

§ 5. Doctrine of God: Trinity

Lecture 7

Arianism

In our study of the Trinity we've looked so far at the *Logos* Christology of the early Greek apologists and then at Modalism. Now we come to the subject of Arianism.

In the year 319 a presbyter of the church of Alexandria, Egypt named Arius began to propagate his doctrine that the Son is not of the same substance as the Father. You will remember that according to Tertullian and other church fathers who opposed those who denied the full deity of Christ that Christ is of the same substance or essence as the Father and therefore fully divine. Arius denied that Christ is the same substance as the Father. Rather, he said that Christ had been created by the Father before the beginning of the world. This episode marked now the great trinitarian controversy that would occupy the church until the end of the century and give us the Nicene Creed and the Constantinopolitan Creeds as a result.

You will remember that Tertullian thought that the *Logos* was begotten by God the Father at the beginning of creation. By contrast, Alexandrian theologians like Origen held that the begetting of the Son (or the *Logos*) from the Father did not have a beginning. Rather it was an eternal begetting that had always taken place. Arius thought that the reason that the orthodox theologians were so opposed to his view that the Son had a beginning was because he affirmed that the Son did not exist eternally. In his letter to Eusebius of Nicomedia he affirmed, "The Son has a beginning but God is without beginning." He thought this is why the orthodox theologians were so opposed to him, because he affirmed that the Son had a beginning. But that wasn't correct. Tertullian himself thought that the *Logos* was begotten at a certain point in time prior to the creation of the world. What the theologians objected to about Arius' view wasn't so much that the Son had a beginning; what they objected to was that this beginning was not a begetting but it was in fact a creation and that the Son was therefore a creature. Arius denied that the *Logos* even pre-existed immanently within the Father prior to the creation of the world. There wasn't even an immanent *Logos* or Word or Reason within God prior to the creation of the world. So the beginning of the *Logos* was not from the substance of the Father; the Father created the *Logos* out of nothing. He created the Son and therefore the Son was a creature. This is what the orthodox theologians really found offensive.

Athanasius, who became the bishop of Alexandria and was a champion of Nicene orthodoxy, protested that on Arius' view God the Father existing without the Son lacked even his Word and his wisdom. He didn't have those immanent qualities within him. This is blasphemous. This is from his *Orations Against the Arians* [1.3.9] – he says on Arius' view the Son is "a creature and a work, not proper to the Father's essence." This was

simply blasphemy to affirm that the Son is a work and a creature, not belonging to the essence of the Father.

In the year 325 the Council of Antioch condemned Arius' views.¹ They condemned anybody who says that the Son is a creature or that the Son is originated or created or made or not truly an offspring – that is someone who is begotten, not made. They condemned anyone who said that at one time the Son did not exist. Later in that same year, 325, the emperor Constantine convened an ecumenical council at Nicaea. That is to say, this was not a local council. This was a universal council that drew bishops from all across the Roman Empire to convene at Nicaea and pronounce on this doctrine of Arius.

The Council of Nicaea then propagated the creedal formulation of trinitarian belief in the Nicene Creed. It is worth mentioning that the Arians who were represented at the Council were very few. There were probably only six Arian bishops present at the Council. There were thirty bishops who were squarely in Athanasius' camp – in the orthodox camp. The vast majority belonged to this sort of confused center camp which had around 200 bishops in it and they didn't know what was going on. They couldn't understand this debate. Then there were the Semi-Arians of whom we will speak later – probably around seventy to ninety of the bishops were in this sort of Semi-Arian camp. What they wanted to say was the Son isn't the same substance as the Father but he is similar in substance to the Father. A sort of quasi-divine as it were.

The Athanasian camp carried the day and persuaded the vast majority of the bishops to condemn Arianism and to propagate the statement of the Trinity that we confess today.

Let's read through this [the Nicene Creed] and then we will comment on it.

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 into the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

So we believe in one God the Father, one Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit – all three members of the Trinity.

¹ 5:07

Then there are affixed to the Creed these condemnations of Arian propositions:

But 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 ‘the Son of God is from a different hypostasis [we will say something about that later] or substance, or is created, or is subject to alteration or change’ – these the Catholic Church anathematizes.

These Arian propositions are condemned in this suffix to the creed.

Several features of this statement deserve comment.²

1. Notice that the Son, and I think by implication the Holy Spirit, is declared to be of the same substance as the Father. The Greek word for this is *homoousios*. *Homo*, the word for “same;” *ousias* from the word for “substance.” So the Father and the Son (and I think by implication the Holy Spirit) are declared to be of the same substance. That is to say they are of the same essence. They have the same divine nature. This is to say that the Son and the Father both exemplify the divine nature. Therefore the Son cannot be a creature as Arius claimed. Arius wanted to say that the Son has a different nature – *heteroousios* – from the Father. *Hetero* meaning “different than,” as in the word “heterosexual” (opposite sex). *Heteroousios* a different substance; whereas the orthodox affirmed the same substance, the same essence.

I mentioned the Semi-Arians who were present at the Council. They were championing the word *homoiousios* to describe the relation of the Father and the Son meaning that they were similar in essence. They feared that by saying they were the same substance this would imply Modalism – that there wasn’t a diversity of persons in the Godhead. So they wanted to say he is not of a different essence or substance but he is of a similar substance. There was a world of difference that lay in this single iota that distinguished *homoousios* from *homoiousios*. On *homoousios*, the Son is fully divine. He is God. On *homoiousios* he isn’t divine. He doesn’t have the divine essence. He is simply similar to the Father and therefore just as much as the Arians they affirmed that the Son is in fact a creature and a work, which was blasphemy.

2. Notice that the Son is declared to be begotten not made. The creed says that he is God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made. This is the vestige of the old *Logos* Christology of the Greek apologists which held that the *Logos* is begotten in his divine nature from the Father, but not created.

Notice that this is said with respect not to Christ’s human nature but with respect to his divine nature. In his very divinity he is begotten from the Father. Therefore just as products of natural generations which are begotten share the same nature as their parents

² 10:00

– cats beget cats, dogs beget dogs, people beget people – so the Son and the Father share the same divine nature because the Son is begotten from the Father, not created by the Father.

The Nicene statement is based upon a draft of a creed that was proposed by Eusebius of Caesarea. This isn't Eusebius of Nicomedia to whom Arius wrote that I quoted before. This Eusebius is from the coastal town in Israel called Caesarea. You can still visit the ruins of this town today on a trip to Israel and see the ruins of this great port city of Caesarea Maritima there on the coast of the Mediterranean. This is where Eusebius of Caesarea flourished and worked. In his initial draft of the Creed he used the word *Logos* instead of Son. So whenever you see the word "Son" in the Nicene Creed, in Eusebius' draft he was using the word *Logos*. The *Logos* is declared to be begotten of the Father before all ages. That is, as I say, the legacy of this old *Logos* Christology of the Greek apologists.

Notice similarly in the condemnations which are affixed to the end of the Nicene Creed, they reject the view that this begetting had a beginning.³ The begetting is eternal. They say that they condemn those who say there was when he was not or before being born he was not. They anathematize anyone who says that this begetting of the Son or the *Logos* in his divine nature is not eternal but had a beginning.

Athanasius, in his treatise *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, uses a very subtle and interesting word play to differentiate between the Father and the Son in this regard. It is really a pun. He says that the Father and the Son are both *agenetos* (*agenetos* means uncreated or unoriginated – it never came into being). This is something that never came into being. He says that the Father and the Son are both *agenetos*. By contrast he says that only the Father is *agennetos* with two "n"s. This is a different word, and this means unbegotten. With two "n"s only the Father is *agennetos*, unbegotten. The Son is *gennetos*, with two "n"s – he is begotten. Just as there was a world of difference with that single iota between *homoiousios* and *homoousios*, so there is a world of difference between *agenetos* (with a single "n") and *agennetos* with a double "n." The Father and the Son are both *agenetos* in the sense of uncreated, never had a time when they came into being, but only the Father is unbegotten in the sense of *agennetos*. The Son is *gennetos* or begotten of the Father.

START DISCUSSION

Student: The examples you gave of a child being begotten from their parents implies a precedence. In other words, the parents were there and then the child was there. Personally I struggle with the word "begotten" - what it actually means. Is what you are saying that God was there and Christ came from God being a precedence, and how do

³ 15:04

you tie that to John 1 which is “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God”?

Dr. Craig: Good question. Yes, there is a precedence here, but it is not chronological. It is not a temporal precedence. The Son derives from the Father. It is a precedence of derivation. The Father doesn't derive from anyone. He doesn't derive from the Son. But the Son on this view does derive from the Father. The Father precedes the Son, not in a temporal or chronological sense, but in the sense that he is underivative whereas the Son is derivative. The examples that the fathers often use that I've alluded to before would be things like the relationship between the sun and its rays. The sun can never exist without its rays. It is always emanating its sunlight. But clearly the sun doesn't derive from its rays. The rays derive from the sun. So if the sun has existed from eternity, the sun rays – the sunbeams – will also exist from eternity. So even though they are derivative they have no beginning chronologically.

Student: That is what I'm struggling with a little bit. Is something being derived from something by its very definition means that there is a time aspect to it?

Dr. Craig: What about the illustration of the sun and its rays? To me that seems like a good illustration.

Student: What actually produces the sun rays is obviously the chemical reactions that is happening in the sun. Without that chemical reaction happening there is no subsequent ray that happens. So there is a sequence even in that example that you give.⁴

Dr. Craig: You are importing modern science into the example, which of course they didn't have. They didn't know about nuclear fusion or anything of that sort. The idea there, though, I think on a popular level seems to be pretty clear that you could have something that is derivative from something else without any sort of chronological precedence. Why, if there is a kind of ontological dependence, does that need to have a chronological beginning? I don't see why it would.

Student: Who was it that used the terminologies of *agenetos*?

Dr. Craig: That was Athanasius. Actually it is fairly universal among the orthodox theologians this distinction between *agenetos* meaning uncreated and *agennetos* meaning unbegotten. But you can find it especially in Athanasius.

Student: The Son (Christ) existed with God but for man's sake (for the sake of man) became a tangible entity.

Dr. Craig: I think that is the idea. The beginning here is not just the beginning of humanity. It is the beginning of the whole world. John thinks that the whole cosmos came

⁴ 20:01

into being through the *Logos*. The world was made through the *Logos*. In the beginning was just God and his Word. Then the world was created through the *Logos*. But as a result of the speculations of these early Greek apologists they thought of the *Logos* as somehow derivative from God the Father.

Student: I agree, and for functional purposes (functional for the purpose of physical man and their accountability).

Dr. Craig: I understand the distinction. I am not committing myself to this view. I am just explaining the view. What you are suggesting is maybe there isn't a kind of ontological derivation of the Son from the Father. Maybe we shouldn't introduce that into the Godhead. Maybe they are just co-eternal, co-equal, but there is a sort of functional submission of the Son to the Father for the sake of the plan of salvation. There were some church fathers who held to a view like that. But that wasn't the majority view. The majority view, because of this influence of these Greek apologists, was that there is this kind of derivation within the Godhead – the Son deriving from the Father. Further, we haven't talked about the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit being derivative as well, deriving from the Father and the Son.

Student: The way I see this is that Jesus always imitates God the Father. That makes sense to me to where Jesus always says, *Father's will, not mine*. But when it says he is imitating it sounds like God the Father would be the greater person of the three. That doesn't make sense to me.

Dr. Craig: That is a tension within orthodoxy that I imagine some of the church fathers would want to affirm – that the Father is greater than the Son in the sense that the Father is not only *agenetos* (uncreated) but he is also unbegotten, whereas the Son has a kind of derivative being. The Father is the fount of the Son and is therefore the greatest of all. Someone asked the other day about the verse where Jesus says, *The Father is greater than I*. I think for the orthodox party at Nicaea they wouldn't have any trouble with a statement like that because they would see the Son as begotten from the Father. But this isn't a creation. That is the important thing to keep firmly in mind. They are both God in the same way, as I say, that puppies are dogs just as much as their parents, or kittens are feline just as much as the cats who give birth to them. They share the same nature, but the Son is begotten from the Father.

END DISCUSSION

Let's go on to the third point that I wanted to make today about this statement.

3. Notice the condemnation at the end. "Of those who say that Christ is a different *hypostasis* or substance from the Father." This clause occasioned great confusion and

controversy within the early church.⁵ *Hypostasis* is a Greek word which is etymologically similar to, and therefore synonymous with, the Latin word *substantia* or “substance.” You can see that etymologically – *hypo* means “under” like a hypodermic needle (it goes under the skin). Or hypothermia – your temperature goes down. *Hypo* means “under.” It means the same thing in Latin that *sub* means, like a submarine goes under the water. In Latin *sub* means the same thing as *hypo* in Greek. *Stasis* and *stantia* are the Greek and the Latin words respectively for “standing under something.” A *hypostasis* is something that stands under something. A substance (*substantia*) is something that stands under something in the sense that these are property bearers. They exist in themselves. Properties exist in these substances. They are possessed by these substances. A *hypostasis* and a substance would seem to be the same meaning. These two words just seem to be the Greek and the Latin of the same thing.

Although the Nicene Creed is drafted in Greek, the meaning of its terms is Latin. It is in Greek but they take *hypostasis* to mean the same thing as *substantia*. Therefore they condemn those who say that there is a plurality of *hypostases* in God. There is only one substance in God, right? God is one substance. So they condemn anyone who says that there is more than one *hypostasis* or *ousias* – substance – in God.

The problem is for native Greek-speaking theologians from the eastern part of the Roman Empire where Greek was the language, not Latin, they didn’t take *hypostasis* to be a synonym of *substantia*. For them, a *hypostasis* just meant a concrete individual, a bearer of properties. So, for example, Gregory of Nyssa, one of the great Greek church fathers, explains that a *hypostasis*, “is what subsists and is specially and peculiarly indicated by a name.” For example, Paul. Paul is the name of a *hypostasis*, an individual. This individual is in contrast to *ousia* in Greek which is the essence of something. So they would say that Paul and Jim and Cindy all have the same *ousia* – they all have the same essence – but they are different *hypostases* – different individuals exemplifying that essence or having that nature. Therefore to say that there are not distinct *hypostases* in God is to endorse Modalism. It is to say the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the same individual. That was obviously wrong. Clearly there are distinct *hypostases* in the Trinity because they have different properties. For example, only the Father has the property of being unbegotten, whereas the Son has the property of being begotten. So there are different individuals in the Trinity. They have different properties. To these eastern theologians the statement of the Nicene Creed that condemns those who say that the Son is a different *hypostasis* from the Father sounded like Modalism – that they were all the same person.

⁵ 25:12

This led to enormous confusion and debate. Finally after decades of debate the confusion was finally cleared up at the Council of Alexandria in 362. At that council they affirmed the doctrine of *homoousios* – there is one substance, one essence, in God – but they allowed that there are three different divine *hypostases*. They recognized the Greek understanding of what a *hypostasis* is.⁶ It is not a synonym to substance. Rather, a *hypostasis* is a concrete individual who bears or exemplifies a nature.

Eventually the church came to recognize that in God there is one substance with three *hypostases* – three individuals.

The Nicene Creed that we affirm today is not the same one as the original that condemned those who say there are more than one *hypostasis*. The one that we affirm and that was promulgated later affirms that there are a plurality of *hypostases*.

START DISCUSSION

Student: How do you reconcile the Old Testament with the plurality of the creation in the words that are in Hebrew where God the Father and the Son were all there in the creation? There are words that are used – the plural form in Hebrew – in the Old Testament.

Dr. Craig: Even the Spirit is mentioned in Genesis chapter 1, I think verse 2, where it says the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. They would say that the Son is implicitly involved in the work of creation even if in the old covenant he is not explicitly mentioned. Because, after all, this hadn't been fully revealed. They believed that God's full revelation took time until Christ. So in the Old Testament you have statements about God that don't differentiate clearly the members of the Trinity.

END DISCUSSION

With that we come to the end of our time. What we will want to do next time is examine more closely exactly what these *hypostases* were that were affirmed to be in the Godhead. There is one God, one substance, and then there are these three *hypostases*. What were those? That is what we will look at next time.⁷

⁶ 30:12

⁷ Total Running Time: 33:00 (Copyright © 2016 William Lane Craig)