

THE ARIAN CRISIS

HOW THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY
CAME TO BE

PART 4: *HOMOIOUSION AND THE
MODERN ARIANS*

HOMOIOUSION AND THE MODERN ARIANS

When the Council of Nicaea 325 drew up its creed, the members inserted what became the test word of future orthodox belief regarding the Son and Father—*homoousion*, which meant that the Son was “identical in essence” with the Father. This group became known variously as the Niceneans or Nicenes or Athanasians (after Athanasius, its leading advocate), or Catholics (meaning “of or relating to the universal Christian church,” not to Roman Catholicism as we know it today). But in the years following, those bishops who did not like the word or what it meant, and insisted that it was not found in Scripture, preferred *homoiousion*, which meant that the Son was only “similar in essence.” This group became known as Semi-Arians in that they denied the perfect identity of essence of Son and Father. Arians preferred a third term insisting that the Son was *heteroousion*, which means “of other or different essence.” For those throughout the Empire unacquainted with the deep issues involved in the dispute between Nicenes and Semi-Arians, or who were indifferent, it all came down in their outsiders uncomprehending view to a silly and meaningless hair-splitting wrangle over a single letter (Greek *iota*, the smallest letter, and the one expressed in Matt 5.19) seen in the key words: *homoousion* versus *homoiousion*, which has given rise to our modern saying that “there is not an iota of difference between them.”

TABLE OF KEY TERMS

Homo-ousian. Nicene or Athanasian doctrine: of or holding the teaching that God the Father and God the Son are of the same nature.

Greek (Homo, *same, identical* + ousion, *nature, essence*) = *Con-substantial* Latin having the same substance (Com, *together, commingle, with* + substantia, *having the nature of substance*)

- ➔ Nicaean Creed 325 says: one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, **consubstantial** [Greek *homoousias* Lat. *consubstantial*] with the Father, through whom all things came to be
- ➔ Creed of Constantinople 381 says: “one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, **consubstantial** [Greek *homoousias* Lat. *consubstantial*] with the Father, through whom all things came to be”
- ➔ Definition of Chalcedon 451 says “[1] So, following the saintly fathers, [4] we all with one voice teach [2] the confession of one and the same Son, [3] our Lord Jesus Christ: [5] the same perfect in divinity [6] and perfect in humanity, [7] the same truly God and truly man, [8] of a rational soul and a body; [9] **consubstantial** [Greek *homoousias* Lat. *consubstantial*] with the Father as regards his divinity, [10] and the same **consubstantial** [Greek *homoousias* Lat. *consubstantial*] with us as regards his humanity; [11] like us in all respects except for sin; [12] begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity [...]

Homoi-ousion of or holding the teaching that God the Father and God the Son are of a similar nature, not of the same nature.

Greek (Homoi, *like, similar* + ousion, *nature, essence*). This position involved contradictions and inconsistencies as it tried to straddle between the Athanasians and the Arians as is made plain in this from John Newman’s *Arians of the Fourth Century* (1833; this work is online at “The Newman Reader” and is perhaps the clearest and fullest history of the Arians.):

Such was the Semi-Arian Creed, really involving contradictions in terms, parallel to those of which the orthodox were accused;—that the Son was born before all times, yet not eternal; not a creature, yet not God; of His substance, yet not the same in substance; and His exact and perfect resemblance in all things, yet not a second Deity (page 299).

Hetero-ousion of or holding the teaching that God the Father and God the Son are of different nature. Position of the Arians (also called Anomeans, Heterousians, Aëtians, Eusebians, or Eunomians)

Greek (Hetero, *other, different* + *ousion, nature, essence*)

HISTORIANS' ASSESSMENTS OF THE FALLACY OF ARIANISM

Ⓢ *This doctrine is a typical product of theological rationalism. It satisfied superficial minds to a high degree because it gave a simple and easy answer to the very difficult question of the relation existing between God the Father and God the Son. It saved Arius and his followers the trouble of investigating God's inner life because it denied all internal divine relations. This rationalistic character is what attracted many to the heresy. Moreover, the false views are closely connected with Neoplatonic theories, still current at the time, of intermediaries between God and the world.*

(J. Quasten, *Patrology*, 1950. Vol 3, page 8)

Ⓢ *We can never understand the history of an error until we to some extent appreciate its attractions. What was the charm that Arianism possessed, during so many years, for adherents so diverse both in race and character?*

- 1) *First, it was a form of rationalism, and therefore a relief to minds that shrunk from so awful a mystery as the Incarnation of the Eternal.*
- 2) *Secondly, it was a vague, elastic creed, congenial to those who disliked all definite doctrine.*
- 3) *Thirdly, it appealed to many by its affinity to older heresies.*
- 4) *Fourthly, its assertion of a created and inferior godhead would come home to persons in transition from polytheism to Christianity.*
- 5) *Fifthly, the scope which it practically allowed to a profane and worldly temper was agreeable to the multitudes for whom the Church was too austere, who desired a relaxed and adapted Gospel.*

(W. Bright. *A History of the Church from the Edict of Milan, A.D. 313, to the Council of Chalcedon, A.D. 451. 3rd ed. Oxford, 1873. Page 13*)

Ⓢ *[...] it is obvious to notice the unscriptural character of the arguments on which the heresy was founded. It is true that the Arians did not neglect to support their case from such detached portions of the Inspired Volume as suited their purpose; but still it can never be said that they showed that earnest desire of sacred truth, and careful search into its documents, which alone mark the Christian inquirer.*

(J. H. Newman, *Arians of the Fourth Century*, Oxford 1833. Page 219. Available online at "*The Newman Reader*").

ARIANS (SINCE THE REFORMATION)

Arianism though extinct as a concerted movement within Christianity, nevertheless continued as an idea, as is made evident in these two excerpts from the 19th and 18th centuries. Now it shows itself in virtually all mainstream Protestant denominations in continuing suspicion or outright rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity; and though Roman Catholicism is outwardly at least, still Trinitarian, it has no doubt its interior problems with Catholics who no longer really believe.

1. Arianism is extinct only in the sense that it has long ceased to furnish party names. It sprang from permanent tendencies of human nature, and raised questions whose interest can never perish. As long as the Agnostic and the Evolutionist are with us, the old battlefields of Athanasius will not be left to silence. [...] Arianism began its career partly as a theory of Christianity, partly as an Eastern reaction of philosophy against a gospel of the Son of God. (H. M. Gwatkin, *The Arian Controversy*, 1889. Page 1)
2. The modern Arians are pleased to allow, in *words*, that *divine* attributes belong to Christ; meaning by *divine*, quite another thing than others mean in this case. Christ is *omniscient*, they say, *relatively*; that is, while *ignorant* of much more than he knows, as he must be if *ignorant* at all: *eternal* also, provided he be not *coeternal*; that is, provided the Father be but *infinitely* (as he must be, if at all) more ancient than he: *omnipresent* also, but within *bounds*: *omnipotent*, but by the Father's power, not by his own: *unchangeable*, I think, they never directly say, but the contrary; making his *generation* and *incarnation* arguments of his being subject to *change*. And, indeed, upon the whole, they suppose him the most *changeable* being in the universe, running through more, and more prodigious *changes*, than any other creature ever did, or will do. (Waterland, *The Scriptures and the Arians*, 1722; from *The Works of Daniel Waterland*, 3rd ed. Vol 3. Oxford, 1856, page 291. Available online. Daniel Waterland [1683-1740] was a top-notch early historian and very severe critic of the Arians of his own time.)

MODERN STATEMENTS INFLUENCED BY ARIANISM (OR ANTI-TRINITARIANISM)

1. **John Milton** (1608-1673), Poet, *Paradise Lost*. From his unpublished theological treatise, *De Doctrina Christiana*: “the Son is God—a fact which I do not deny. But they [his orthodox opponents] will never manage to prove from this passage [1 Timothy 3:16] that he is the supreme God and one with the Father”; he denies “that the Son is of the same essence as the Father, and generated from all eternity”
2. **Sir Isaac Newton** (1643-1727) – denied the Trinity, believed eternal generation of the Son was not taught until the fourth century; believed Athanasius was a corrupter of true doctrine. (See his *'Paradoxical Questions concerning the morals & actions of Athanasius & his followers'* online at “The Newton Project”)

3. **Thomas Jefferson**—

- ➡ Letter To John Adams, 1813 : It is too late in the day for men of sincerity to pretend they believe in the Platonic mysticisms that three are one, and one is three; and yet that the one is not three, and the three are not one . . . But this constitutes the craft, the power and the profit of the priests. Sweep away their gossamer fabrics of factitious religion, and they would catch no more flies.
 - ➡ Letter To Van der Kemp, 1816—letter. Altho' I rarely waste time in reading on theological subjects, as mangled by our Pseudo-Christians [...] Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them; and no man ever had a distinct idea of the trinity. It is mere Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus.
4. **Ellen G. White. Seventh-Day Adventist** founder. **1903** "The man Christ Jesus was not the Lord God Almighty." (1903, ms 150, SDA Commentary V, p. 1129); **1904** "To Christ *had been given an exalted position*. He has been *made equal* with the Father" (*Testimonies* vol. 8, p. 268)
5. **LDS**. "In common with the rest of Christianity, we believe in a Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. However, we testify that these three members of the Godhead are three separate and distinct beings. We also testify that God the Father is not just a spirit but is a glorified person with a tangible body, as is his resurrected Son, Jesus Christ. [...] In contrast, many Christians reject the idea of a tangible, personal God and a Godhead of three separate beings. They believe that God is a spirit and that the Godhead is only one God. In our view, these concepts are evidence of the falling away we call the Great Apostasy." (from LDS.org. "The Fulness of the Gospel: The Nature of the Godhead," 2006 Dallin Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.)
6. **Jehovah Witnesses**. "The Trinitarian dogma is a late fourth-century invention" (from Watchtower.org. "Myth Number 4. That God is a Trinity")
7. **The Arian Catholic Church**. "Arian Catholicism (the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church) is a Church Tradition in its own right, the church follows the teachings and doctrine of Jesus Christ and his apostles and is applied with logic, reason and the guidance of St Arius, Presbyter of Alexandria; it is therefore based on early Catholicism and follows the teachings of Arius which were both in-line with and defending the early church. Arian Catholicism is based on the early Catholic Church (Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church) and the teachings of Arius of Alexandria, who stipulated, among other things, that Christ was not of the same substance, i.e. not co-substantial, with God and therefore was not God, and there was a time when he did not exist, therefore was not co-eternal with God. Arius concluded that Jesus Christ was not divine. (from Arian Catholic Church website)

SO WHY DOES A STUDY OF ARIANISM MATTER?

1. It helps stay doctrinal drift
 - ➡ Knowing why and how the doctrine of the Trinity came to be is an anchor to keep us steady and stay the drifting our minds are so easily led to allow (Heb 2:1 “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.”) All cults and liberal denominations have lost sight of this, however piously otherwise they may speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by those names.
2. It focuses our attention on the truth of who Jesus is.
 - ➡ God saved us by taking on a human nature. Jesus was not a demi-god, nor was He a separate God from the Father (as the Greeks and Romans thought of gods). Arianism was such an attractive alternative to the mystery of the Godhead because it allowed that Jesus was more than a man but less God than the Father. If God is singular, Arians said, He cannot be divided; so it followed for them that there could be no Trinity of persons in the Godhead.
3. It should help us realize our limitations.
 - ➡ Reason, logic, and human experience are appropriate in their place in looking at and understanding Scripture; but we ought not to think backwards and reason from our limited minds and experience to make conclusions about God. Arians looked at how humans propagate and said that that was also how we should understand the terms Son and Father. Athanasius insisted that the Son is eternally the Son because that is possible with God but not with mankind.
4. It helps us identify the markers of heresy today
 - ➡ Arianism or Anti-Trinitarianism of the fourth and fifth centuries sets out certain markers that if we look carefully at later centuries we find to be repeated. For example, the Arians of the 17th and 18th centuries in England repeat the doctrines of Arius in denying co-equality and co-eternity of the Son and Father.
5. We can recognize patterns repeated at intervals in history.
 - ➡ Patterns in history reappear at intervals in otherwise distinct events. To find those patterns is one of the supreme benefits of the close study of history. For example, to study and compare the circumstances surrounding the wars of Alexander the Great with those surrounding the wars of Napoleon shows some of the patterns typical of all wars, not just these two widely separated eras. A prominent pattern appearing in Biblical narratives of the kings of Israel and Judah is the repeated and common set of idolatrous practices typical of tyrant kings in all eras of history, not just Biblical.

6. History is the context out of which doctrinal controversies are set.
 - ➡ A study of history is not a waste of time. Ancient history (Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome) and Church history (Arianism to the Reformation, the Enlightenment to our time), and Secular history (wars, governments, literature, etc) tell us much about how dark the mind of man really is and how futile have been efforts to perfect society apart from Biblical principles. The Bible itself is filled with negative examples of failures in government and the evil of human desires and greed. The more history we read, the better. Jer 17:9 sums the matter: “The heart is more deceitful than all else. And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”
7. Truth is paramount.
 - ➡ The distinction that appeared at first glance to be small between homo- and homoi- in the two key test words in the controversy between the Athanasians and Semi-Arians was misleading. There existed in reality an enormous gap—the difference of one letter in spelling said that one group saw Jesus as God/Man; the other that He was almost God or entirely not God in His essence.
8. Cults and liberal theologians hide heresy behind a seeming veil of truth.
 - ➡ The Arians, just as various groups today who wish to appear orthodox, hid their lies and distortions of Scripture until they were forced out into the open at Nicaea and Constantinople. It reminds us to press those we think are in error to define their terms so that we can help them see clearly where they are wrong.
9. Bible Churches, by that name, follow the Bible closely.
 - ➡ The Bible is not a “Paper Pope” we worship, as though the words, the ink and paper, were themselves magical or sacred. We believe that the Bible reveals God’s truth and came to us and the world from God through the some 40 writers of the 66 books contained in it; therefore we want to study it carefully and also to study the history of the Church in such movements as Arianism so as to make a firm contrast between truth and error in our souls.