



Lesson 3. The Arian Controversy

Introduction:

1. What is the purpose of a creed? Why do we need creeds?
2. Why do you think we regularly include creeds in our worship services?

3.1 The Teaching of Arius, a priest at Alexandria

Recall that Arius became involved in a theological dispute with Bishop Alexander over the person and divine nature of Jesus Christ. Prior to 325 multiple attempts had been made to bring Arius back to orthodoxy but all were unsuccessful.¹ Moreover, Arius continued to his teaching so that it spread and took root throughout the Eastern (predominantly Greek-speaking) church.

The controversy surrounding the teaching of Arius was the single most important reason for calling together the Council of Nicaea. Arius was a Christian priest in a suburban church of Alexandria in Egypt. He had been educated to be a clear and rational thinker in the tradition of Greek philosophy. When Bishop Alexander explicitly stated that God the Father and Jesus the Son were equally divine and eternal, Arius' logic took him in a different direction. Since Jesus was the Son and begotten of the Father, Arius believed Jesus could not be eternal in the same sense the Father was and thus could not be equally divine. Arius' logic found favor with a number of other church leaders and teachers, especially in the Eastern Empire. Sometime in the early years of the controversy, Arius put his theology into verse in a writing called the *Thalia* (Banquet). Here are a few of the surviving lines:

We praise him [the Father] as without beginning in contrast to him [the Son] who has a beginning.

We worship him as timeless, in contrast to him who in time has come to exist.

He who is without beginning made the Son a beginning of created things.

¹ Constantine had penned a letter asking for the reconciliation of the parties. Afterwards he proposed an examination before a panel of bishops.

He [the Son] has none of the distinct characteristics of God's own being.
For he is not equal to, nor is he of the same being as him.

As far as their glories, one infinitely more glorious than the other.
The Father in his essence is a foreigner to the Son, because he exists without beginning.

Hence the Son, not being [eternal] came into existence by the Father's will.

For it is impossible for him to fathom the Father, who is by himself.
For the Son himself does not even know his own essence.

3. Luther made a distinction between the ministerial and magisterial use of reason: We use reason as a servant (ministerial) in interpreting Scripture but not to judge (magisterial) what Scripture says. How might that distinction be applied to the discussion of Father and Son at the time of Arius?
4. How do the following passages support the eternal nature of the Son (the Word of God/Logos), who was also begotten in time as the human, Jesus Christ? How then must we understand the passages that describe the "begetting of the Son"?

John 1:1-3, 14 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ... ¹⁴ The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Hebrews 1:1-3 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. ³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

John 10:30, 38 "I and the Father are one. ... Understand that the Father is in me, and I in the Father."

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

5. Consider the following doctrinal statements and explain how a misuse of reason or logic led to its false teaching. Think of Scripture passages that give the correct understanding.
 - A. Jesus has a real human body that is in heaven, and a human body cannot be in multiple places at once. Therefore, Jesus' body cannot be present in the Lord's Supper; the bread and wine must be symbolic.

- B. The Bible clearly teaches that God has elected (chosen) some people to be saved. It logically follows that God also therefore elects some people to be damned to hell.

- C. The Bible clearly teaches that human beings are responsible for their sin. It logically follows that humans are also responsible, at least in part, for their own salvation or for choosing to believe.

- D. Any other logical “inconsistencies” or mysteries of Scripture that you’d like to discuss?

Closing Thought and Prayer

Our God orchestrates all history for the good of his Church. It is no coincidence then that just as one of the most insidious heresies should emerge and rapidly gain steam, the Lord provided the opportunity for this error to be addressed in the open.

Next Time: Comparing the Use and Content of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds