius in 381.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What insights did you gain from this description of Arianism? In what ways did the teachings of Arius make sense to you? Where do you see the limitations of Arius’ theology? Why is it necessary to assert the unity of being, power and purpose between the Logos/Son and God?
2. The church universal has a history of condemning individuals whose beliefs do not align with scriptural teachings. In its efforts to defend orthodoxy, the church may risk hastily condemning those whose ideas differ from its own. This raises important questions: How do we define heresy? What can we learn from those labeled heretics? When is it necessary to address divisive issues? How can we avoid too quickly condemning and labeling as heretics those whose ideas differ from our own?
3. How might the practices of praying and reciting the creed speak meaningfully to people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds? What other cultural wisdom and philosophical traditions could help expand our understanding of Jesus’ identity and his relationship with God?
4. The Council of Nicaea was unable to address all the theological disputes of the time. However, it was able to establish a creedal statement that has become central to Christian faith and practice. How does this Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) help shape our faith? What other spiritual practices do we need to cultivate to continue growing in faith?

FOR FURTHER READING

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