

THE TRINITY AND THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

by

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GLOSSARY¹

Adoptionism. A Christological view that asserts that Jesus was a human being chosen by God to be elevated to divine sonship. As such, it denies His eternal deity.

Arianism. A Christological view that asserts that the Son of God was the first of God's creation. He is the highest of created beings and was made before the world began. As such, it denies His eternal deity.

Apollinarianism. A Christological view that asserts that the divine Christ only took on human flesh, but not a human soul. The human soul was replaced by the Logos or Word. As such, it denies His full humanity.

Homoousios. Doctrine that asserts that the Son is of the same substance of the Father. It places the Son on the same level as the Father as an uncreated being and thus affirms His eternal deity.

Homoiousios. Doctrine that asserts that the Son is of a similar substance to the Father, but not the same as God. As such, it denies the full equality of the Son with the Father.

Incarnation. Theological doctrine that asserts that the Second Person of the Trinity became a human being without giving up His deity.

Peccable. With reference to Christ, the idea that He was able to sin.

Sabellianism. A view of the nature of God that asserts that God is one being and one person, who takes on three different forms or manifestations at various times: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As such, it denies the Trinity by denying that God eternally and simultaneously exists as three persons.

Soteriology. In theology, the study of salvation.

Subordinationism. A theological doctrine that asserts that the Son is inferior to the Father in essence and status.

Trinity. A theological doctrine that asserts that God is one essence and yet exists eternally in three co-equal persons.

¹These definitions are adapted and expanded from Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).

CHAPTER I

I. INTRODUCTION

In some ways, this paper is the culmination of a 20-year personal journey for the present writer. For it was then that a member of a religious group known as The Way International recruited him for membership in his late teen-age years. At the heart of the appeal was this message: “The Trinity is a fiction. Jesus Christ is not God. Come with us and learn the truth.”

The appeal was not overtly intimidating, nor was it successful. The writer never darkened the door of a Way International meeting. But those exchanges raised profound questions that the writer was not prepared to answer as an unconverted sinner. Over the passage of time, questions like, “Why is the word “Trinity” not found in the Bible if it is essential to the truth?” and, “Can I truly know if Jesus Christ is God?” presented themselves to the writer’s mind in varying degrees of consciousness. These were no academic inquiries--eternal truth was at stake, truth that had eternal consequences for his soul.

A few years later, the writer was converted to genuine Christianity by the grace of God. Yet in his spiritual immaturity, uncertainty still remained as he sought final resolution of those questions in his mind. He believed in the Trinity and the deity of Christ, yet he was miserably unprepared to defend that belief. Scripture alternately

seemed to support or undermine those beliefs depending on which verse was being read out of context at any given time.

The confusion was only heightened as traditional Christian teaching was challenged by a group known as the Jehovah's Witnesses. On the one hand, Christian leaders would use the Greek text of the Bible to support their assertions that Jesus Christ is God. Yet on the other hand, the Jehovah's Witnesses would also appeal to the Greek language in support of their assertion that John 1:1 clearly teaches that Jesus Christ is "a" god, not a person who is equal to God the Father.

As these competing truth claims clashed in the writer's mind, one thing became evident. Without a knowledge of the Greek language, he was left only with an arbitrary choice between which teacher to believe about what "the Greek means." He had to get into a position where he could evaluate these claims independently for himself. And he also had to get into a position where he was able to know theology for himself.

Those inner compulsions set off a nearly 20-year chain of events involving the development and then abandonment of a prosperous law practice, three cross-country moves, nearly 30 credit hours of Greek study, and the attainment of two theological degrees, the second of which will be granted only days after the completion of this paper. The profound eternal questions that plagued his mind two decades ago have now yielded to the countless thousands of hours of private study. The Trinity is true. Jesus Christ is God. Of these things there can be no doubt.

Those personal reminiscences provide the impetus for the present paper. This effort is intended for the young believer, or uncertain unbeliever, who finds himself in a

similarly troubled position as the present writer was many years ago. It endeavors to bring into one place the scriptural, theological, and historical information needed to resolve these important questions about the nature of God.

The backdrop for this discussion will be what is known in church history as the Arian Controversy, which raged generally from 318 to 381. Amazingly, the same questions that modern Christians debate with Jehovah's Witnesses are the questions that were asked and answered over 1600 years ago. To understand the development and resolution of the Arian Controversy is to understand the Trinity today. It is to that topic that this paper is devoted.

The writer does not intend to present a scholarly advance on this topic, but rather a summarization of established facts and arguments in a single resource that can be given to the seeking individual. While some of the discussion is necessarily technical, basic biblical discussions about the Trinity and the deity of Christ have been included in the indices to establish the important point that these doctrines do not arise from abstract theological speculation, but are required by the compellingly clear testimony of the unadorned Scriptures themselves.

All Scripture quotations will be from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

CHAPTER II

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

Persecution Under the Roman Emperors

The Arian controversy developed against the backdrop of unfolding Roman political history. The first three centuries A. D. saw the Roman Empire frequently persecuting Christians. Believers were variously accused of being cannibals, atheists, and incestuous, and their refusal to participate in emperor worship came to be viewed as politically treasonous. Nero (54-68) was the first persecutor of Christians who set a precedent that others followed. He was seeking a scapegoat for the burning of Rome. Domitian (81-96) persecuted believers out of fear of possible rivals and of Christian influence. Trajan (98-117) did not actively seek out Christians for persecution, but he tried and executed those who came to his attention. Hadrian (117-38) followed Trajan's policy. Antonius Pius (138-61) also continued this same policy. Marcus Aurelius (161-80) began actively seeking to identify Christians through espionage, and opposed Christianity out of his sympathy for Stoicism. Septemius Severus (193-211) established a Roman religion. Decius (249-51) required Christians to sacrifice to Roman gods, and sought to minimize the political threat of the growing Christian movement. Valerian (253-60) practiced a milder persecution, but the relief was temporary. Diocletian (284-305), a military leader, proved to be the most severe persecutor of them all. He believed Christians were disloyal and an impediment to a reorganization of the Roman Empire.

He ordered that their churches be destroyed, their Scriptures confiscated, and their leaders tortured.²

Thus, for nearly two and a half centuries, Christians lived under the specter of persecution at the hands of the governing authorities. No doubt they were often challenged by Peter's words,

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. . . . Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king (1 Peter 2:13-17).

And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you (1 Peter 5:10).

A New Direction Under Constantine

That long-standing pattern of persecution changed with the ascension of Constantine to the throne in 312. He issued the Edict of Milan in 313, which officially declared imperial toleration of Christianity. In subsequent years, he promulgated a series of edicts that favored Christians and Christianity over other religions.³

²David F. Wells, "Persecution," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 766-67.

³Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 138. In many respects, the death blow to persecution had come two years earlier, when Galerius issued his Edict of Toleration in 311. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 106-107. The question of whether Constantine was a genuine convert to Christ, while intensely interesting, must be left outside the scope of this paper.

Specifically, Constantine's policies favored the Church on a large scale. He remedied the effects of persecution by financing new copies of the Bible and by building churches in both Rome and Bethlehem. He gave the palace of his second wife Fausta to the bishops of Rome as an episcopal residence, which served that function until 1308. He also apportioned some of the empire's revenue to church charity, and expressed Christian principles in some of his laws by granting protection to children, slaves, peasants, and prisoners. One particular edict in 316 forbade the branding of criminals on the face because "man is made in God's image."⁴

After Constantine had consolidated his rule over the empire, he sought to maintain political unity. The Christian religion served as a basis for that unity. Thus, a theological disagreement over the nature of Christ between bishop Alexander of Alexandria and his presbyter Arius became a political concern for the emperor when the dispute spread to other geographic regions. While the dispute had originally been a local one, Arius had garnered the support of the historian Eusebius of Caesarea, and his namesake Eusebius of Nicomedia. Consequently, the Greek episcopate was split into two parties, and feelings were running high. Constantine had a political need to find a solution that would preserve unity.⁵

He responded by sending his ecclesiastical adviser Hosius, bishop of Cordova, on a mission of reconciliation and inquiry. When Hosius arrived at Alexandria, he sided with Alexander against Arius, and then went to Antioch in Syria to investigate the

⁴Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1967), 127-28.

⁵*Ibid.*, 129.

support Arius had been receiving from Eusebius of Caesarea and others. Hosius presided over a council in which Eusebius was excommunicated, subject to confirmation by an upcoming council of bishops that would ultimately take place at Nicea after Easter 325.⁶ The seeds of what would become a 60-year long theological controversy had been sown, and they were beginning to sprout. At this point, it is necessary to explore the nature of the theological agreement in greater detail.

⁶Ibid., 129-30.

III. THE RISE OF ARIANISM

The Personal Background of Arius

The date of Arius' birth is uncertain. He studied under Lucian of Antioch, who had Christological views that foreshadowed those that Arius would develop later in his life. Lucian tended to emphasize the humanity of Christ over His deity, and sought to explain the incarnation in a way that did not identify Jesus as fully God, and at the same time, avoided the appearance of adoptionism.⁷

Arius became a deacon in the city of Alexandria early in the fourth century, carrying with him Lucian's theological influence. He embarked on what would become a controversial pastoral career. One of his duties was to direct a school of biblical interpretation for those Christians who wanted to teach. He seems to have had a charismatic personality that attracted many followers. Thus, when he came into conflict with his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, over the nature of Christ sometime between 318 and 323,⁸ many Alexandrian Christians rallied to his defense.⁹

⁷Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 142.

⁸Victor L. Walter, "Arianism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 74.

⁹Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 144.

The Theology of Arius

Arius was influenced by Greek philosophy, which believed that the perfection of deity effectively rendered impossible any change to its essential nature. Under that presupposition, to change is either to change for the better or for the worse. Change would therefore imply that God was either less than perfect before the change, or less than perfect after the change.¹⁰ In either case, change was obviously an impossibility to ascribe to God.

Arius took that presupposition and applied it to the implications of the incarnation. If Jesus Christ were fully God, preexistent from all eternity, then the incarnation would represent a change in His essential nature. Since that would represent a fundamental change in His nature, the immutability of God would be violated. According to Arius, that conclusion meant that Jesus could not have been God in human flesh.

In his teaching, Arius attempted to identify the origin of the pre-incarnate Logos. He believed that if the Father begat the Son, the Son must have had a beginning of existence. According to Arius, there was a time when the Son was not.¹¹ In other words, Arius believed that Jesus Christ was a created being, and taught that Jesus was the greatest and first of all created beings, and was brought forth in order that through Him the world might be created. He was entitled to the veneration of men, but he was not of

¹⁰Ibid., 143.

the same uncreated essence as the Father. Arius supported his views with passages like Prov 8:22 (LXX), Matt 28:18, Mark 13:32, Luke 18:19, John 5:19, John 14:28, and 1 Cor 15:28.¹²

The fundamental premise of Arius' theological system was the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of God. To Arius, God was the unoriginate source of all reality. Since He is unique, transcendent and indivisible, that essence cannot be shared or communicated.¹³ On the basis of that presupposition, Arius and his followers developed four key propositions that J. N. D. Kelly identifies.¹⁴

The Son Must Be a Creature

He was formed out of nothing by the Father's fiat. He is a perfect creature, not to be compared with the rest of creation, but He owes His being to the Father's will. The Son is not self-existent.

The Son Must Have Had a Beginning

Arius distinguished between the Son, who had a beginning, and God, who is without beginning. Arians often said, "There was [a time] when He was not."

The Son Can Have No Communion with His Father

¹¹Samuel J. Mikolaski, "Arianism," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 67.

¹²Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, 84-85.

¹³J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 227.

Since He is a creature, He is alien from and utterly dissimilar to the Father's essence and individual being. The Word can neither see nor know the Father perfectly and accurately.

The Son is liable to change and even sin.

The Son's nature was in principle peccable. God in His providence foresaw that the Son would remain virtuous by His own steadfast resolution, and therefore bestowed this grace on Him in advance

Arius' Scriptural Arguments

Arius used four lines of scriptural argument to support his position: (1) Passages that suggested that the Son was a creature; including Prov 8:22 ("The Lord created me"); Acts 2:36 ("God has made Him Lord and Christ"); Rom 8:29 ("The first-born among many"); Col 1:15 ("The first-born of all creation"); Heb 3:2 ("Who was faithful to Him who made Him.")). (2) Passages that represented God the Father as the sole veritable God; including John 17:3 ("This is life eternal, that they should know Thee the only true God, and Him whom Thou didst send, Jesus Christ"). (3) Passages that seemed to imply Christ's inferiority to the Father. John 14:28 ("The Father is greater than I."). (4) Passages that attributed ignorance, weakness, suffering or development to the Son of God.¹⁵

¹⁴Ibid., 227-29.

¹⁵Ibid., 229-30.

Arius' arguments became the subject of great controversy, and led to the famous Council of Nicea, to which attention is now turned.

IV. THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

Historical Background

Constantine was eager to maintain the unity of the empire, and saw the unfolding theological schism as a threat to that unity. As a result, he summoned 318 bishops throughout the empire for a council at which the dispute could be resolved. He defrayed their expenses from the public treasury. Many of the bishops sought to use the council as an opportunity to air their private disputes before the emperor, but he refused to listen to them.¹⁶

The formal opening of the Council was marked by great pageantry as Constantine entered the session. Those in attendance rose to their feet as the emperor moved to his throne with great vestments. He addressed the attendees in Latin, which was translated into Greek.

The incongruity of this moment with the prior history of the Church under former emperors should not be forgotten. After previous Roman emperors had tried to crush the Church through persecution, Constantine now presided over an effort to resolve a key doctrinal controversy. Schaff comments,

How great the contrast between this position of the church and the time of her persecution but scarcely passed! What a revolution of opinion in bishops who had once feared the Roman emperor as the worst enemy of the church, and who now greeted the same emperor in his half-barbarous attire as an angel of God from heaven, and gave him, though not yet even baptized, the honorary presidency of the highest assembly of the church!¹⁷

¹⁶Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5th ed., rev. (n.p.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1910; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 3:623.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 3:625.

With regard to the theological question at stake, there were three parties: (1) The orthodox party, which held firmly to the deity of Christ and affirmed the principle of *homoousios*. This party began in a numerical minority, but had influential thinkers able to support its position. (2) The Arians, who numbered approximately 20 bishops. (3) The majority party, led by the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, which took a middle ground that affirmed the divine nature of Christ but rejected the term *homoousios*.¹⁸

As the theological debate unfolded, the Arians offered a creed that the others rejected so violently that it was torn to pieces. Eighteen of the Arian bishops abandoned the position after that episode. Then, Eusebius offered a confession that affirmed the divine nature of Christ but rejected the term *homoousios*. Constantine had approved this formula and the Arians were also prepared to accept it.¹⁹

However, the orthodox party refused the statement. They did not want to accept a creed that was also acceptable to the Arians. They insisted on the inclusion of the term *homoousios*, which the Arians consistently rejected. When Constantine saw that Eusebius' proposal would not pass, he gave his approval to the orthodox construction that provided the groundwork for the famous Nicene Creed. It affirmed the true deity of the Son and condemned Arianism. The books of Arius were burned and his followers were branded as enemies of Christianity.²⁰

¹⁸Ibid., 3:627.

¹⁹Ibid., 3:628.

²⁰Ibid., 3:628-30.

This was the first example of a civil punishment for heresy. Prior to Constantine, ecclesiastical excommunication was the ultimate penalty. Now that the Christian religion had been joined so closely to the state, all offenses against the church were also viewed as crimes against the state.²¹

Schaff calls the Council of Nicea the most important event of the fourth century for its success in resolving such a critical doctrinal dispute. It summed up all previous discussions of the doctrine of Christ and laid the cornerstone for orthodoxy for the following centuries.²² Among other things, the Nicene Creed established that Christ was of the being of the Father, He was begotten but not made, and that He was of “one substance” (*homoousios*) with the Father. The Creed also anathematized Arian followers.²³ The council drafted the following provision and required all the bishops present to sign:

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 from the father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

²¹Ibid., 3:630.

²²Ibid., 3:630-31.

²³G. L. Carey, “Nicea, Council of (325),” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 706.

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.²⁴

²⁴Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 232.

AFTERMATH OF THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

Despite Constantine's hopes of ensuring future unity, the Council of Nicea did not resolve the Christological dispute. Two of the Arian bishops who attended the Council refused to sign the creed, and in the decades that followed, the theological landscape was extremely unsettled. Subsequent emperors waffled between Arianism, semi-Arianism, and orthodoxy. Compromise with the Arians was explored, and the Nicene formula was threatened with reversal.²⁵ As J. N. D. Kelly writes,

The Nicene crisis did not come to an end with the closing of the council. Arianism proper had, for the moment, been driven underground, but the conflict only served to throw into relief the deep-seated theological divisions in the ranks of its adversaries. The Church's new relation to the State, which meant that the success or failure of a doctrine might hinge upon the favour of the reigning emperor, tended to sharpen these divisions. In fact, the dispersal of the council marked the commencement of a protracted period of controversy lasting at least until Constantius' death in 361. Even then two further decades had to elapse before the Nicene faith was securely and finally established.²⁶

It would not overstate the case to say that the results of the Council of Nicea were a mixed blessing for the Church. The surpassing accomplishment was the establishment of a Trinitarian basis of thought that would ultimately survive the test of time (even though it would take nearly 60 years to make the victory complete). But the Church paid a steep price, because the authority of the state had now been invoked to settle a theological question. With the Roman Empire having a vested interest in the unity of the Church, state power began to be used to force theological agreement on Christians. In

²⁵Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 162.

²⁶J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3d ed. (New York: David McKay Company, 1972), 237.

the ensuing years, theological controversy would be settled less by theological debate among church leaders and more by political intrigue.²⁷ Chadwick writes,

As the fourth century advanced, it became increasingly the tendency for the final decisions about church policy to be taken by the emperor, and the group in the church which at any given time swayed the course of events was very often that which succeeded in obtaining the imperial ear.²⁸

Surely, the New Testament writers did not contemplate such involvement in crucial church matters by political leaders. The idea of political clout was far from the apostolic writers, who were regarded as “the scum of the world [and] the dregs of all things” (1 Cor 4:13), and ultimately were martyred at the hands of the Roman emperors.

ATHANASIUS

During this unsettled period, the bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius (293-373), proved to be a bulwark in defense of the orthodox position. Athanasius attended the Council of Nicea in 325, at which time he served as the secretary and confidant of Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria. Athanasius quickly won regard for his brilliance, and in 328, succeeded to the bishopric of Alexandria upon the death of Alexander.²⁹ He

²⁷Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, *The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 158-59.

²⁸Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 132.

²⁹John F. Johnson, “Athanasius,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 94-96.

was in exile five times for a total of seventeen years, as different Roman emperors either supported or opposed him.³⁰

Athanasius said in his book, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, that the Scriptures teach the eternal Sonship of the Logos, the direct creation of the world by God, and the redemption of the world and men by God in Christ. From that starting point, Athanasius made three main points.³¹

1. Immutability.

The problem with incarnational Sonship is that it threatens the immutability of the Father. If God was not a Father until Jesus became a Son, then God changed into a Father at the incarnation. However, if God is immutable, and thus always a Father, then it follows that the Son Himself must be eternally God, so that God was eternally a Father.³²

2. Soteriology

Athanasius also made a soteriological argument. It was undisputed that Jesus Christ was the center of God's redemptive plan. Athanasius used this as a basis to argue for Jesus' deity. Only God can undo sin and restore man to God. If Jesus Christ was not God and human, He could not bring the two together.³³ Pelikan writes,

³⁰Samuel J. Mikolaski, "Athanasius," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 81.

³¹Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 167.

³²Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 168.

³³Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 169-70.

The faith confessed at Nicea, both in its own original formulation and in its interpretation by its defenders, was a cosmological confession and a soteriological confession simultaneously. Underlying it was the conviction that only he who had created the universe could save man, and that to do either or both of these he himself had to be divine and not a creature.³⁴

³⁴Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 203.

3. Revelational

Athanasius' final argument was revelational. Only God can reveal God; a creature cannot reveal its Creator. Thus, if Jesus Christ is not God in human flesh, God is not revealed in Him.³⁵

Athanasius' powerful arguments did not equate into ecclesiastical and political acceptance. He was sent into exile five different times in his life. During one of those exiles, while he was in exile in Trier, Arius died, only one day before he was to be restored as a Christian presbyter in a special ceremony in Constantinople. His death in 336 came only months before Constantine himself died in 337.³⁶ But by this time, Arius was no longer a prominent player in the drama, as other men such as Eusebius of Nicodemia had taken the lead. Chadwick writes,

[Arius] had been left out in the cold, almost forgotten. At length, sick and old, he had pleaded with Constantine to allow him the benefit of the sacraments before he died, sadly complaining that his powerful friends like Eusebius of Nicodemia could no longer be bothered to do anything for him. It was charitably arranged that he should be formally restored at Constantinople. . . . He had long been discarded by both sides, and, as he himself painfully realized, he had become negligible.³⁷

Constantine was replaced by his son Constantius, who allowed Athanasius to return to his see in Alexandria. However, the peace was only temporary. Constantius hoped to restore unity to the church, and believed that the term *homoousios* should be replaced with *homoiousios*, which represented the difference between the Son having the

³⁵Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 171.

³⁶Ibid., 164.

³⁷Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 136.

same substance as the Father and His having only a *similar* substance to the Father. This change would have prevented a Sabellian interpretation of the Nicene Creed, but left open the door to a subordinationist interpretation by implying that the Son is not God in the same way that the Father is God.³⁸

Athanasius was in no mood for compromise, and he condemned the *homoiousios* position as rank heresy. He believed that salvation itself was at stake, because an intermediate creature could not join man to God. If the Savior was not God, there was no reconciliation with God. As Olson writes,

The entire gospel hinged on Jesus Christ being truly God as well as truly human. . . . [The] difference between *homoousios* and *homoiousios* is the difference between the divine and the creaturely. One says that the Son *is* God. The other says that the Son *is like* God. If a being is God, then saying he is like God is entirely wrong. If a being is only *like* God, then declaring him to *be* God would be heresy if not blasphemy. Athanasius saw this and resisted the seductive compromise.³⁹

In his effort to defend the true deity of Jesus, Athanasius drifted toward a form of Apollinarianism. Drawing upon some of the thinking of Origen, he frequently referred to the incarnation as the Logos' *use* of a human body. Such a position may have unguardedly disconnected the deity and humanity of Christ from one another. Only in subsequent writers would this issue be clarified.⁴⁰

Olson summarizes Athanasius' contribution as follows:

If the Son of God who became Jesus Christ is not truly God as the Father is God, we humans are not being saved by him and our connection with him, *and* he does

³⁸Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 164.

³⁹Ibid., 164-65.

⁴⁰Ibid., 168-69.

not truly reveal the Father to us. Furthermore, the Father has undergone change in begetting a Son, which is improper to the [immutable] divine nature. All this adds up to the charge that Arianism and semi-Arianism constitute “another gospel” and not authentic Christianity at all. Christianity revolves around Jesus Christ as the real incarnation of God in human nature.⁴¹

Athanasius proved himself to be a true hero of the faith, even though he did not formulate a final doctrine of the Trinity that included the role of the Holy Spirit and the nature of the three persons and their unity in the Godhead. He did, however, lay the foundation that others would build upon.⁴²

V. CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS

The Council at Nicea was a clear statement against Arianism, but it did not decisively end the controversy. The matter continued to flare up over ensuing decades, and would not be put to final rest until the Council of Constantinople in 381. That council turned out to be the second ecumenical council of the Christian Church (Nicea being the first), and it is noted for putting the finishing touches on the Nicene statement of the Trinity.

The success of the Council of Constantinople can be attributed in main part to three men known as the Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. They are known as the Cappadocian fathers because they all

⁴¹Ibid., 171.

⁴²Ibid., 172.

came from Cappadocia in central Asia (modern day Turkey) and held church office there. They were close friends of Athanasius and built on his thinking.⁴³

When Athanasius died in 373, an Arian emperor ruled and various forms of Arianism were influential among the church bishops. However, the Arians had

⁴³Ibid., 174.

difficulty developing a creed that could win final acceptance. During this process, the Cappadocian fathers defended Trinitarian doctrine and systematized the faith with as much logical clarity as possible. Their lasting contribution came in their success in interpreting the term *homoousios* in a way that maintained the full deity of the Son and at the same time his eternal distinction from the Father. The central point was this: God is one *ousia* and three *hypostases*.⁴⁴ Those terms will be explained below, but those words became the core of trinitarian belief from 381 onward.

The first Cappadocian father to be considered here is Basil of Caesarea. He practiced an extreme form of ascetism and founded his own monastery. He wrote extensively on the person of the Holy Spirit, and he greatly influenced the eventual revision of the Nicene Creed to include more about the third person of the Trinity.⁴⁵

Another Cappadocian father was Gregory of Nazianzus. He was the same age as Basil and the two were best friends. He developed a reputation as a great defender of trinitarian orthodoxy. He preached many sermons in Constantinople that eventually were preserved in his writings *Theological Orations*. Through his ministry, he paved the way for the coming Council of Constantinople.⁴⁶

The greatest of the three Cappadocian fathers is considered to be Gregory of Nyssa. He was Basil's brother, and although he was not as well educated as Basil or Gregory of Nazianzus, he participated in the Council of Constantinople, delivered its

⁴⁴Ibid., 175.

⁴⁵Ibid., 176-77.

⁴⁶Ibid., 177-78.

opening address, and helped guide it to its conclusion in favor of Nicene trinitarian orthodoxy. He drew upon Greek philosophy to explain God's nature. He taught that the essence, or *ousia*, of God was the universal that held the three persons of the Trinity together. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a common *ousia* while remaining distinct but not separate persons.⁴⁷

Basil contributed to the discussion as he refuted a group known as the Eunomians. This group argued that the Son could not be equal to the Father, because the Son is begotten. This makes him less than the Father because the Father's very essence is "unbegottenness." Since the Son is begotten, He cannot be *homoousios* with the Father.

Basil responded to this position with four main arguments.⁴⁸ First, he attacked the Eunomians for claiming to have grasped God's essence as "unbegottenness." The transcendence of God meant that no human could grasp his essence. Second, Basil denied the Eunomian analogy between divine and human begetting. Simply because human begetting occurs in time and results in a kind of inferiority to the one begotten does not mean that the analogy applies with the begottenness of an eternal being outside of time. Third, Basil showed that begottenness could be eternal by comparing God's begottenness with the sun's rays. The rays of the sun are as old as the sun itself, and the sun never existed without its rays. Finally, Basil argued that if the Son of God was merely a creature, then humanity is still without a true revelation of God.

⁴⁷Ibid., 180.

⁴⁸These four points are drawn from Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, 180-82.

Basil also argued against a group known as the pneumatomachians, or Macedonians. They denied the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. Basil refuted this error by pointing to the Great Commission at the end of Matthew's gospel, where He commanded baptism "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). He further supported his argument by showing that even the pneumatomachians worshipped the Holy Spirit in their liturgies, which would be blasphemous if the Holy Spirit were not God.⁴⁹

Basil then defended the idea that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could all be equally God and yet only one God. He drew a distinction between the essence (*ousia*) of God and the *hypostasis* of the three. *Hypostasis* is analogous to the English idea of "person," although it does not convey the idea of individualism as much as the English term does. God has one essence, yet there are three "persons" that share that essence. Basil compared the Trinity, imperfectly, to the concept of human nature. There is one human nature, yet three individual men all share that one nature while still being distinct in their identities. To fully understand Basil's position, it is important to realize that *hypostasis* includes not only a sense of individuality but at the same time a sense of community as well. Thus, there is a sharing of essence even within the idea of *hypostasis*.⁵⁰

The two Gregorians made their own contributions to the debate as well. Gregory of Nazianzus addressed the relations between the three persons. While he confessed that

⁴⁹Ibid., 182.

⁵⁰Ibid., 184-86.

the relationships were a mystery, he spoke of the Father's unique identity within the one divine being is his relatedness to Son and Holy Spirit as their begetter and source of procession. the Son is the Father's express image and agent, and the Holy Spirit is the one who eternally proceeds from the Father as His wisdom and power.⁵¹

Gregory of Nazianzus is also known for opposing Apollinarianism, which taught that the Jesus was fully divine, but the eternal Logos took the place of a rational soul in him. Thus, Jesus had a human body and life force, but his mind and consciousness were divine. This creates the impression of an omniscient being taking over a creaturely body and using it as a vehicle without actually becoming human and experiencing human limitations and sufferings.⁵²

Gregory of Nazianzus opposed this teaching, arguing that if Jesus humanity was not a whole human nature--body, soul, and spirit--then he could not truly redeem humanity. If a part of human nature was not assumed by Christ, then to that extent humanity was not fully redeemed. Full redemption meant full humanity for the Savior.⁵³

Gregory of Nyssa made his contribution by explaining why the three persons of the Godhead did not lead to a conclusion of tritheism. He showed that the three persons (*hypostases*) must always act together in all things. they never act separately or

⁵¹Ibid., 187.

⁵²Ibid., 188-89.

⁵³Ibid., 189-90.

independently. All operation is common to all three persons of the Godhead. That is what makes them not three Gods in spite of the fact that they are three distinct persons.⁵⁴

The Council of Constantinople was the culmination of the great work of the Cappadocian Fathers and Athanasius. It expanded the Nicene Creed in defending the deity of the Holy Spirit and clarifying the relations between the members of the Trinity. After this Council, there were no further Arian confessions that sought to challenge the orthodox position. The Trinitarians had won the day and established Christian orthodoxy in a way that prevails even to this day.⁵⁵

Jaroslav Pelikan writes,

The climax of the doctrinal development of the early church was the dogma of the Trinity. In this dogma the church vindicated the monotheism that had been at issue its conflicts with Judaism, and it came to terms with the concept of the Logos, over which it had disputed with paganism. The bond between creation and redemption . . . was given creedal status in the confession concerning the relation of the Father to the Son; and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit . . . was incorporated into this confession. . . . [In] this dogma Christianity drew the line that separated it from pagan supernaturalism and it reaffirmed its character as a religion of salvation.⁵⁶

⁵⁴Ibid., 192-93.

⁵⁵Modern day Arians such as the Jehovah's Witnesses are no exception to this statement. Within general Christendom, there is no dispute about Trinitarian orthodoxy.

⁵⁶Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 173.

APPENDIX A

A CHRONOLOGY OF THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY⁵⁷

311 CE: Egypt - Arius is ordained a presbyter by bishop Achillas of Alexandria, successor to Peter, who was martyred in 311.

311 CE: Palestine - sometime between 311 and 318, Eusebius of Caesarea becomes bishop of Caesarea.

312 CE: Egypt - Alexander becomes bishop of Alexandria.

317 CE: Asia Minor - Eusebius, a follower of Lucian of Antioch, becomes bishop of Nicomedia.

318 or 319 CE: Asia Minor - Arius accuses Alexander of Sabellianism. Arius sets forth adoptionist views following the theology of Lucian of Antioch. In response, Alexander of Alexandria convenes a council that condemns and exiles Arius. Arius then writes his *Letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia* in which he complains of being unjustly persecuted. The letter mentions that Eusebius of Caesarea and many other Eastern bishops have also been condemned. Arius then travels to Nicomedia at the invitation of Eusebius, after which Eusebius advances a letter writing campaign to the bishops of Asia Minor in support of Arius. Eusebius' rigorous support of Arius transforms what might have remained an Egyptian dispute into an ecumenical controversy.

Sometime during the same year, Alexander writes his *Catholic Epistle* in which he informs his fellow bishops that Eusebius of Nicomedia is also spreading the Arian heresy. He warns his colleagues not to follow Eusebius, lest they too fall into apostasy.

320 CE: Asia Minor - Arius writes his *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria* in which he presents another summary of his views. Arius also writes *The Banquet* (or the *Thalia*), in an attempt to popularize his doctrine. Only fragments of this work survive, mostly in quotations from Athanasius.

324 CE: Egypt - Alexander writes a *Letter to Alexander of Constantinople* that is also sent to bishops outside of Egypt. He warns his fellow bishops of the Arian danger. He names Lucian of Antioch and Paul of Samosata as the true originators of this heresy.

⁵⁷Adapted from Anthony F. Beavers and Robert Rivers, "A Chronology of the Arian Controversy," 1996, <http://cedar.evansville.edu/~ecoleweb/arians/arianchr.htm> (18 Apr. 2001).

Early 325 CE: Palestine - Hosius, a representative of the Emperor Constantine, presides over an anti-Arian council in Antioch. This council condemns Eusebius of Caesarea for being an Arian sympathizer and formulates a doctrinal creed in favor of Alexander's theology.

325 CE: Asia Minor - Constantine convenes the Council of Nicea to develop a statement of faith that can unify the Church. The *Nicene Creed* is written, declaring that the Father and the Son are of the same substance (*homoousios*), a decidedly anti-Arian stand. Arius is exiled to Illyria.

327 CE: ??? - Arius and Euzoius write a *Letter to the Emperor Constantine*. It defends Arius' orthodoxy and petitions for his restoration to the Church.

328 CE: ??? - Constantine recalls Arius from exile in Illyria.

328 CE: Egypt - Alexander of Alexandria dies on April 17th. Athanasius becomes bishop of Alexandria on June 8th.

335 CE: Palestine - The *Pronouncement of the Synod of Tyre and Jerusalem* restores Arius and his friends into communion with the Church. Both Eusebius of Caesarea and Eusebius of Nicomedia have leading roles in this synod. Athanasius is deposed and so goes to complain to the Emperor Constantine, whom he encounters mid-road. After Athanasius persists in requesting an audience, Constantine agrees to hear his complaint. The Emperor then writes his *Letter to the Bishops Assembled at Tyre* requesting that they meet in his presence to discuss the matter. Some of the bishops flee home, but Eusebius of Nicomedia and his consort go to meet with Constantine.

336 CE: ???- The Emperor agrees with the findings of the council concerning Athanasius, and so in February, he exiles him to Trier.

336 CE: ??? - Marcellus, bishop of Ancyra, is deposed by a council at Constantine. He had written a treatise in 335 defending the Nicene theology, but was considered a Sabellian by his opponents.

336 CE: Greece - Arius dies suddenly in Constantinople on the evening before a formal ceremony was to restore him to his presbyterial rank.

337 CE: Asia Minor - Eusebius of Nicomedia baptizes Constantine, who dies on May 22nd in Nicomedia. Eusebius of Caesarea delivers the eulogy. The Roman Empire is divided among Constantine's three sons: Constantius in the east, Constantine II in Britain and Gaul, and Constans in Italy and Illyricum. On June 17th, Constantius orders the return of Athanasius to Alexandria.

338 CE: Greece- Eusebius of Nicomedia is installed as bishop of Constantinople.

338 CE: Palestine - A council at Antioch deposes Athanasius and orders a second exile.

339 CE: Egypt - Athanasius flees Alexandria in anticipation of being expelled. Gregory, a man from Cappadocia (not Gregory of Nazianzus or Gregory of Nyssa), takes over as bishop of Athanasius' see.

339 CE: ???- Eusebius of Caesarea dies late in 339 or early in 340.

340 CE: ??? - After the death of Constantine II, Constans becomes sole ruler of the west. He supports the Nicenes and Athanasius, while his brother in the east, Constantius opposes Nicene theology. Also, Julius I, bishop of Rome, receives Marcellus and Athanasius into communion with the Roman church.

341 CE: Palestine - Two Arian councils are held in Antioch, the first at the dedication of a church begun under the direction of Constantine. Of the ninety-seven bishops present, none are from the West and most are hostile to Athanasius. The *First, Second* (also known as the *Creed of the Dedication*) and *Third* Arian Confessions are written, thereby beginning the attempt to produce a formal doctrine of faith to oppose the Nicene Creed. The *Fourth Arian Confession* is written at the second council of the year. The bishops deny being Arians, and issue the famous statement, "How, being bishops, should we follow a priest?" (referring to Arius).

341 CE: ??? - Eusebius of Nicomedia dies in the winter of 341-342.

342 CE or 343 CE: ??? - Constans convenes a council in Sardica in an attempt to restore unity to the Church. The council is a fiasco. The western and eastern bishops separate and denounce each other. The West releases a statement against Arianism; the Eastern bishops justify the deposition of Athanasius and Marcellus and condemn Julius I. They also issue a creed that has additional anathemas directed at Marcellus.

344 CE: ??? - Another Arian council is held in Antioch, which writes the *Fifth Arian Confession (or Macrostich)*. It is notably longer than the confessions written at Antioch in 341. The *Macrostich* is the Eastern creed of Sardica plus eight paragraphs addressed to the western bishops.

345 CE: Italy - A council is held in Milan. Western bishops read the *Macrostich*.

345 CE: Egypt - Gregory, bishop of Alexandria, dies in June.

346 CE: Egypt - Athanasius is restored to the Alexandrian see.

347 CE: Italy - A second council is held in Milan.

350 CE: ??? - The rebel Magnentius murders Constans.

351 CE: ??? - A second council is convened at Sirmium under the supervision of Basil of Ancyra. The *Sixth Arian (or First Sirmium) Confession* is written, which seems to be an expanded revision of the Fourth Arian Confession written in 341.

353 CE: ??? - A council is held at Arles during autumn that is directed against Athanasius.

353 CE: ??? - Constantius defeats Magnentius and becomes sole ruler of the empire; with Constans, who supported the Nicenes, gone, he works to eliminate the Nicene theology.

355 CE: Italy - A council is held in Milan. Athanasius is again condemned.

356 CE: Egypt - Athanasius is deposed on February 8th, beginning his third exile.

356 CE: Egypt - George is named bishop of Alexandria. Aetius, who claims that the Son is unlike (anomoios, hence the title Anomoeism) and cannot be of the same or similar essence as the Father, is an influence on George.

357 CE: Palestine - Eudoxius, another theologian influenced by Aetius, becomes bishop of Antioch.

357 CE: ??? - The third Council of Sirmium is convened during the summer. The *Seventh Arian (or Second Sirmium) Confession* (also called “The blasphemy”) is written. The Western bishops move closer to a compromise with the Arians. Both *homoousios* (of one essence) and *homoiousios* (alike in essence) are avoided as unbiblical, and it is agreed that the Father is greater than his subordinate son.

358 CE: ??? - A council held at Ancyra, under the leadership of its bishop, Basil, releases a statement using the term *homoiousios*. The bishops attending are labeled “Semi-Arian.”

359 CE: ??? - The fourth council of Sirmium is convened on May 22nd. *The Fourth Sirmium Confession* proposes a compromise formula, which is not technical, and is designed to please everybody (though it is too watered-down to do any good).

359 CE: ??? - Constantius summons two councils to finish what Nicea had started, that is, to develop a unifying creed for Christianity. The Synod of Ariminum (Rimini) is held in the West during May and is attended by more than 400 bishops. The Synod of Selucia is held in the East during October (or December?) and is attended by about 160 bishops. Here, the *Ninth Arian Confession* is written, which affirms that Christ is “like the Father” while, at the same time, anathematizing the Anomoeans. In the end, both councils agree to this semi-Arian statement of faith, even though it does not specify how the Son is like

the Father. However, the agreement seems to have been coerced at Ariminum, which may have otherwise ended in favor of Nicea.

360 CE: Greece - A council is convened in January to review the conclusions of Ariminum and Seleucia from the year before. The *Tenth Arian Confession* is written. Commenting on this council from a perspective of twenty years later, Jerome writes that the world “awoke with a groan to find itself Arian.”

360 CE: ??? - Constantius’ armies are facing difficulties and meeting defeat. The Gallic forces declare Julian, Constantius’ cousin, emperor, rather than giving their support to the failing Constantius.

361 CE: ??? - Constantius dies on November 3rd after naming Julian as emperor.

361 CE: Palestine - A council is held in Antioch during the installation of Euzonius as bishop of Antioch. (Euzonius had been excommunicated with Arius in 318 and 325 and restored with him in 335.) During this council, the *Eleventh Arian Confession* is written. This creed is strongly Anomoean, leading Athanasius to remark that the Arians have reverted back to the first doctrines framed by Arius.

373 CE: ??? - Athanasius dies on May 3rd.

381 CE: Greece - The First Council (Second Ecumenical) of Constantinople is convened to review the controversy since Nicea. Under the direction of Gregory of Nazianzus, the Nicene Creed is re-evaluated and accepted with the addition of clauses on the Holy Spirit and other matters.

383 CE: ??? - The findings of the First Council of Constantinople are reviewed. 383 can be identified as the year that the Arian controversy ended, provided that we take this to mean that the orthodox Church finally accepted a non-Arian statement of faith that went uncontested by further Arian confessions. Though Arians continue to exist long after this year, the theological agenda of the Church turns from the Trinity and headlong into another controversy, the Christological Controversy of the fifth century.

APPENDIX B

A Brief Biblical Basis for the Trinity

Evangelical Christians adhere to a doctrine of God called the "Trinity", which is so foundational to Christian teaching that it could fairly be called a litmus test of orthodoxy. Failure to affirm the Trinity is failure to affirm the truth. This essay will introduce this important Christian doctrine. The existence of God and the accuracy of the biblical data are assumed.

Any discussion of the Trinity should be prefaced by a recognition that God's greatness is unsearchable (Ps. 145:3). Man should therefore expect to encounter matters beyond his full understanding when he approaches God. Such is the case with the Trinity, which eludes total comprehension without being contrary to reason. It is a mystery known only by biblical revelation.

With this in mind, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is this: There is only one true God, who has revealed Himself as having only one essence, and who eternally exists in three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three persons are each fully God in every respect, existing co-equally, co-substantially, and co-eternally within the one divine essence. Each deserves worship and obedience. Yet these three persons are only one God.

Thus stated, there are three key elements to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. The first element is the oneness of God. The second is the full deity of each of the three distinct persons - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The third element is that these three

persons are one God, not three. These three elements will be examined separately. The supporting biblical citations below are illustrative, not comprehensive.

The biblical oneness of God is found in Moses' statement, "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut 6:4). Elsewhere, God states that there was no God before Him and that there will be no God after Him. He is the First and the Last. There is no God besides Him (Is. 43:10, 44:6). Clearly, the God of the Bible is an exclusive, unique God, against whom no other gods could possibly be raised. This one God has an essence which none can rival.

This biblical oneness of God must be fully retained as the next element of Trinitarian doctrine is considered, the deity of the three separate persons in the Godhead. While several lines of biblical evidence could be considered, only statements specifically attributing deity to the three individual persons will be considered. So, the Father is called God in John 6:27. The Son is addressed as God in Hebrews 1:8. Finally, the Holy Spirit is referred to interchangeably with God in Acts 5:3,4. Thus, while there is only one God, there are three persons in the Bible who are called God without qualification.

The third element of Trinitarian doctrine is that these three persons are only one God, as shown in those passages of Scripture that join the oneness of God with the three persons of the Godhead. For example, Jesus commanded His disciples in Matthew 28:19 to baptize in the name (singular name) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (plural persons). Here, each person of the Trinity is considered equally with the other persons under the one name, without compromise of the individual identities.

The distinction between the three persons has a functional dimension within the Godhead. One person of the Trinity may be subordinate for a time to another so that a particular task can be accomplished. For example, the Son submitted Himself to the Father when the Father sent Him from heaven to be the Savior of the world (cf. 1 John 4:14). In the present age, the Holy Spirit conducts a ministry that, among other things, glorifies the Son (John 16:14). However, these differences in function do not entail a difference in essence. Each person is fully God, having a particular work to fulfill, without violating the one essence that constitutes God.

Trinitarian doctrine must be distinguished from a tritheism that would maintain that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct gods having a unity in purpose and endeavor. While Trinitarians would affirm a unity in purpose and endeavor, they would also affirm a oneness of essence among the three persons which tritheists would deny.

Trinitarian doctrine must also be distinguished from a modalism that would maintain that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only different manifestations at different times of the one true God. Trinitarian teaching differs by holding that all three persons exist simultaneously from all eternity. This can be illustrated from the account of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16-17.

Admittedly, the term "Trinity" is not found in the Bible itself. However, the doctrine that the term represents is an accurate synthesis of all the biblical statements about the unity and personhood of God. The Trinity goes beyond reason, but is not contrary to reason. While "three persons, one person" would be a contradiction, "three

persons, one God" is not a contradiction. Thus, the Trinity is a mystery to be affirmed and believed, for it is the dividing line between truth and error.

APPENDIX C

The Deity of Christ as Seen through the Gospel of John

The true nature of Jesus Christ was at the heart of the Arian controversy. Confusion on this point continues to drive many cults today, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and The Way International, though the latter has slipped in prominence. The purpose of this appendix is to provide a selective biblical defense of the deity of Christ taken from seven key passages of the Gospel of John.

One writer has framed the discussion of Jesus' deity as follows:

When the question is raised about who Jesus Christ really was, the debate continues to rage on as it has for nearly 2,000 years. Cults and skeptics offer various explanations. Some say He was a religious fanatic, a fake, or a political revolutionary. Others say He was just a good teacher. Still others take an entirely different approach, saying He was the highest form of mankind, possessing a spark of divinity that He fanned into flame--a spark, they claim, we all have but seldom fan. Then there are those who believe Him to be one of many gods, a created being, a high angel, or a prophet. The common thread of those countless human explanations is that they make Jesus less than God.⁵⁸

In the swirling discussions, men should ask a simple question. "What does the Bible say?" From the review of the Arian controversy in the main text of this paper, and from the continued proliferation of opinions today, the uninitiated might get the impression that the Bible is not clear on the identity of Christ. Yet, a few moments with the Gospel of John will dispel those notions. What follows is a defense of the deity of Christ taken exclusively from the Gospel of John. While other lines of biblical evidence

⁵⁸John MacArthur, *First Love* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1995), 15-16.

can be gathered in support of the deity of Christ,⁵⁹ the present effort provides a simple survey through a key book of the Bible to establish this critical theological point.

The Bible Calls Jesus God

The apostle opens his Gospel with the simple words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The word “was” is an imperfect tense in the original language, and refers to the Word’s continual existence that was in progress at the beginning point of time. This Word was “with God,” therefore distinct from God and in personal relationship with Him, yet at the same time this Word “was God,” speaking to the Word’s inherent quality. The Deity that belongs to God also belongs fully to the Word.

After John establish the Deity of the Word, He proceeds to identify the Word with greater particularity. In 1:14, he says, “The Word became flesh.” The Word who was God took on humanity without any loss of His Deity. God made Himself known in a real historical man--the one identified in the remainder of John’s Gospel as Jesus Christ. This is affirmed in Colossians 2:9, where speaking of Christ it says, “In Him all the fulness of Deity dwells in bodily form.”

⁵⁹In addition to the treatments found in standard systematic theologies, see also the excellent article by Phillip R. Johnson, “Who Is Jehovah? Who Is Jesus?” 1996, <http://www.gty.org/~phil/articles/deity.htm> (6 May 2001). Johnson organizes his material around eight headings: (1) The Old Testament predicted a divine Savior; (2) Jesus is called Jehovah; (3) Titles reserved for Jehovah are applied to Christ; (4) Jesus possesses all the incommunicable attributes of God; (5) Jesus does the works of God; (6) Jesus receives worship; (7) The Bible says Jesus is God; and (8) Jesus Himself claims to be God.

Jesus Does the Works of God

A second line of evidence in support of the Deity of Christ is found in the works He does. In John 5:16-24, the Jews were disputing with Jesus because He healed a man on the Sabbath in violation of the Jews' Sabbath regulations. Jesus justified His right to do such works by appealing to the actions of God the Father (5:17). He said, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working,"--thus putting Himself on a level with God.

The Jews who were there understood the significance of Jesus claim. They sought to kill Him because He "was calling God His own Father, *making Himself equal with God*" (5:18; emphasis added). Importantly, Jesus did not seek to correct any supposed misunderstanding on the part of the Jews. Instead, He pressed His equality with greater fervor in the verses that follow:

Whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner (5:19).

Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom He wishes (5:21).

For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son (5:22).

After Jesus equated His works with those of God the Father, He pressed His point all the more, by claiming that all should honored Him "even as they honor the Father" (5:23). For a man to claim that he was entitled to the same honor as the uncreated Father of the Universe would be unspeakably blasphemous--unless that man was God. Only One who is equal to the Father can do everything the father does. Jesus is God.

Jesus Has the Name of God

A third line of evidence in the Gospel of John that supports the Deity of Christ is found in Jesus' claim to the divine name. To appreciate the significance of this point, one must remember the account in Exodus 3, where Moses was speaking with God. He asked God for His name so that Moses could defend his own assertion of leadership over the people of Israel. Moses asked God,

Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I shall say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them? (Ex 3:13)

Exodus 3:14 gives God's reply:

"I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

The phrase "I AM" identified God in a unique way. The Jews were familiar with this name, of course. Thus, it is significant that when they asked Jesus, "Whom do you make yourself out to be?" (John 8:53), that Jesus answer included the statement, "Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." Jesus claimed the name of God, and thus asserted full equality to the God of the Old Testament. Jesus' appropriation of the divine name to Himself is a staggering assertion of His Deity.

Jesus Has Unity with God the Father

A fourth line of evidence supporting the Deity of Christ in the Gospel of John is found in His claim of unity with God the Father. In John 10:22-33, the Jews again questioned Jesus about His identity, saying "How long will you keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly" (10:24). Jesus proceeded to say that He gives eternal

life to His sheep so that they will never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of His hand (10:26-28). He then attributes that same preserving action to the Father (10:29), and concludes with the astonishing statement, “I and the Father are one” (10:30).⁶⁰ Jesus expressed a unity of will, power, and action with the divine nature, so for Jesus to be one with the Father is a clear assertion of Deity.

The Jews who were with Jesus at the time certainly understood the claim He was making. They picked up stones to stone him, and said, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because you, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (10:31-33). Jesus’ statement of union with the Father points irrefutably to that very conclusion that the Jews had reached.

Jesus Expresses the Character of God

As John’s Gospel unfolds, the apostle begins to describe the earthly departure of Jesus. In John 14:1-3, Jesus comforts His disciples about their soon separation by assuring them that He would prepare a place for them and then come again to receive them to Himself. Despite His words, the disciples were still uncertain about the future. Thomas said, “Lord we do not know where You are going, how do we know the way?” (14:5). After Jesus points to Himself as the Way (14:6), Philip asks to see the Father (14:8).

Jesus’ response to Philip is yet another indication of His Deity. He says,

Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the father; how do you say, ‘Show us the Father?’ (John 14:9).

⁶⁰“One” is in the neuter gender, showing a divine unity or essence.

Such a claim can only be true if Jesus Himself is God and has a character that is exactly like God's. Jesus' words and works are the words and works of the Father abiding in Him (14:9-10), and demonstrate that the character of Christ is exactly like God's character. Only One with the uncreated essence of Deity could express the essence of the uncreated Father. To know Jesus is to know God, because Jesus is God.

Jesus Possesses God's Glory

A sixth evidence in support of the Deity of Christ from John's Gospel comes from Jesus' High Priestly Prayer in chapter 17. Jesus, in anticipation of His death, prays to the Father as the appointed hour drew near. In this prayer, Jesus said that eternal life was to "know Thee, the only true God, *and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent*" (17:3; emphasis added). The Father and Jesus are equal possessors of, and sources of, eternal life. No creature could say such a thing.

Jesus' prayer further reinforces that conclusion, when He petitions the Father, "And now, glorify Thou Me together with Thyself, Father, *with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was*" (17:5). Viewed against the backdrop of the Old Testament, Jesus words are a profound assertion of His Deity. In Isaiah 42:8, God said, "I will not give My glory to another." Yet Jesus says that He shared God's glory with Him before the world began. The only one who could share God's glory, particularly in the background of Old Testament teaching, is God Himself. Jesus is God.

Jesus Receives Divine Worship

The final principle in support of Jesus' Deity in this brief survey is found in the post-resurrection appearance of Christ in John 20:24-29. Jesus had already appeared to the disciples earlier, but Thomas had not been with them at that time. Ever the pessimist, Thomas refuses to believe the disciples' account of having seen the risen Lord. He states emphatically, "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I *will not* believe" (20:25).⁶¹

Eight days later, Jesus came to Thomas and showed Him His wounds, and called on him to "be not unbelieving, but believing" (20:27). Thomas' response was one of worship, "My Lord and my God" (20:28). With these titles, Thomas gives worship to Jesus as God. Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for blasphemy, but instead affirmed his confession and said that those who did not see Him and still believed would be blessed (20:29). By receiving these titles, Jesus acknowledged the truth of what Thomas had said. He is Lord and God.

Thus it is seen throughout the Gospel of John that Jesus is clearly God. His works, His name, and His glory all point to Him as full and unqualified Deity. Thus, the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, to which this paper has been devoted, was not the invention of fourth century theologians without a biblical basis. Instead, it was the necessary consequence of the Scripture's teaching about Jesus Christ.

⁶¹The italics reflect the emphatic double negative in the Greek text.

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