

## The Deity of Christ: Arius, Athanasius, and the Nicene Creed

This is a message about the deity of Christ. The deity of Christ means that he was fully God. John begins, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” In Colossians 1 Paul writes, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in the Son.”

We are looking at the Nicene Creed this Sunday and the Chalcedonian Creed next Sunday to protect ourselves from heresy, from false teaching about the Lord Jesus. The early church faced all kinds of teaching about Christ, all coming from inside the church.

None of these have stopped. They all still keep coming up. Remember that the New Testament itself has many warnings against false prophets, false teachers, false teachings, false brothers and sisters, false apostles, and so on. We want to guard against false teaching about Christ.

Two weeks ago we looked at a handout that had twelve different New Testament summaries of what we believe, and they mostly talked about Christ. But none of them made a clear statement about Christ being God, about his deity.

Last week we looked the Apostles Creed, and that did not have a clear statement about Christ’s deity either. The Apostles Creed stuck pretty close to what the apostles themselves emphasized. These people understood that Christ was fully God, but it was not a regular part of their message.

Our clear understanding of Christ’s deity owes a lot to a young man churchman named Athanasius, who was born about the year 293. He lived in Alexandria. We hear about Athanasius because of Arius.

### 1 Arius and Arianism

Arius was another church leader in Alexandria. Arius left behind the deity of Christ. I am going to summarize what Arius taught, which came to be known as “Arianism.”

Arius liked Scriptures like this: *God who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.* 1 Timothy 6.

Arius focussed on the absolute perfection of God the Father. Arius said that God was completely unapproachable, and God was absolutely One. There could be no God in the proper sense of the word “God” other than God the Father. God had no source. God was himself the source and origin of whatever else existed. God’s being, his substance, was completely unique.

There is a lot right about this, isn't there. Our God is one, there is no one else beside him, and so on. The Bible says all of that. But Arius held on to that so strongly that he drastically reduced the Son. For Arius and for Arians, the Son was a creature, the Son was created by God. True, he was created before anything else, and he was perfect, and all things were made through him. But he was still included in what God created.

This meant that the Son had a beginning. He came into being, said Arius, before the times and ages, but he was not eternal. Arius was clear on this: there was a time back there when the Son did not exist at all.

This also meant that the Son could not really know the Father. The Father alone was infinite, only the Father had no beginning, only the Father was wise, and so on. God the Father remains unknowable, even to Christ the Son. What the Son knows and sees, said Arius, he knows and sees in the same way we know and see.

To summarize Arius: God the Father alone was perfect and unknowable. God's being, his substance, his "spiritual material," was entirely unique. So the Son was a creature, made by God to create everything else. The Son was not eternal. If we could go back far enough, there was a time when he did not exist. And the Son cannot really know God, because God alone is infinite, God alone is perfect, and is therefore unknowable.

Arius wandered off the path because he got too excited about one of the Bible's teachings: God alone was perfect, infinite, immortal, unapproachable. Arius leaned on them so hard that other biblical truths had to bend, and he was willing to do that. It is still a common story. Someone runs too hard with one biblical truth, and that leads to false teaching.

## 2 The Council of Nicaea (CE 325)

Arius started to teach this in about 318, and he persuaded some. Arius was always very good at spreading his views widely. Some were convinced by Arius, but most early leaders knew that Arianism was wrong, and were very concerned. So many from all over met in the city of Nicaea in 325 to sort this out.

The majority knew that Arius and his people were wrong, but they had trouble finding words to say what they meant. Arius was and his followers were there. The Nicene council wanted to use biblical phrases to teach that Christ was fully God.

But the Arians were very good at using Scripture words mean something different, so that so that the Scripture supported their position. Even when the Bible seemed clear, they found a way to make it agree with their views. So the council had to use non-biblical phrases to say clearly what they meant, to say that Christ was God. And of course there was some disagreement about that.

But Athanasius, who was about 30 years old at the time, basically carried the day. Athanasius was nearly 40 years younger than Arius. But he found words to describe the deity of Christ that Arians could not possibly agree with. The Nicene creed was designed to make Arianism a heresy, and it succeeded.

In the process, it gave us a wonderfully clear statement of who our Lord is. Different liturgical churches still recite the Nicene Creed together on special church days. It remains the best statement on the deity of Christ that the church has produced. And it does not say more than what the Bible itself says about Christ.

You can see that it takes the Apostles Creed as its foundation, and builds on that. That's why some churches use it, because it is an expanded Apostles Creed. But the collected church leaders really had just one purpose in putting this together. They wanted to separate themselves from a particular false teaching about Christ.

Arianism is still around, make no mistake. For whatever reason, some find the Christ of the Bible hard to take. They still like him, they say, and they like his teaching, but the Christ of the Bible is too much. God in the flesh? Lord of heaven and earth? No, not that. So they reduce Christ to something less offensive. It has been around a long time. Here's the Nicene Creed:

### 3 The Nicene Creed

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,  
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,  
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.  
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven,  
was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.  
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;  
he suffered death and was buried.  
On the third day he rose again, in accordance with the Scriptures;  
he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.  
He will come again in glory, to judge the living and the dead,  
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,  
who proceeds from the Father and the Son,  
who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified,  
who has spoken through the prophets.*

*We believe in one holy worldwide and apostolic Church.  
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.  
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

You can see that this just expands the Apostles Creed, which means that the Apostles Creed was a widely known standard by 325. Let's look at the early lines of the second section, the Christ section, because that's where they went after the Arians.

#### 4 The Crucial Lines

*We believe in one Lord,  
Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father;  
through him all things were made.*

*Eternally begotten of the Father.*

“Eternally begotten” The Gospel of John calls Jesus the “only begotten Son” a few times. The Arians used this to say that there was a time before the Son existed. But the others knew that was wrong. “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*”

Parents produce children. Parents produce human life. That's how it works. When humans do this, the child begins to exist at a particular point in time, when they are conceived. The eternal Son *is* like us in that he gets life from his Parent, his Father. But he is *not* like us in that he has always been getting life from his Father. It did not begin at any early point in time. For eternity past, he has always been the offspring of his Father. Eternally begotten of the Father.

I had human parents, so I'm human. They passed on their basic nature and substance to their children. Marilyn and I have done that to our children. It is the same between the Father and the Son. If the Son is begotten of the Father, then he is the same species as his Father. I'm every bit as human as my parents. The Son is every bit as divine as the Father.

The council was ruling out what the Arians said, that there was a time before the Son existed.

*Eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,*

The Arians said, “God's being, his substance, was completely unique. The Father alone was infinite, he was alone without beginning, the Father was alone wise, and so on.”

The Nicene council said, “No. The Father passed on himself, his own species, to the Son, as all parents do.” God eternally begotten from God, Light eternally begotten from Light, True God eternally begotten from True God. *“Eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”*

*Begotten not made.* “Begotten” we’ve already explained. “Not made” occurs here because the Arians said “begotten” means “made.”

*Of one Being with the Father.* Other translations say *Of one Substance with the Father.* The Arians said that God’s being, his essence, his substance, was entirely unique. The Nicene council said, “no, the Father passes on his being, his substance, his nature, to the Son. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”

*Through him all things were made.* The Arians agreed with this. Still, it is an important part of what the New Testament teaches about Christ, so they put that in their creed.

Here are those lines again: *We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.*

Then the Creed affirms the Lord’s humanity, which is just as important. But at the time that was not under threat. These lines about the deity of Christ are the power of this creed. The thing is, for 17 hundred years believers have been reading the Bible and agreeing that there is not a better way to say this. Lots of us grew up being taught pretty early in the church that Jesus was God.

That’s taught in the Bible, but the apostles did not stress it, and the Apostles Creed did not stress it either. But from the Nicene Creed on it has been an important part of our faith. Keep in mind that there is plenty of Arianism still around, though it is not called that.

5 Nicene Creed Summary.

Negatively, the Nicene Creed leaves no room for Arianism. It was meant to do that. Positively, it says four things: (1) the Son is fully Divine and (2) equal with the Father, (3) the Son’s being comes from the Father (eternally begotten), so (4) the Son has the same divine nature and essence as the Father. Amen.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for early church fathers who were faithful, and for their energy to keep false teaching out of the church. Thank you for all the churches throughout the world that still accept this without reservation. Thank you that your Spirit still leads us into truth. Amen.

BENEDICT’N: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen. Go in God’s peace to love and serve the Lord.