

The History of the Doctrine of Justification...



How
Christ
preserved
the good
news in
history

The Person of Christ There Was, When He Was Not: Arius

The two great tethers that have kept orthodox Christianity tied to the Scripture have always been:

1. Who was Christ?
2. What did He accomplish on behalf of His people?

Who was Christ? The issue is of enormous consequence if we are to rightly understand what Christ did on our behalf. What did Christ accomplish on our behalf? The answer to that question only has value depending on who He was? Now in our present study, we are interested in the development of these central issues as they pertain to the doctrine of justification. In particular, we are looking at how the early church struggled with the identity of Christ.

The evangelical church today is obsessed with trying to be relevant. We will try anything to be heard by the popular culture. We state or restate historic doctrines and concepts to make them more culturally relevant and friendly. It is not a new

idea. The early church apologists made frequent use of Greek philosophy in order to defend the person of Jesus before the unbelieving world. Sometimes the use of philosophy had good results; sometimes it did not. Often it caused confusion and the wildest of speculation that went far beyond what Scripture addressed.

There was in the midst of all the theological discussion, however, two central boundaries that everybody took for granted. Those two points are crucial when trying to understand the debate we are going to discuss this morning.

First, there was a concern to hang on to biblical monotheism, that is, there was a commitment to the biblical theology of one God. It was a central tenet of historic Judaism. It was a central tenet of Scripture. Certainly, one of the most famous passages of Old Testament Judaism was the Shema.

^{NIV} **Deuteronomy 6:4**...Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵
Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

But there are other passages that say the same sort of thing. In the later prophets, Isaiah is a clear representative of biblical monotheism.

^{NIV} Isaiah 44:6..."This is what the LORD says-- Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God. ⁷
Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and lay out before me what has happened since

Yet, with the incarnation and atoning work of Christ the church faced another important issue. That issue was how to maintain proper adoration, exaltation,

and devotion to Christ. It is abundantly clear that New Testament Christians and authors both agreed that Christ was the worthy object of both devotion and worship.

NIV Philippians 2:9...Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father

NIV Revelation 5:10...You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." ¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹² In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" ¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, forever and ever!" ¹⁴ The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and w

It should be obvious why these two boundaries caused disagreement. On the one hand, if emphasis was placed on radical monotheism, Christ wound up being subordinated to the Father. On the other hand, if Christ was rendered all the devotion and worship due the Father, it seems like you wind up with two Gods. This conflict, which can be resolved, led to two major heresies in the early church. Both heresies have historically been classified as "monarchianism".

"Monarchianism" looks like the English word "monarch". But in the Greek world it meant something a little different. Etymologically the word had two parts: "*mono*" meaning one and "*arch*" meaning rule or principal. So "monarchianism" can be defined as a theology desirous to maintain the notion of one arch being. The underlying desire of "monarchianism" was to preserve the

“oneness” of God the Father. Monarchianism can be further divided into two major types: modalistic monarchianism and dynamic monarchianism.

Modalistic monarchianism taught that the one God could and did, for His own purposes, express Himself at different times in different forms or modes. Thus it was possible to have the one God appearing at different times performing different tasks. He appeared as the Father at creation. For the work of salvation, He appeared as the Son. While, for the work of redemption, He appeared as the Holy Spirit. A man Noetus taught the simplest form of modalistic monarchianism. He taught:

Christ is the Father Himself, who was born and died. If Christ is not the Father, then He is not God.¹

But the man most representative of modalistic monarchianism was a man named Sabellius (222 AD). Sabellius was much more sophisticated than Noetus. He had learned from Noetus’ mistakes and his excommunication. Sabellius tried to solve the problem by using the illustration of the sun and its rays. The Father was the sun. Jesus is considered to be a dominate ray. He was projected for a while and then withdrawn back into the substance of the Father. Obviously, for Sabellius there was a sense in which there was a significant subordination of Jesus. He was not fully God. He was close to God. He even emanated from God, but He was not God. In another sense, Sabellius could say Jesus was “*Light of Lights*” and even “*homousias*”. Jesus was “*Light of Lights*” in that He was like a ray of the sun, He emanated from the Father. He was “*homousias*” in that he was of the same substance as the Father.

Now what's interesting is the way the Nicene Creed uses these exact terms. If you will take a moment and turn in your hymnal to page 846, you will see the repetition of the very words that Sabellius thought so important.

THE NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made;
who for us and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary,
and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried;
and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets;
and we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church;
we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
and we look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

If you will look at the seventh line, you will notice the phrase “*light of light*”. While in the ninth line, you will notice the phrase “being of one substance with the Father;” which is the English translation of “*homousias*”. Now what are we to conclude regarding those two phrases? It seems either the Nicene Creed is thoroughly Sabellian or something had occurred that was so gigantic in proportions that the church felt the need to go back to language that had been previously condemned in order to fight off whatever this new super threat happened to be. Let me put your minds at ease. The Nicene Creed has nothing to do with Sabellius. Sabellius’ teaching along with the teaching of a man named Paul of Samosata was condemned at the Council of Antioch in 267 AD, although Sabellius had been excommunicated much earlier (217-222 AD).

Now here is the interesting part. At the Council of Antioch, the church repudiated the idea of Christ being “*homousias*” with the Father. They changed the phrase “*homousias*” to the phrase “*homoiousias*”. The difference between the two words is extremely important, even though in Greek the difference between the two words is just one letter. The emphasis put on the difference of the one letter led Edward Gibbon to write in the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that never in the history of the world had there been so much energy spent over a single vowel.²

Yet the difference in the two words does really matter. “*Homousias*” means the same substance. “*Homoiousias*” means a similar substance. At Antioch, the church was concerned with condemning the heresy that the Son was the Father, and the Father was the Son. They were concerned with Sabellius’ notion that Father and the Son were simply manifestations of the one person God. In that sense the Fathers at Antioch held the same view as the great, American theologian, Mark Twain. It was Twain who laid down the great theological principle that the difference between the right word and almost the right word was the difference between “lightning” and “lightning bug”³. They were set on

refuting Sabellius' technical use of the word "homousias", with all of its modalistic, gnostic implications.

At the same time, there was another school of monarchianism that developed at the same time as the modalistic school. It was called dynamic monarchianism. The school of dynamic monarchianism was really started by Paul of Samosata. He held that God gave an impersonal power called the "logos" to the man Jesus at His baptism. Up until that time, Jesus was just an ordinary man. But after He was empowered with the "logos", He entered into a unique relationship with the Father, a deeply moral relationship. In that sense, He became the Son of God. Paul of Samosata had no problem in calling Jesus the Son of God. Of course, He was not actually God, but because of this unique relationship with the Father, as a result of being adopted by the Father, He became greatly superior to all other men. The name given Paul of Samosata's heresy was adoptionism.

Paul of Samosata had a disciple named Lucian, who gave this whole idea a different twist. Lucian argued that "logos" was not just a force or power from God, He was, in fact, a created being. At the incarnation, the "logos" took a human body. He was a mutable or changeable creature, who when He took a human body became immutable or unchangeable. When He became immutable, there was a sense in which He became God.

Now you see in both of these ideas the idea of process or change. That is what is meant by dynamic monarchianism. There is a process or dynamic in which that which is not God becomes God or at least close to God. This is precisely the theology of contemporary Mormonism.

Out of this line of Paul of Samosata and Lucian came the great protagonist who forced the issue resolved at Nicea. He was the great arch-heretic of the early church. His name was Arius.

Arius belonged to the church at Alexandria, but his theology was much closer to the church of Antioch and Lucian. As a result of persecution under Diocletian, much of the controversy related to the council of Antioch had subsided. Lucian, Arius' mentor, had been killed. Yet as Arius became more and more vocal about his doctrine of adoptionism, he came more and more under the scrutiny of the Bishop at Alexandria, whose name was Alexander. Finally, Alexander could take it no longer and he excommunicated Arius for his views. When Alexander excommunicated Arius, he thought the conflict was over. Actually, he was starting a battle that would take 56 years to resolve.

Finally, the Emperor Constantine, who had just gained control of the eastern empire intervened. He called the first major council of the church since the biblical council at Jerusalem noted in the book of Acts. Constantine wanted unity and he felt if he could bring an council together, the issues could be discussed and resolved. So in 325 AD at Nicea, the church held its first great ecumenical council. There were around 300 bishops and Constantine presided. Despite all of the participants, the debate was essentially between two men: Arius the heretic and Alexander the Bishop of Alexandria. We know most of the facts because Alexander brought to the council a young deacon named Athanasius, who recorded some of the more important statements.

Arius went first. He was an accomplished speaker. He was polished, highly rational, and relentlessly methodical. Let's look for a moment at Arius' Christology.

Arius argued:

- God alone is eternal and unbegotten.
- The term "beget" means to create.
- The Son is the perfect creature. (κτισμα τελιον) In Christ, we have the union of the "logos" with a human body. The "logos" takes the place of the human soul.
- The "logos" is the created creator.

Arius became famous at the council and later for one particular phrase. The phrase as recorded by Athanasius was:

There was, when he was not...

When Alexander had the opportunity to respond, he argued:

- Christ must belong to the Godhead in order to redeem.
- The Son is begotten eternally.
- The Son is generated by the Father. Generation does not mean emanation or creation.

Arius was hiding, at the time, behind the term "homoiousias". He was arguing that Christ as a created being was not of the same essence as God. He argued that even the church council at Antioch recognized there was a difference in the essence of the Father and the Son. They were not of the same stuff. Arius and his followers were quite coy about the essence of Christ. Later, Athanasius even quoted some of their songs or jingles in his historic work, Against the Arians.

The English writer, Dorothy Sayer, has wittily translated one of them.

If you want the Logos doctrine,
I can serve hot and hot:
God begat him and before he was begotten,
He was not.
(Christology and the Later Fathers, pg. 20)

Edward Hardy, the editor of Christology and the Later Fathers has ably summarized the Arian agenda.

They were engaged in the always delicate and sometimes dangerous process of commending the gospel to the best thought of the age, and may well have felt that the new opportunities offered to the Christian preacher demanded a statement of Christian truths in terms the age could understand. Now for the Neo-Platonist mind the ultimate Being was too remote to be incarnate, and man was too low in the scale of existence to be capable of receiving deity. But the idea of intermediate beings who could connect God and man while themselves being neither was quite congenial to them.
(Christology and the Later Fathers, pg. 21)

Now if Hardy is right there is an inherent danger in trying too hard to be relevant, in trying too hard to recast the gospel in terms of the culture. The monarchians fell into the trap of trying to accommodate Christology in terms of Greek philosophy and it quite possible that we too can extend beyond the bounds of Scripture in trying to accommodate the gospel to a pagan culture. Arius in particular, fell into the trap of rationalism. It was clearly the providence of God that gifted the church with the bulldogs, Alexander and more particularly, Athanasius. It is also clear that for some time Athanasius alone was manning the tether that kept the church attached to this pivotal doctrine of person of Christ.

Athanasius argued that the term “homoiousias” was too ambiguous. There was he said many things that were like God, even wolves. He clung to the issue of salvation. In his courageous defense of the deity of Christ, Athanasius argued again and again that the issue was whether any being but God could save fallen humanity. His logic was simple and biblical, if Christ is not God, we are not saved. Athanasius argued that what Arius offered the church was a monotheism with respect to the creation, but monotheism without a Savior.

Later, others argued that Arius maintained monarchianism, but he did not retain monotheism. In Arius system, if he called Christ God in any sense, he was a polytheist or an idolater. Arius left us with an undefinable being who becomes God by first becoming man and is still neither God nor man. The God-Man, in Arius’ thought is neither God nor man. He is not God in that He is a creature. He is not man in that He has no human soul. So in a sense, Arius denies both the real deity of Christ as well as His real humanity.

The thing I want to call attention to is that the term the church rejected in 267 AD was emphatically asserted in 325 AD. The church must have understood the Arian threat as a super threat. What the fathers at Nicea meant by “homousias” was not what Sabellius meant by “homousias”. The church at Nicea argued that Christ was God. For the council at Nicea, “homousias” meant same essence, same stuff. They accepted the arguments of Alexander and Athanasius. They rejected monarchianism and Arianism outright. That rejection is hard to see, by looking at the Nicene Creed in your hymnal because the creed underwent several revisions. It was revised at Constantinople in 381 AD and again at Toledo in 589 AD. But if you look at the creed as delivered at Nicea you find the original anathemas attached. The original creed ended with the phrase,

And we believe in the Holy Spirit.

After that phrase the attached they attached the following statement:

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.

Notice how the phrasing is directed particularly at Arius. The choice was a wise one. Either Christ was God as revealed in the Scripture, or Christ is less than God and we are lost in our sins. Arius was excommunicated, but the victory was too easy, too swift. Over the next fifty-six years the creed was overturned, amended, overturned, amended, and ratified all over again. Even the Emperor, Constantine flip-flopped on the issue and moved over to the Arian camp. It was not until Athanasius had been dead for three years that the church finally laid the issue to rest at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, but more about that later.

Finally, I think it is important to see that the issue turned on the precision of one word. Still, you may be thinking that really was a lot of fuss. It seems they could have gotten an agreement without all the debate. They could have just held to the Scripture. My friends that is exactly what they did. They held fast to what the Scripture said, and even more importantly to what the Scripture meant. That is what creeds and confessions of faith do. They are not substitutes for Scripture, they are a common confession of what Scripture says. They provide safety to the church as we seek ever to hang on to the two tethers of (1) who Christ is, and (2) what Christ has done.

¹ Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, "He alleged that Christ was the Father Himself, and that the Father Himself was born, and suffered, and died."

² Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology*, pg. 287.

³ Mark Twain, *Letter to George Bainton*, 10.15.1888. "The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning."