



## **The Arian Crisis and the Debate about the Nature and Authority of the Son**

- **Background: Justin Martyr, Origen and Early Logos Theology**
- **Arius and the Early Arian Crisis**
- **Athanasius**

### **Prayer Before Studying Theology:**

Almighty Father, whose blessed Son was revealed so that he might destroy the works of the devil and make us the children of God and heirs of eternal life: grant that having this hope we may purify ourselves as he is pure; that when he shall appear again with power and great glory, we may be made like him in his eternal and glorious kingdom, where with you, Father and with the Holy Spirit, he lives and reigns, one God, for evermore. Amen.

--Book of Common Prayer, Epiphany 6

Last week, we looked at Jesus being the unique mediator between God and humanity,

- Being like God and
  - performing various functions only God could perform
  - being
    - given various titles that could only be given to God in the OT and
    - qualitatively different from the angels

### **Background: Justin Martyr, Origen and Early Logos Theology**

- God's Son/Logos as the intermediate principle that is the means by which God normally acts in the world.

Logos (which may mean nothing more than Word in the prologue to John's Gospel) is increasingly understood in terms of the divine Reason by which the world was ordered and which makes knowledge of God possible (even, to a limited extent, for thoughtful non-Christians).

- This idea comes from popular Stoicism and neatly served the purposes of early Christian apologetic, since it provided an answer to the questions,
  - "Where was God before Jesus came?" and
  - "How can God hold all people responsible for responding to this message which has only recently arrived and is not known to all?"
- Furthermore, it allows the Word to exist alongside the Father indefinitely, since surely God was never without his Reason?

### Questions:

(1) If one makes the Logos both the mediator between God and the world and the way by which creatures come to know God, then what role is left for the Spirit?

(2) Is the claim that the Word is Reason that issues from God and makes God known to all rational beings wholly compatible with the biblical narratives?

- Admittedly, it does provide an answer as to where the goodness and correct knowledge among pagans comes from, which helps to answer the question about how God could hold them accountable.
- Don't angels also play this (or a similar) role (cf. Hall, 55).

Note that the Word/Reason's procession from God can be included within the Gnostic series of emanations but is distinguished from the latter; cf. Basilides (Stevenson, NE, p. 76); Valentinus (Stevenson, NE, pp. 79-80)

### **Tertullian**

- The idea of οἰκονομία (the economy of salvation)=the divine administration of the world
  - i.e. God acts over time in a variety of different ways which reflect the different modes in which God governs and redeems the created world.
  - Thus God
    - acts in one way when he reveals himself in the Old Testament and
    - in another way when he reveals himself in Jesus Christ in the New Testament.
  - There is therefore one God who is a single being but reveals himself in three different modes--Father, Son and Holy Spirit--when he acts in the world and upon human beings.

Note that nothing here is said about *what God is* or is not like when he is by himself; the economy may only have to do with *how God acts* toward the world, not what he is like in himself.)

### Organic Metaphors Used to Show Continuity Through Different Modes of Existence

- the spring and the water that issues forth from it
- the sun and the ray of light that proceeds from it (Stevenson, NE, p. 161)

In these analogies

- *continuity* and
- *unity*

are preserved in spite of

- *extension* and
- *differentiation*.

In these models, the source indwells the extension and is undiminished in extending itself (cf. Tertullian in NE 161 and Origen on eternal generation in NE, 204).

### A Note on Terminology (Substance):

*Substantia* ("substance", "being") can refer either to

- a clearly defined class (e.g. "human being") or
- an individual member of a particular class which actually exists (e.g. "Jesus Christ"=one actually existing human being, but other human beings besides him certainly exist). In the case of "god," there is only one member of this class who actually exists, i.e. "God."

## Monarchianism

### The notion of the "economy"

- =God acts toward us to do things for us, which may or may not tell us much about what he is really like himself

can be interpreted in two different ways that each deny real distinctions within God's inner life:

(1) Jesus was a mere man adopted by God (**adoptionism**) and subsequently endowed with an impersonal power (=Word) that issued from God but was not distinct from God (=dynamic monarchianism).

Here the Word has an existence wholly independent from the man that the Word assumed.

(2) The Father, Son and Spirit are merely **temporary** modes by which God elects to act in the world and reveal himself to the world. These modes (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), however, do not reflect real and permanent distinctions of persons within the divine life (**modalism/ modalist monarchianism/Sabellianism**)

- organic metaphors (sun->light ; spring->stream) interpreted as an impersonal extension of power
- Intended to refute the idea that there are three wholly separate entities that lay claim to the divine life (three gods=tritheism)

(a) Father and Son are one person and one God

- "Christ was the Father himself"
- "the Word himself is Son, and himself is Father"
- the Son "did not pre-exist in an individual existence of his own before his coming to reside among men, nor had he a divinity of his own, but only the Father's dwelling in him."

(b) The Son begins to be "Son" at a particular time, before which the Son was not (i.e. the Son did not exist or rather God did not exist as the Son)

(c) In the Son, the one called "Father" suffered

- "theopaschitism" =God suffering

The idea here is to preserve the oneness of God by opposing a multiplicity of persons (*personae*), so the Word cannot have an individual existence of its own.

## Origen

Attempted to save the good ideas in Logos theology from being interpreted in unhelpful (modalist Monarchian) ways that denied any real, eternal distinctions in the divine life by saying that the Son/Word is not different from the Father or is only temporarily, not permanently, distinguishable from the Father.

What's good in Logos theology:

(1) Surely God always has what is best (every excellence in the highest degree). If having Reason (Logos) and Wisdom (Sophia) is a good thing, then surely God always had these things, never being without his Reason (Logos) and Wisdom (Sophia) else he would be ignorant and foolish!

(2) Reason (Logos) functions as a mediator in

- creating the universe and
- connecting God with his creatures

Origen: There are two further points we need to add to ensure Logos theology is understood correctly:

(3) The terms "Father" and "Son" imply each other. If being "Father" is a good thing, then surely God was not sadly lacking this good thing (title/relationship) and then later improved himself by acquiring it.

- It follows then that, although the Son derives his existence from the Father, the Son has always existed together with the Father (eternal generation).

(4) Although God does act in different ways to reveal himself in the economy of salvation, these distinctions in the way God *acts* do reflect real distinctions in the way God actually *is*.

- The Son is a permanent part of God's inner life and is not just brought into being for a short time to reveal God and effect salvation (as the modalists thought).
- The Son is dependent upon the Father as the source of his life/being (what he is) and is subordinate to the Father and does the will of the Father, but is not therefore inferior to the Father.

Origen's treatment of these issues helped to advance and stabilize the discussion

- *the way God acts reflects the way God actually is*
- this reflects eternal distinctions in God's own inner life

Origen's thought, however, also contained some tensions:

- the Son is subordinate to the Father, who alone is the source of the divine life/will and thus properly God
- the Son performs the will of the Father in creation, functioning as his instrument

These ideas can be interpreted in different ways and lead to quite different accounts of the Son's position and authority.

This is in fact what happened in the Arian controversy in the early fourth century.

**Arius**

Arius was presbyter of a church in Baukalis (a suburb of Alexandria) and was developing a reputation as a biblical expositor at a time when the church was recovering from persecution and schism.

Arius objected to the teaching of his bishop Alexander, whom Arius may have regarded as either

(a) a modalist

- i.e. Arius may have thought that Alexander allowed for no real and permanent distinctions within the divine life, so that the Son was not truly distinct from the Father in identity or

(b) a ditheist

- i.e. Arius may have thought that Alexander allowed for two separate gods, both of whom were eternal and unoriginate but had separate existences.

Arius' response:

(a) Being a Son means being begotten and this makes the Son really distinct from the Father in order (=sequence and honor) and power.

- The Son's being like us, e.g.
  - (a) being created/brought into existence out of nothing; he exists by an act of the Father's will, having a beginning--see Prov. 8:22;
  - (b) subject to certain limits, e.g. not being able to see or know the Father comprehensively;

is essential to his being able to communicate to us knowledge of God the Father and to save us (being, as Hebrews 2:10 says, the *archegos tes soterias*, the originator/leader of our salvation).

(b) Although the Father cannot create a creature as perfect as himself (due to the limits of the creature), by the will of the Father the Son is kept from choosing worse things.

- For the Arians it is the divine will (which operates by *fiat*, i.e. "let it be [so]") that overcomes the creator/creature divide and makes possible salvation.
- Contrast the Nicene party (e.g. Athanasius) where it is the full divinity of the Word, who bears the image of God, that communicates grace and makes possible salvation.

(c) Does the Son's being begotten and deriving his existence from the Father mean that the Son was made by the Father and began to exist when he was created by the will of the Father?

- Note that the focus here is on the title "Son" and not on other designations, e.g. the Logos (Reason) and Wisdom of God, which might have suggested a greater continuity of identity between the Father and the Son., since Wisdom, etc. could be conceived of as powers of God.

Arius condemned and deposed at a synod in Alexandria c. 318, affirmed by the Council of Nicaea. Constantine, by letter, appeared to censure both Alexander and Arius and to commend their reconciliation, but the council had already passed its judgment. (This meant that even if Arius could be reconciled to the church, it would be only as a layman.)

### **Council of Nicaea**

The Son of God is

- eternally begotten of the Father

- God from God
  - Light from Light
  - true God from true God
- begotten not made
- of one being (homousios = "consubstantial," "of one substance") with the Father

The Nicene party (e.g. Athanasius) tended to see the Son as image (*eikon*) as being continuous with God, whereas the Arians wanted to see him separated from God by being a product of the Father's will. The two parties argued over what "Son" meant.

### Some Terminology

οὐσία (ousia)--conventionally translated "substance" but "being" may work better in some ways if we understand this to mean "what a thing is." (I.e. this is an apple or a human being or whatever)

- To say that the Father and Son have one and the same ousia (substance/being) means that what the Father is, the Son also is.
  - The Son has the same defining qualities/attributes that the Father has and has these from the Father.
- Note that this doesn't say how the Father and the Son are different, so doesn't solve the potential problem of **modalism**, which left a variety of people (e.g. Eusebius of Caesarea) dissatisfied with the term homousios used in the creed accepted at Nicea.

πρόσωπον (prosopon) conventionally translated "person" but without the notion of "individual personality" that the term now carries.

ὑπόστασις (hypostasis) refers to the actual existence of a distinct agent with an ongoing existence.

- To say that the Son has an hypostasis distinct from that of the Father means that
  - although the Son has the same qualities/attributes as the Father,
  - he is not just what the Father is (otherwise he would be indistinguishable from the Father).
  - Although the Father and Son may have precisely the same qualities and share the same life, they are still distinct persons.
    - The two stand in different relationships to others and also have different functions.
      - The Father is the source of the divine life in a way that the Son and Spirit are not.
      - The Father will therefore be the first cause and logically prior to the Son and Spirit, though not prior to them in existence (the Son is eternally begotten from the Father and the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father).

### Fourth Century Trinitarian Positions

#### (1) Homoousion Party:

- The Son is **from** Father and of the **same substance** (homousios) as the Father.

- The basic position of Rome and of Alexandria after Origen.
  - Supporters included
    - Athanasius and
    - the Cappadocian Fathers
      - Basil of Caesarea
      - Gregory of Nazianzus and
      - Gregory of Nyssa
  - Sometimes called the "neo-Nicene" party because of their support for the Nicene Creed (interpreted in the manner described above)

(2) Homoiousion Party: The Son is **like** the Father **in all things** (i.e. **like the Father in substance** [homoiousios] and in will).

- The traditional position of most Eastern bishops.
- Note that the the word "like"
  - leaves room to distinguish the Father from the Son but also
  - tries unsystematically to recognize a continuity between the Father and the Son.
- Eventually discarded because it was so fuzzy that even many semi-Arians could subscribe to it ("The Son' existence is sort of like but really quite distinct from that of the Father").

(3) Homoean Party: The Son is **like** the Father, period.

- Typically adopted
  - by older Eastern bishops who were wary of the extra-scriptural term ousia and by
  - later Arians, who really meant that the Son was **different from the Father in substance and honor but like the Father in will** (i.e. he was a creature who did what the Father wanted him to do).

(4) Anomoean Party: The Son is wholly **unlike** the Father in substance, being a creature created by the will of the Father to do the Father's bidding.

- Aëtios and Eunomius the prime movers of this party.
- Eunomius:
  - Words have meanings that are distinct and constant.
    - The Father is "unbegotten" and
    - the Son is "begotten."
    - "Unbegotten" and "begotten" are
      - opposites and
      - fundamentally different from one another.
    - The Father and the Son are therefore fundamentally different from one another (have different qualities/attributes/life/existence).

• The Orthodox Response (Esp. Cappadocians): No.

- Words are
  - imperfect ways of talking about created things and
  - cannot properly describe what God is like.

- Words can only
  - suggest some very limited points of comparison with the created things with which we are familiar, but even here
    - words will mean something different when applied to God than when applied to human beings.