

THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY - AN OVERVIEW

The Bible contains verses which focus on the unity, or oneness, that exists between the Father and the Son. It also contains verses which focus on the differences that exist between the Father and the Son. The Arian controversy was over the issue of how these two sets of verses fit together. Do we emphasize one set of verses over the other, and use the one set to "interpret" (nullify the significance of) the other? Or do we place equal emphasis on *both* sets of verses, accepting *each* set in the way the Bible gives it to us?

On a deeper level, do we consider these truths "contradictory," so that we must choose one and deny (ignore or change the meaning of) the other? Or do we accept them as "complementary," so that we affirm both? Are these truths "friends" or "enemies"?

A. Views Held Prior to the Council of Nicaea:

1. Excessive emphasis on the UNITY or ONENESS that exists between the Father and the Son: *SABELLIANISM*

This view claimed that the *one* God can show himself in any of three ways, but not at the same time - comparable to the way that "H₂O" can manifest itself in three different ways, as ice, water or steam (water vapor).

* It must be emphasized that this view did not have many adherents by the time of the Arian controversy. Yet because the ARIANS kept accusing the ORTHODOX of holding to this view, it needs to be mentioned. Such accusations were largely responsible for the reluctance of many Christians to wholeheartedly accept what became known as the "Orthodox" view. (This hesitant group - called the "Semi-Arians," below - eventually *did* accept it, once the misunderstandings were cleared-up. But because of the widespread confusion, it took a number of years for that to happen.)

2. Emphasis on *both* the similarities and the differences that exist between the Father and the Son: *ORTHODOX VIEW*

This view was held by nearly all of the Christians in the western half of the Roman Empire, and most of those in the east. However, before the controversy occurred, the exact relationship between the Father and the Son was only vaguely understood (by most). This controversy forced many to examine the issue much deeper than they had done before.

When an attempt was made to develop a more precise definition (or explanation) of this relationship between Father and Son, it was readily accepted by the Christians in the West. However, because of fears (and accusations) of "Sabellianism," the Christians in the East were more reluctant to accept it. ("Sabellianism" had been more prevalent in the East.) It would take half a century of "growing pains," before the controversy was completely resolved. In the meantime, it would appear that this group was split into *two* factions, with only the minority of them holding to the Orthodox view. And the others ("Semi-Arians") would appear to hold a somewhat ambiguous position somewhere between the Orthodox and the Arian views.

3. Excessive emphasis on the DIFFERENCES that exist between the Father and the Son: This led to the development of *ARIANISM*. It started with...

The views of ORIGEN and of PAUL OF SAMOSATA: These were probably over-reactions to the opposite "extreme" (Sabellianism).

- Origin's view: Jesus was uncreated God, etc., but was subordinate to the Father.
- The view of Paul of Samosata: A "Logos" force from God (the Father) energized the *man* Jesus (at his baptism). This force did so increasingly, until Jesus reached "divinity." ["Logos" is the Greek word translated "Word" in John 1:1]

Portions of these two views merged to form ...

The VIEW OF LUCIAN: Same as Paul of Samosata, except: The "Logos" had personality and was "incarnated" into the Christ in place of his soul. This view was eventually modified into...

VIEW OF ARIUS (and several others). This will be further defined below. At this point, it can be noted that the majority of leaders who held to this view had been students of Lucian.

B. Confrontation and the Council of Nicaea

ARIUS IS EXCOMMUNICATED after a confrontation with a bishop who was explaining the Orthodox view to a number of church leaders. This causes those with views similar to Arius to support him.

THE NICENE COUNCIL IS HELD. These events occur at the council:

- Nearly all of Christendom condemns Arianism. A statement ("creed") is written, in attempt to accurately define the relationship between "Jesus" and "God."
- A certain controversial (misunderstood) word is included in the creed. [This word, "coessential," means that the Father and Son are said to share the *same* essence.]
- Though in agreement with the spirit of the creed, many are discontent with the inclusion of this word. Some fear that this word could promote the Sabellian view. (The Sabellians had used this word, in some of their arguments.)
- For political reasons, Emperor Constantine temporarily upholds the Orthodox view. Through his influence, nearly everyone signs the creed, in spite of the controversial word.
- Many in the East have second-thoughts about signing the creed (for the reasons mentioned above), and soon form their own group. These Semi-Arians favor a revision of the creed.

NOTES:

1) Considering the Arian accusation that the Orthodox view was actually Sabellianism, the Semi-Arians were inclined to view it as an "extreme," rather than as the view that places equal emphasis on *both* truths.

2) The issue here involves the question of how Jesus (the Son) is "God." These definitions are *not* to be interpreted as an implied denial of the fact that Jesus (the Son) was also "human."

C. Resulting Views After the Council:

1. *ORTHODOX VIEW* (Held by most, or all, Christians in the western half of the empire, and by a few in the eastern half)

Definition: The Father and the Son are God in the same sense; the relationship between them is that of unity.

2. *SEMI-ARIAN VIEW* (The majority view in the eastern half of the empire)

Definition: The Father and the Son are God in the same sense. (The relationship between them was not explained by this group.)

3. *ARIAN VIEW* (View held by a few in the eastern half of the empire)

Definition: The Son was specially created - a creature who is different from all others (which *he* then created). He deserves worship, is a "god," etc., but all in a secondary sense. He took the place of the soul in a human body, at the incarnation.

D. The Resulting Political & Theological Conflicts:

After the council, various conflicts (political, theological, etc.) began to occur. It should be remembered, however, that these conflicts occurred mainly in the "*eastern branch*" of Christianity. The majority of those in the west continued to hold to the "Orthodox" view.

1. The ARIANS (or at least most of them) tone-down their views, to take advantage of the SEMI-ARIANS, who want to revise the creed; a coalition is formed.
 2. For political purposes, Emperor Constantine joins them and various creeds are written.
 3. Those holding to the ORTHODOX position are persecuted or banished.
 4. On the surface, there appears to be *two main groups*:
 - ORTHODOX (accused of being "Sabellian") - most of the leaders are persecuted or banished.
 - EUSEBIAN COALITION, comprised of most of the SEMI-ARIANS and ARIANS (except perhaps a few "extreme" Arians). (This coalition is named after one of the influential leaders, Eusebius).
 5. Since there is no true unity between the groups within the coalition, the coalition eventually breaks-up. The Arian "extremists" also form their own group.
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E. Four Resulting Views / Groups (After the Coalition Breaks-Up):

1. *ORTHODOX* - "The Father and the Son have (share) the SAME essence."
2. *SEMI-ARIANS* - "The Father and the Son both have the SAME KIND of essence." (The unity between them is *not* being affirmed.)
3. *ACACIANS* (the main group of Arians) - "The Son is SIMILAR in essence to the Father... but different."
4. *EUNOMIANS* (the "extremist" Arians) - "The Son is UNLIKE the Father."

NOTES:

- The issue is the definition of "the very essence" of these two beings (Father and Son), or "the substance of which they are composed." The various groups answered this question by stating that the Father and Son were the "same," or "similar" (etc.), in essence.
 - The Eunomians had little impact on anyone. This position was condemned by *all* the other groups.
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F. Events Leading to a Resolution of the Conflict:

1. Emperor Julian brings back the *ORTHODOX* (he allows them to return from exile or to come out of hiding). He does so, because he wants to *promote internal strife in the church...* because he wants to destroy it! Instead, the opposite occurs!
2. The *SEMI-ARIANS* conclude that there is no "middle ground" between the opposing views. The misunderstanding in the wording of the creed is cleared up, and they unite once again as the *ORTHODOX* view.
3. Emperor Valens helps the *ACACIANS* [Arians] regain temporary control.
4. After Emperor Valens dies, the Nicene Creed is reaffirmed as being an accurate representation of Christian doctrine. And "Arianism forever became a sect outside the church."