THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

Introduction

The Scriptures emphatically teach that there is only one God. However, they also teach that Christ is God. The attempts to reconcile this apparent contradiction have been the cause of many heated controversies throughout the history of Christianity.

The purpose of this paper is to get a better understanding of one of these "battles"--the Arian controversy. Emphasis will be placed on the theological background from which the heresy originated, its view of Christ, the Action at Nicaea against the heresy, and reaction to the Nicene formula. Also, some of the most important terms used in the debate will be discussed.

Events Leading to Arianism

Monarchianism

The Unity of the Being of God is truly an orthodox belief. But when it is overemphasized, to the neglect of the "Trinity" of God, serious errors result. This happened, probably beginning quite "innocently," with what was perceived to be a needed stress on the "oneness" of God, against the polytheism of the surrounding community. The Monarchian heresies were the result of such "one-sided" attempts to reconcile the divinity of Christ to the Unity of God.

Modalistic Monarchianism

Modalistic Monarchianism, or "Sabellianism" (after one of its leaders, Sabellius, in Rome c. 198-200), gave full divinity to the Son, but denied his personality, blurring the distinction between him and the Father. The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit became "simply designations of three different phases under which the one divine essence reveals itself--three names of the one and the same being."¹ The varying needs of the occasion would determine the "mode" by which the divine essence would function. It could be said that, in a way, the Father himself (or the "Son-Father") suffered and died on the cross.

To attack this heresy, it was necessary to stress the differences between the Father and the Son. When not guarded, this stress could be easily interpreted as Arian.
Quite naturally the Arians (who stressed the difference between the Father and the Son) were completely opposed to this type of Monarchianism (which stressed their unity). "Sabellianism" became the accusation the Arians used against the Orthodox.

**Dynamic Monarchianism**

Dynamic Monarchianism—another view resulting from over-stressing the unity of God—reduced Christ's divinity to "a mere power bestowed on him by God." The Logos (the "Word," as in Jn. 1:1, or the "Wisdom" of God) was called an attribute of God, and therefore, could never become a person. The man Jesus, begotten by the Holy Spirit, was not energized by the Logos until his baptism. After this, due to the unswerving union of his will with God's will, the divine power increased, throughout his life until he reached "divinity."

Paul of Samosata, Bishop Of Antioch, was deposed for holding this view, in 268. His teachings contributed to the development of Arianism in that area.

**Origenism**

Origen (c. 185-c. 254) successfully countered the Monarchian heresies, but in doing so, he inadvertently introduced other concepts that were later adopted by the Arians. He taught that the generation (act of begetting) of Christ is eternal—not a succession of events, but a continuous, single event—so that there never was a time when the Son was not. He is uncreated God, being of and from God's own nature and essence, and in no way unlike him. Yet Origen held a subordination of the Son to the Father, which provided for personal distinctions in the Godhead, and a safeguard against Sabellianism. This idea of subordination was picked up by the Arians, and its influence, taken apart from the rest of his theological system, eventually caused much of Christendom to react against certain terminology in the Nicene creed.

**Lucian**

Lucian was a native of Samosata, and the head of a critical, exegetical and theological school at Antioch. He lived at the time of Paul of Samosata, and seems to have been in a state of suspended communion after Paul's deposition; later being reconciled to the church. His great opposition to Sabellianism eventually led to his martyrdom in 312. (It might have also led him to incautious statements of an Arian tendency.)

Lucian's theology was a compromise between Paul of Samosata and Origen. He seems to have followed Paul's theology except for two main points: 1) He recognized the Personality of the Logos, and 2) he believed the incarnation of the Logos in the historical Christ, taking the place of the soul in the body.

Most of the original advocates of Arianism were his pupils. At the Council of Nicaea, nine of the thirteen Arianizers had been under his influence.
Arianism Before the Council

The Introduction of Arianism

The Arian heresy came to surface when Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, attempted to explain "the Unity of the Holy Trinity" to a group of clergy and presbytery (318 or 319). Arius accused him of Sabellian views, and expressed his own view: "If... the Father begat the Son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence: and from this it is evident that there was a time when the Son was not. It therefore necessarily follows, that he had his subsistence from nothing."³

In time, Arius was excommunicated. This had a "negative" effect of "increasing the influence of Arius by throwing him upon his fellow-Lucianists of the rival dioceses of the East, and giving notoriety to his name and tenets."⁴ And so the heresy grew, until it was no longer a "minor" quarrel, and all of Christendom had to make a positive stand against it.

Arian Christology and Terminology

To the Orthodox, the concept of "son" involves two aspects: 1) son by nature (or birth), and 2) son by adoption. To them, Christ is the Son of God by nature; Christians are sons of God by adoption.

To the Arians, the most important idea implied by "sonship" was the time element. Taking an analogy from human sonship, they declared that "sonship" implied the existence of God the Father prior to when the Son was "begotten." It follows that the Son's "begotten" nature is not the same as the Father's "unbegotten" nature, so that the Son is of a different "essence" than the Father. All this adds up to saying, they claim, that the Son is a creature--the only creature God directly created ("only begotten"), and the instrument by which God created the rest of creation. He can be called "not one of the creatures," for he is not a creature like other creatures. "Before all time" refers to the "time"of this creation--before time began, or timelessly.

Having been created, he is "Son" only in the secondary sense of adoption, just as we are. When he is called "Word" or "God," it is only in a secondary sense, not being the true Word or God, but rather as being "adopted" to that position. We worship him in a "secondary sense"--although not God, he is our creator. All words, names, and attributes of deity are interpreted, by the Arians, in a secondary sense.

Concerning his "humanity," the Word or Son was united to a human body, taking the place of the soul, so that Scripture verses referring to his human development (for example Lk. 2:52) refer not to a "human nature," but to his own imperfect nature as the created Son of God.
Confusion Over the Word "Begotten"

During the Arian controversy, much confusion originated over the word "begotten," due to the presence of two different Greek words, both pronounced the same way. One word (genetos—one "n") meant "that which has (or can) come to be, that which is the result of a process," or "originate." This word and its negative (agenetos—inoriginate) "respectively denied and affirmed the eternal existence" of something. This word was equivalent to "creature." The second word (gennetos—two "n's") meant "generate" or "begotten." This word and its negative (agennetos—not begotten, or without parentage) described philosophical relationships of being.

The Arians considered the two words to be equivalent, the confusion probably arising from the application of the second word (begotten, or not begotten) to inanimate objects by some of the Greek philosophers, and by a confusion of the terms by some of the earlier Christian writers.

The Arians had in view the idea that the Father alone was "unoriginate" (agenetos—existing eternally), and that the Son was "originate" (genetos—not existing eternally; a creature), having been "begotten (that is, created) before all time" by the will of the Father.

The Orthodox believed that the Fatherhood of God was the result of his nature, not of his will. Thus there was always the Father and always the Son. The Father is "unoriginate." The Son is "unoriginate" in the sense of having existed from eternity, but was more appropriately called "begotten" (gennetos), "that is, belonging to the Father, who would not be Father unless there was a begotten one (gennema) to justify the name."7

Due to the confusion of terms, the use of these two words was avoided by the Orthodox.

The Nicene Creed

The Use of Creeds

The Bible is the Christian's supreme rule for faith and practice. Creeds have a value, but they dare not take the place of the Bible. Their authority depends on their measure of agreement with the Bible. They have great value, being "summaries of the doctrines of the Bible, aids to its sound understanding, bonds of union among their professors, public standards and guards against false doctrine and practice."8

It must be remembered that creeds can be harmful when abused. Also, those who reject the use of any creed are no better or worse than those who use them.
The Writing of the Creed (325)

Almost all of the bishops meeting at the council of Nicaea (about three hundred in number) were against the Arian doctrine. They attempted to write a creed, using only words and phrases found in scripture, in order to exclude the heresy, but their attempt ended in failure. Every time a term was introduced, the Arians found a way to evade its full force.

The bishops were forced to use "non-Scriptural" terminology (not "un-Scriptural") to protect and preserve the Scriptural meaning. The use of non-Scriptural words was a new idea to most of the bishops. Although almost everyone signed the creed (with the exception of possibly two or three), it was not without hesitation.

The Nicene creed is similar to a number of other early creeds, but it was designed specifically with the Arian controversy in mind. Its key phrases were "of the essence of the Father" and "of one essence with the Father," designating the unity of the Godhead; "begotten, not made," against the idea of a created Son; and "was made man," to show that the Logos did not, as the Arians said, merely replace a human soul. In addition, the anathemas are directed specifically against the basic Arian tenets.

The Key Phrases of the Creed

Objections by Eastern Bishops

The "watchword" for the creed was "coessential," a term which the Arians had previously denied. This word, with "of the essence of the Father" and "of another substance or essence" (in the anathema) were "not adopted without hesitation, nor would it [they] have been adopted had any other barrier against the heresy, which all but very few wished to exclude, appeared effective." The Western bishops had introduced the main term "coessential," and had no problem with the whole explanation; but the majority of the Eastern bishops (partly due to the influence of Origen's subordinationism) had uncertainty, as shown by one of the leaders, Eusebius of Caesarea:

On their dictating this formula, we did not let it pass without inquiry in what sense they introduced "of the essence of Father," and "one in essence [coessential] with the Father." Accordingly questions and explanations took place, and the meaning of the words underwent the scrutiny of reason. And they professed, that the phrase "of the essence" was indicative of the Son's being indeed from the Father, yet without being as if a part of Him. And with this understanding we thought good to assent to the sense of such religious doctrine, teaching, as it did, that the Son was from the Father, not however part of his essence. On this account we assented to the sense ourselves, without declining even the term "One in essence," peace being the object which we set before us, and steadfastness in the orthodox view.
The main objections to the word were: 1) Philosophically it could be identified with other words implying a materialistic connotation, or something existing prior to both the Father and the Son; 2) Its previous association with Sabellianism; 3) The fact that it was condemned by the Council at Antioch; and 4) The fact that, although embodying Scriptural thought, the word did not occur as a term in Scripture. [More about "coessential," below.]

**The Concept of Essence**

The word "essence" (*ousia*), as developed by Aristotle, had a two-fold sense. "In its primary sense *ousia* means a real individual existence, a single concrete entity or unit, a single identical object, whether person, thing, or whatever can be said to exist in its own right." It could be used to describe a material object, or "the internal and invisible substration that gives form and expression to the eternal and visible manifestation." A secondary use of the word referred to "a quantity or property in which more than one individual can share," comparable to our modern-day "genus" and "species."

This word was used in both senses in early Christian writings, but at Nicaea, it was used in the primary sense.

**The Meaning of Coessential**

Briefly, the word "coessential" (*homoousion*) means "sharing a joint or common essence." The word was used as early as the beginning of the second century by Christian writers. For the next century, a number of Christian writers used it. Tertullian used its Latin equivalent.

In the middle of the third century, a change occurred: the word started being used by advocates of heresy, and most of the orthodox Christians stopped using it. About 264, the council which condemned Paul of Samosata also condemned the word, as being connected with Monarchian heresy. [There were three councils at Antioch, between 264 and 268.]

At the Nicene council, most of the bishops probably gave the word "coessential" the meaning of "as the same kind or nature," believing that "the only purpose of its use was to place beyond possibility of doubt that the Son is God in exactly the same sense as the Father, without reference to the latter problem of the relation between persons." Yet the actual purpose for which the word was introduced (combined with the other phrases) was to assert "not merely the *specific* identity of the Son with the Father...but the full unbroken continuation of the Being of the Father in the Son, the inescapable unity of the Son with the Father in the Oneness of the Godhead (emphasis theirs)."

Disagreement over the inclusion of this word in the creed would continue for many years. The majority, who had essential agreement with the creed in all other respects (other than the word "coessential") are described below as "Semi-Arians." This is in contrast with the "Nicenes" who accepted the "coessential" with all its ramifications.
A Later Disagreement About "Substance"

The word "substance" (*hypostasis*), added to the anathema, was an alternative term, almost synonymous to "essence" (*ousia*). It was probably added to provide a "link" to the equivalent term in Latin (*substantia*).

To the Latin Christians, God existed as one substance (*substantia = hypostasis*) which manifested itself in three Persons (*persona*). But the Greeks began to see God as one Essence (*ousia*) manifested in three substances (*hypostasis*). So the Latins considered the Greeks tritheist, and the Greeks considered the Latins Sabellians.

At the Council of Alexandria (362), Athanasius [see below] showed that each believed the same thing, but expressed it in a different way. It was decided that each group would keep its own usage.

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Reaction To The Creed

The Role of Constantine

Emperor Constantine favored Christianity over paganism, yet doctrinally he had little understanding about it. In this controversy, he took a "peace-maker's" attitude and tried to preserve the unity of the church.

When he first learned about the controversy between Arius and Alexander, he wrote to them and accused them of contending about "these small and very insignificant questions." When the matter could not be resolved, he called for the council. When he saw most of Christendom against Arianism, he turned against Arius. He was influential in getting wavering bishops to sign the creed containing the controversial "coessential." At Nicaea, he seemed to be a champion of orthodoxy, but later he became a champion of Arianism (due to the Arian influence of his sister), and brought all of the Arians back from exile...and helped create the problems of the next fifty-five years. Constantine died in 337.

The Role of Athanasius

Athanasius (298-373) was one of the greatest contenders for the Orthodox faith. When most were content with a creed which all could sign (even the Arians), Athanasius pressed for the addition of the word "coessential," thus excluding the Arians. When he became bishop of Alexandria, in 328, he became one of the central points of Arian attack and was exiled five times during his lifetime.

He was a great writer, and even before the controversy he had written a scholarly work, "On the Incarnation of the Word." During the years following the debate (including his
years of exile), he continued to write voluminously against the Arians, defending orthodox Christianity.

Between his third and fourth exiles, he was very influential in reconciling the Semi-Arians and the Nicenes, at the Council of Alexandria (362).

**The Eusebian Coalition**

This coalition of Arians and Semi-Arians (most of the Eastern Bishops) formed as a backlash to the "coessential" in the creed. Most of the leaders (two of which were named Eusebius) were Arians. In contrast, most of the followers were the Semi-Arians--those who were discontent with the "coessential." This group gained political control of Constantine and his court, and began banishing the most influential Nicene leaders on various pretexts. They adopted, in succession, five different creeds at various councils at Antioch.

When Constans (now emperor) demanded a council at Sardicia (about 343), the Eusebians withdrew from the council, and held their own council. In the years that followed, the coalition between the Arians and Semi-Arians broke up.

**The Semi-Arians**

The "Eusebian" creeds were really "Semi-Arian" in character. The Arian leaders had not really intended to believe the creeds, but used them as a "blind" to their true motives. The majority of the Eastern bishops, however, really did hold these views--both at this time and after the coalition broke-up.

Most of the leaders of the newly-formed Semi-Arian group were men of high regard. Athanasius spoke well of them and wrote:

> ...those, however, who accept everything else that was defined at Nicaea, and doubt only about the Coessential, must not be treated as enemies...but we discuss the matter with them as brothers with brothers, who mean what we mean, and dispute only about the word. For, confessing that the Son is from the essence of the Father, and not from another subsistence, and that He is not a creature nor work, but His genuine and natural offspring, and that He is eternally with the Father as being His Word and Wisdom, they are not far from accepting even the phrase "Coessential."²³

The Semi-Arians were against the Arian view that the Son was created. Yet they weren't ready to say that the Son was of the *same* essence as the Father. They said that his essence was "like" the Father's (*homoiousion*), not coessential (*homoousion*).

Eventually most of the Semi-Arians were reconciled with the Nicenes, but a number were led into a heresy which taught that while the Son was of like essence with the Father, the Holy Spirit was a creature.
The Acacians

The Arians were now called "Acacians," named after Acacius, an Arian leader who became prominent after the death of Arius in 336. After reorganization, they developed a new strategy. Its distinguishing principle was

adherence to the Scripture phraseology, in opposition to the inconvenient precision of the Semi-Arians; its distinguishing tenet is the vague confession that the Son is generally "like" or at most "in all things like" the Father...that is, the vague confession that the Son is generally like, or altogether like the Father (emphasis theirs).\(^2^4\)

Their reason was that "like" (or mere similarity) implies difference (at least in some way) instead of identity, or the Semi-Arian "of like essence." This was pure Arian in its intent.

The Acacians were in the minority, but gained control of all of Christendom by political manipulation during a number of councils (354-360). They began the "second Arian persecution" (the first persecution was by the Eusebians), and many Nicene "champions" were banished--some even martyred. The Orthodox stronghold at Alexandria was in constant turmoil. Athanasius had to flee to the desert, barely escaping with his life.

The Eunomians

The Eunomians (named after Eunomius, another Arian leader) arose after the break-up of the Eusebian coalition. This group was much bolder, and contained a number of the original Arians, who had kept silent after the Council of Nicaea. These "pure Arians" said that the Son was "unlike" the Father. Although they temporarily gained control in a few places by improper means, most of Christendom was against them, and they were condemned at the "Acacian" councils.

Reconciliation

When Julian became emperor (361), he tried to destroy Christianity, not by persecution, but by internal strife--by recalling all those who had been previously banished. But the result was the opposite: the Christians united, and many advances were made by the Nicenes. Athanasius, at the Council of Alexandria (362) dealt with the problem of admitting Semi-Arians back into the Nicene group (by simply reaffirming the Nicene Creed), and as well as with the confusion of the terms "substance" (hypostasis) and "essence" (ousia).

Under Valens (successor to Julian) the Acacians gained temporary control (c. 363), but only for a time. By the death of Athanasius (373), the Arians were losing ground. Basil, a long-time enemy of Arianism, became bishop of Caesarea (in Cappadocia). Gregory of Nazianzus started an Orthodox mission in Constantinople, which was well received, amid persecution. Finally, when Theodorus became emperor, the Nicene creed was upheld at
the Council of Constantinople\textsuperscript{25} (381-383), and Arianism forever became a sect outside the church.

\section*{CONCLUSION}

And so, the Arian heresy had run its course. After fifty-five years of struggle, Christendom was convinced that it had to either accept the complete and full deity of Christ, or deny it. There was no middle ground.

As for the Arians, they lingered on for a few centuries. They never again held prominent positions in the church, but they were readily accepted by the "barbarians"--the Germanic tribes, and others--so their influence was still felt. Even today it creeps up in the form of various sects, to remind us of these former days--days when it had almost conquered Christendom, but having been put to the test, was found to be false.
THE CREED OF NICAEA - 325

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 of the Father, the only begotten;
         that is, of the essence of the Father,
            God of God,
            Light of Light,
            Very God of very God,
      begotten, not made,
      being of one essence with the Father,
by whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth,
   who for us men, and for our salvation,
    came down
       and was incarnate
       and was made man:
   he suffered
       and the third day he rose again,
  ascended into heaven,
    from hence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead,
   and in the Holy Ghost.

But those who say, 'There was a time when he was not'
   and 'He was not before he was made'
   and 'He was made out of nothing'
   or 'He is of another substance'
      or 'essence'
   or 'The Son of God is created'
      or 'changeable'
      or 'alterable'
--they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church.
ENDNOTES


9 There were very few Arians--somewhere between 13 and 22.


11 "Coessential" is usually translated "of one substance," adopted from the Latin (*substantia*).


14 Compare with Archibald Robertson, Prolegomena to "Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria," p. xxx.


16 Everett F. Harrison, *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), p. 504. This is given by Harrison as the definition of *hypostasis*, but it is synonymous to that of *ousia*, as used at the time of Nicaea.


21 Archibald Robertson, Prolegomena to "Select Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria," p. xxxii.


25 The "Constantinople-Nicene Creed," which is often quoted today, very conspicuously omits two very important clauses of the Nicene Creed. It is not a revision, but a completely different creed, probably incorporated into the Acts of the Council of Constantinople in addition to the Nicene Creed. See T. Herbert Bindley, *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, p. 64ff.
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