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The Arian Controversy

By Jim Myers

One of the most important events in the history of Christianity, other than the life of Jesus, took place when **Constantine the Great**, Emperor of the Roman Empire, decided to become involved in a Christian controversy known as the Arian Controversy.¹ It began in **318** when an Alexandrian Christian teacher named **Arius**² accused **Bishop Alexander of Alexandria**³ of teaching a false doctrine. What was the false doctrine? Alexander taught that “God and Christ were of the same essence.”

Like many early Christian scholars, Arius was influenced by the writings of **Origen**. In some cases he agreed with Origen’s teachings, while also disagreeing in other cases.⁴ *Arius taught that the church had strayed from the original message of Jesus and must return to the teachings of the apostles and the early church.* Arius declared:

“God was the Father – one, infinite, and indivisible. He was uncreated, existed forever, and ruled as sole sovereign and judge. No other God existed but He. Given His nature, He could not impart it to any other being. He had no equals.”⁵

Bishop Alexander’s response was that “Arius had drained the dregs of impiety by his unscriptural blasphemy against Christ.” He wrote:

Arius and Achillas have lately formed a conspiracy . . . They revile every godly apostolic doctrine, and in Jewish fashion have organized a gang to fight against Christ . . . They use all possible means to maintain the ungodly doctrine held by the Greeks and the Jews concerning Jesus Christ, seeking approval from them. Everything which outsiders ridicule about us they practice diligently. . . Arius and Achillas, together with their fellow foes, have been expelled from the Church, because they have become alienated from our pious doctrine . . . The following are the name of those who have been anathematized as heretics: among

the presbyters, Arius; among the deacons, Achillas, Euzoius, Aethales, Lucius, Sarmatas, Julius, Menas, another Arius, and Helladius.⁶

As we read above, Bishop Alexander convened a council to decide the matter and it ruled against Arius and found him guilty of apostasy, schism, heresy, and blasphemy. It also declared that Arius's teachings were those of the Antichrist and excommunicated him. It is important to understand that this took place before the Church of Rome became the center of Christian authority and power in the Roman Empire. Therefore, the Alexandrian church's excommunication of Arius only affected him there, not in other locations. Arius continued to teach and make new followers, including bishops who accepted his position as the truth.

Arius's position was not a new issue. Christian leaders had been arguing about it for over 200 years and it was far from being settled. Two of the earliest groups involved in the disagreement over were the **Ebionites** and **Marcionites**.

The **Ebionites** traced their roots back to the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. They practiced Jewish rituals – *including circumcision and Shabbat* – and believed that the Torah, Prophets and Writings were the Scriptures.⁷ They held that Jesus was a man and his parents were Joseph and Mary. Jesus had been called and anointed by God to be His messenger and teacher of the Torah and the Prophets. The Ebionites rejected precepts such as his pre-existence, virgin birth, atoning death, and physical resurrection.⁸

The **Marcionites** based their beliefs on the writings of Paul. Marcion taught that Jesus revealed *a new previously unknown god* to mankind. The god of the Jews was a jealous, wrathful, and legalistic god that created the material world, which is a defective place of suffering. They believed that Jesus was not the Anointed One promised by Judaism, but he was sent by a god greater than the Jewish god -- *a god that was free from passion and wrath, and was wholly benevolent*. Jesus was sent to free believers from subjection to the Jewish god.⁹ Christ was a spiritual entity that was sent by the greater god to reveal the truth to mankind.¹⁰

There were many Christian groups with a wide range of beliefs about Jesus and God. Jesus was. Some Christians believed in one God; others believed there were two gods; still others said there were thirty gods; while some even claimed there were 365 gods.¹¹ However, a dominate belief was **monotheism**. *The problem for those groups was to fit Jesus into a doctrine in which there is only one God.*

If it hadn't been for the intervention of Constantine the Great, the conflict between Arius and Alexander would have just another local debate in the long line of debates on the issue. But, in **325**, Emperor Constantine called for the

Council of Nicea to meet and resolve the issue. Invitations were sent to over 1,800 bishops throughout the Empire to meet at Nicea, but only **298** bishops from the **East** and **2** from the **West** attended. The lack of participation was probably not a sign of lack of interest on the issue. *It must be remembered that there had been many years of persecution by Roman emperors of Christians.* There is little doubt that many of the bishops that received invitations may have considered the possibility that this could simply be a trap.

After about two months of debates, the meaning of one key word became a bottleneck for the 300 bishops. Emperor Constantine surprised everyone when he joined the discussion and suggested an interpretation -- *the Father and the Son are of the **same essence** (consubstantial) and not of a different essence.* This validated Bishop Alexander's position. But, the bishops did not immediately and unanimously accept Constantine's interpretation. At that point, Constantine changed his suggestion to a demand -- *and the bishops immediately complied.*

But, Arius rejected it and did not agree that "*Jesus was of the same essence as the Father,*" because Constantine's position would mean there were two gods. *Once again, Arius was excommunicated, but this time it was backed by the authority and power of the Emperor of Rome.* The council ordered that Arius's writings be burned and that failure to comply with the council's decrees would result in penalties of confiscation of property, fines, imprisonment, or even death.

Interestingly, in **335** Emperor Constantine called for the **Council of Tyre** to meet and discuss charges against Bishop Alexander's successor, **Athanasius**. About **310 bishops** attended, of which **48 were Egyptian bishops** that Athanasius had brought.¹² The council also addressed the issue about Jesus again. But this time it ruled that "Jesus was completely human, only a man, and not God." *It fully restored Arius as a member-in-good-standing of the church and condemned Athanasius.* By **350**, the Arians were almost completely triumphant in the Empire. The next emperor, **Constantius II**, reunited the East and West under the Arian banner. *During this period the official position of the Roman Church was that "Jesus was not God."*

Athanasius continued his fight against Arius and convinced certain Church leaders to call the **Council of Rimini** in **359**. There were between **300 and 400 bishops** in attendance. Once again the issue of who Jesus was drew the attention of the bishops. The council condemned reversed the decision of the **Council of Tyre.** *It condemned Arius and ruled that his teachings were heresy. Athanasius was once again in power, but Arian continued to teach and many churches taught his position.*

The Arian controversy contains many important insights about how beliefs and doctrines that are "unquestionable orthodox truths" held by many Christians today originated and were passed down from one generation to the next -- *until*

they made it to 2013. An important insight is the roles emperors, bishops, and the decisions of three councils played. The “Christian truth” decreed by one council, became “heresy” by the ruling of another council, and then became the “truth” again by the decision of a third council.

- *Jesus and God are of the same essence.*
- *Jesus and God are not of the same essence.*
- *Jesus and God are of the same essence.*

The truths of the Church were created by the majority vote of the bishops, not a divine revelation from God. For Christians living in that period, the switching back and forth was not only confusing, but could be very dangerous. If they weren’t up-to-date on the latest rulings, they could be arrested and penalized for holding the wrong one.

Keep in mind that at this point, **359**, the official belief was that Jesus and God were of the same substance -- *not the same God*. The questions of who the Holy Spirit was and how it related to Jesus and God would have to wait until **451**, when another council, the **Council of Chalcedon** would vote on it.

The rulings of these councils made it possible for inquisitors to take the property, liberty and lives of people who were found guilty of heresy because they did not agree with the “truths” of the Church. *Today, there are still many Christians who are afraid to discuss, question or disagree with their church’s beliefs and doctrines – even when they know that they contain errors. Do you think Jesus would want this done in his name? **W**hat **W**ould **J**esus **D**o?* **BHC**

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¹ Blasphemy: Verbal Offense against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie by Leonard W. Levy (The University of North Carolina Press; Chapel Hill, North Carolina and London; © 1993 by Leonard W. Levy; pp. 15-49).

² <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/people/arius.htm>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Alexander_of_Alexandria

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arius>

⁵ <http://www.earlychurch.org.uk/arianism.php>

⁶ <http://www.fourthcentury.com/urkunde-14/>

⁷ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5411-ebionites>

⁸ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ebionites>

⁹ <http://www.religionfacts.com/christianity/people/marcion.htm>

¹⁰ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcionism>

¹¹ *Lost Christianities* by Bart Ehrman; © 2003 by Oxford University Press; New York, New York; p. 2

¹² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Synod_of_Tyre