

Introduction

This paper will examine the Arian Controversy that divided the church during the fourth century. Arianism is defined as, “The idea based on the teaching of Arius that Christ is the highest of created beings-god, but not God.”¹ This movement was dangerous to the church because it alters the doctrine of redemption as taught in Scripture and denies the Holy Trinity. The Arian controversy had continued to plague the church even after Arius died as there were many historical characters involved in this situation. This paper will identify the crucial theological issues in this controversy. Next it will identify the key figures and their beliefs concerning the Person and work of Christ. Lastly, it will consider the importance of this controversy as it affects the modern evangelical church.

Key issues and figures The Arians

Arianism has its origin in the beliefs of Arius who was born in Libya in 260.² Noted church historian Phillip Schaff argues that Origen’s inconsistent Christology was the impetus for Arius’ heresy. Concerning the tie from Origen to Arius, Schaff notes, “But on the other hand in his (Origen’s) zeal for the personal distinctions in the Godhead, he taught with equal clearness a separateness of essence between the Father and Son, and the subordination of the Son, as a second or secondary God beneath the Father, and thus furnished a starting point for the Arian heresy.”³ Arius eventually became a leader in the church in Alexandria and he influenced many people. H.M. Gwatkin described Arius as, “no mere bustling schemer, but a grave and blameless

¹ Terry L. Miethe, *The Compact Dictionary of Doctrinal Words* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 35.

² Everett Ferguson, ed., Michael P. McHugh, ed., Frederick W. Norris, ed., and David M. Scholer, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*. (New York: Garland, 1990), 92.

³ Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church vol III, Nicene and Post Nicene Christianity: From Constantine the Great to Gregory the Great, A.D. 311-600*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans 1910), 619-620.

presbyter of Alexandria.”⁴ Arius was under the supervision of Alexander who was the Bishop of Alexandria. As an aspiring leader, Arius was popular as a preacher in Alexandria, and due to his widespread acceptance, his public teaching and doctrine became prevalent. The beliefs of Arius ended up being challenged by Bishop Alexander. Everett Ferguson notes that, “Bishop Alexander secured a condemnation of Arius’s teaching at a synod of Alexandria (317 or 318) that sent a letter to the other bishops concerning the exclusion of Arius from fellowship.”⁵ While Arius was the chief proponent of Arianism, there were two other influential Arians early on in the development of this movement. Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh note, “The three most influential early Arians were- Arius (256-336), Asterius the Sophist (d. ca.341), and Eusebius of Nicomedia (d. ca. 342).”⁶ So Arius had many supporters, and on at least one occasion in his letter to Bishop Alexander, it was accompanied with a number of signatures. There was an exchange of letters between Arius and certain bishops including Alexander and his ally Bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia to which we will now turn.

In 318 Arius wrote to his theological ally Eusebius, Bishop of Nicomedia complaining about the treatment he and his followers were receiving from Bishop Alexander. Eusebius held to the doctrines of Arius so the letter was friendly, but honest as to what Arius believed. Concerning Bishop Alexander, Arius said to Bishop Eusebius;

“The bishop largely destroys us and persecutes us, and does his worst against us, and has even turned us out of the city as godless men because we do not agree to what he publicly preaches: ‘Eternal God, eternal Son; like Father like Son; unoriginated, the Son co-exists with God, He is eternally born, He is unoriginated born, neither by mental conception, nor by the slightest temporal interval does God precede the Son; eternal God, eternal Son; the Son is of God Himself’ But what is it that we say and believe and did teach and do teach? That the Son is not

⁴ Henry M. Gwatkin, *Arian Controversy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1908), Kindle chap 1.

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Church History, vol 1, From Christ to the Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan 2011), 192-193.

⁶ Robert C. Gregg, and Dennis E. Groh. *Early Arianism A View of Salvation.* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981) IX.

unoriginated, neither in any way partially unoriginated, nor from any essential substratum. Rather, that by will and counsel, He subsisted before time, and before ages, fully God, only begotten unchangeable, and before He was begotten – that is created – or separated or established, He did not exist. For He was not unoriginated. We are persecuted because we said that the Son had a beginning, but God is without beginning. We are persecuted because we said He is from what did not exist. We have so spoken, however, because neither is He partially God, nor is He from any essential substratum. For this we are persecuted. You know the rest.”

Arius is very confused in the above letter because one time he said concerning Jesus that He was “fully God,” and then the rest of the letter says that Christ had a “beginning.”

There is much more in the above letter denying the Deity of Jesus Christ which contradicts that one comment “fully God.” Fortunately, there are a plethora of primary sources both pro and con concerning Arianism that need to be considered when engaging in a historical and theological examination of it. Let us now consider some additional works of Arius.

The comments of Arius and his theology flow freely and honestly from his pen. That could be considered both good and bad. It is good in that there is enough there to examine, but it is bad in the sense it influenced and led many astray. Arius’ beliefs are frequently cited by Athanasius in his *Discourses Against the Arians*. In that famous work by Athanasius he analyzed Arius’ *The Banquet* which was partly written in prose and verse. Arius was known for spreading his doctrines through music. Athanasius quoted Arius as saying, “God was not always a Father; indeed there was a time when God was alone and He was not yet a Father....For God was alone and the Word was not with Him...For moreover, indeed, the Son does not only not know the Father precisely, for He is lacking in comprehension; but the Son does not perceive His own essence.”⁷ These

⁷ Athanasius, “Discourses Against the Arians: Encyclical Letters to the Bishops of Egypt and Libya,” in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 276.

doctrinal propositions are crystal clear. According to Arius, Jesus Christ the Word was not eternal like the Father. These beliefs caused no small controversy in the visible church. Arius' letter to his Bishop Alexander was much more to the point on the nature of Christ.

Arius' letter to his Bishop Alexander dated circa 320 has the same doctrinal positions as those already enumerated but they are further fleshed out, namely Jesus Christ had a beginning. The letter uses much correct terminology about God the Father that He is "unbegotten, eternal" etc., but the problems arise when Arius describes Jesus Christ as "a perfect creature of God" who was "created and founded before the ages."⁸ As mentioned earlier, there were many signatures of agreement attached to this letter to Bishop Alexander. William A. Jurgens in his work *Faith of the Early Fathers*, notes at least 15 people of all different ecclesiastical ranks who signed it⁹. Denying the Deity of Jesus Christ soon got the attention of the Emperor Constantine one of the key figures in the Arian Controversy. Events such as council of a hundred Egyptian and Libyan bishops in 321 "deposed of Arius and his followers."¹⁰ Councils involving such a large number of clergy over a swath of territory were bound to get to the ears of Constantine. He is the next chief figure in the Arian controversy that will be examined.

Key issues and figures The NON-Arians

Since Constantine legalized the acceptance of Christianity, he wanted to have unity within his empire as much as possible. Constantine got wind of the dispute between

⁸ Arius, "Letter of Arius to Alexander of Alexandria," in *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. William A. Jurgens (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970), 278.

⁹ Ibid., 278 footnote 9.

¹⁰ Schaff, *History of the Christian Church vol III*, 620.

Arius and Bishop Alexander and he, “sent his chief ecclesiastical advisor, Hosius of Cordova to look into the situation.”¹¹ Alexander mentioned the trouble the Arians were causing in Alexandria. In 324 Alexander said of the Arians, “On account of their concealment, their manner of life, and their unholy attempts, we have—by the common vote of everyone, --cast them out of the congregation of the church, which adores the Godhood of Christ.”¹² There was a synod in Antioch in 325 prior to Nicaea and the teachings of Eusebius were condemned. Constantine wanted another synod where the church could hear the recantation of Eusebius but ended up convening a Council in May of 325 in Nicaea. Henry Sheldon notes, “three hundred eighteen bishops were present...The Latin church having but a few delegates.”¹³ This was quite a scene to behold, a head of state gathering the church from around the then known world. Many of the church leaders in attendance suffered persecution prior to Constantine’s reign. These church leaders had plenty of stories to share and the wounds to show for it. One leader who garnered much attention was Athanasius a then deacon under Bishop Alexander.

Athanasius served as Bishop Alexander’s secretary at the Council of Nicaea and eventually became Bishop of Alexandria in 328.¹⁴ The majority of Athanasius’ writings are polemical in nature as they dealt with the errors of the Arians. The results of the works and effort Athanasius put forward against the Arians cannot be understated. Ferguson notes, “Athanasius’ steadfastness and his writings blocked the Arians’ progress

¹¹ Ferguson, *Church History* vol. 1, 193.

¹² Bishop Alexander in *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs: A Reference Guide to More Than 700 Topics Discussed by the Early Church Fathers*, ed. David W. Bercot, (Peabody, MA: Hendrikson Publishers, 1998), 35.

¹³ Henry C. Sheldon, *History of the Christian Church, vol.1, The Early Church* (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 422.

¹⁴ Ferguson, *Church History*, vol. 1, 204.

and prepared for the eventual victory of the Nicene cause.”¹⁵ Athanasius answered those with whom he disagreed in several works but probably his most notable polemic was, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*. In this major work, Athanasius comes to the conclusion, “Arianism is fundamentally anti-Christian, since it leads logically to the conclusion that Christ was a man, which is the Jewish position, or that he is a second God or demigod, which is pure paganism.”¹⁶ This conclusion is crystal clear when one reads the New Testament and sees it teaches the full Divinity of Jesus Christ (Matt 1:21, Jn 1:1, 5:18, 10:30, Rom 9:5 Col 1:16, Heb 1:8 & Titus 2:13).

Theological Relevance of Arianism

As mentioned earlier, Arius had many allies that supported his pernicious heresy, and the controversy did not die right after Nicaea. Everett Ferguson documents that many tribes from the Goths to Visigoths Ostrogoths, Suevians and Vandals were all Arian in their Christology.¹⁷ Down through church history, it is difficult to assess who *exactly* was Arian and what belief system would fall under that narrow classification. For example, “Athanasius’ strategy of grouping all opponents of Nicene orthodoxy as Arian,” was a complex task given the “political, theological and ecclesiastical division.”¹⁸ There were many groups opposed to Nicene orthodoxy, and many were hostile not just to the Nicenes, but amongst themselves. One can argue technically that anyone who denies the full Divinity of Jesus Christ, is “Arian” in that sense of the term. This abominable

¹⁵ Ibid., 206.

¹⁶ Richard, E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity During the Last Days of Rome* (New York: Harcourt, 2000), 115-116.

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Church History*, vol. 1, 289-293.

¹⁸ Maurice Wiles. *Archetypal Heresy: Arianism through the Centuries*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 27.

doctrine has persisted in church history in groups such as Jehovah Witnesses, *Unitarians*, *Hicksites*, *New Lights*, *Universalists* and *Mormons*¹⁹ among others.

Arianism is still relevant for the evangelical church today because Christians will encounter those who, knowingly or unknowingly espouse an Arian Christology. And this has eternal ramifications. As Hiram Mattison said, “If Christ be a mere *creature*, mutable and finite, who will dare to trust their souls to His keeping, for time and eternity? Who would risk all for both worlds on the pardon of a *creature*?”²⁰ A mere creature cannot keep saints saved and perfect in heaven for all eternity.

Arianism is also relevant to the church today as many who sit in the pews on Sunday have an unorthodox Christology. For example, in a 2020 survey of evangelicals the question was posed, “Jesus was a great teacher, but He was *not* God.” The results: “62% strongly disagreed, 4% somewhat disagreed, 4% were unsure, 4% somewhat agreed and 26% strongly agreed.”²¹ These numbers are alarming! There are approximately 38% of the those who answered this question that would be justifiably labeled as “confused.” And as noted above, if these “Christians” are trusting in a creature for their pardon, then the stakes have eternal ramifications.

¹⁹ Hiram Mattison, *A Scriptural Defence of the Doctrine of the Trinity, or, A Check to Modern Arianism As Taught by Unitarians, Hicksites, New Lights, Universalists and Mormons, and Especially by a Sect Calling Themselves "Christians"*. (New York: Huntington & Savage, and Mason & Law, 185).
<<http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/19840403.html>>.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

²¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com/>

Conclusion

The Evangelical Church still has a great deal of work to do in educating its members on basic Christian doctrine. Many of the modern-day heresies that Christians face have already been dealt with in an extensive format by the church fathers. The Deity of Christ is one such doctrine that has been hammered out in church history in creeds, councils and confessions. How pastors can assume their congregants know basic doctrine like the Deity of Christ, and surmise their members are able to defend it, while they seldomly preach or teach on it, is baffling. Evangelicalism as a whole has yet to realize that the cults “are the unpaid bills of the church.”²² The cults are the proverbial “thorn in the side” of the church as they tend to steal and confuse members. When dealing with heresy, the church must define it, document it, defend the congregation from attacks, and defeat it.

²² Jan Karel Van Balen, *Chaos of the Cults* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1962), 14, in Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1992), 14.

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