

THE BEST GIFT OF ALL

The year was 325AD. The early Christian church was in its formative years, and one of the biggest theological debates in the history of the faith had spread across the civilised world. A church council had met in the city of Nicea to settle the controversial question at issue once and for all: Is Jesus Christ really God?

It was the biggest argument in the history

of the Christian church to that date. A larger argument would not rage until the Protestant Reformation, over a thousand years later. It came to greatest prominence during the fourth century, in the formative years of modern Christianity, when a renegade bishop from Alexandria publicly challenged one of the essential pillars of the Christian faith: the deity, or Godhead, of Jesus Christ.

This kind of challenge came as something of a surprise to the Christian world, since the Christians who lived in Alexandria had always been very strong in their belief regarding the divine nature of Christ. However, Bishop Arius was not part of this traditional group. He had studied under Lucian of Antioch, whose understanding of the person of Christ was less than orthodox.

The issue under review challenged the church's teaching and the understanding of the apostles: that Jesus Christ was actually God. Not merely a reflection of God, or some sort of lesser God, but God Himself in human flesh. According to the Bible, there are three members of the Godhead: Father, Son and Holy Spirit (see, for instance, Matthew 28:19). However, these three distinct Persons are co-eternal, and are united in nature, character and purpose. Thus, they work together as the one true God (see, for instance, James 2:19).

This is still the orthodox position of Christians today, but Lucian of Antioch was marching to a different drummer. Taking his cue from Paul of Samosata, he began to question whether or not Jesus of Nazareth was really God, in the same sense as God the Father. Paul of Samosata

believed that Jesus was merely a man who was supernaturally endowed with the Holy Spirit—so much so that He was adopted by God as His Son. A church synod in Antioch in 269AD condemned Paul's teaching, but in later years Lucian of Antioch began to adopt some of Paul's unbiblical ideas.

Lucian's ideas were different, in that he didn't relegate Jesus to a position of mere humanity. Instead, he said that Jesus was greater than us but lower than God, giving Him the same status, roughly speaking, that a Roman pagan would have given to the demigods. Lucian said that Jesus was divine in nature but was created by God the Father at some point in ancient history.

Lucian's idea inspired the headstrong Arius of Alexandria, who went on to develop a system of teaching that came to be known

in theological circles as Arianism.

Here is a brief overview of this teaching. Arius taught quite correctly that God was perfect and unchangeable. But then he argued that because Jesus grew and changed throughout His human life, He couldn't possibly be one and the same as God. Instead, Arius argued, Jesus was the most perfect being ever created by God, and was subsequently adopted by God as a Son and then used to create the world we live in. And the Holy Spirit? According to Arius, that was another subservient Being who was created by God.

The Christian church, naturally, was horrified by this teaching. And the thing that made the heresy particularly frightening was the blazing speed with which it seemed to spread across the Mediterranean world.

Arianism was particularly appealing to the pagan world, because it made Christianity look a lot like the hierarchy of pagan gods they were used to under their own belief systems. Arianism taught that God the Father was supreme, and below Him were two demigods that He had created: the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In the year 321, less than a decade after the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity, the teachings of Arius were rejected at a church synod in Alexandria. This was not enough to stop the spread of Arianism, however, and the debate continued to rage across the Christian world for several more years. That's when Constantine, eager to keep his empire unified under the Christian banner, decided that something had to be done.

So it was that in May of 325AD, one of the

most famous church councils in history was called to deal with this heresy that simply wouldn't die. In the emperor's opinion, the whole fight was simply a matter of semantics, and he called it a "fight over trifling and foolish differences".

The bishops who gathered at the Council of Nicea, however, didn't find it trifling at all. The stakes were very high. After all, they were discussing the very nature of the One they worshiped. Is Jesus Christ really God, or not?

During the Council of Nicea, the entire debate centred around one word: substance. They debated whether or not the New Testament Greek word *ousios* meant that God the Son was made from the same *substance* as God the Father. On the one hand, there were orthodox Christians who argued that Christ was "like substance"

with the Father. Against them were the Arians, who argued that Christ was radically different from the Father, and as such was “unlike substance”.

Naturally, as always happens, there were still others who tried to compromise. They said that Christ was *similar* in substance, but not *exactly the same* as the Father; that, of course, was essentially saying that Christ was some kind of lesser god.

When the council was over, it was absolutely clear as to where the Christian church stood. A document was drafted, now known as the Nicene Creed, that summarised the position of the church. Out of an estimated 300 bishops who were present at the meeting, only three of them refused to sign it. One of them, of course, was Arius.

The consequences were immediate. Arius and two other bishops were declared to be heretics, and Arius himself was exiled by Constantine to Illyria. The emperor also ordered that all known copies of his book, *The Thalia*, be committed to the flames. With that, the open theological debate in the Christian church came to an end.

Over the next few decades, however, the heresy proved to be far from dead. As various emperors came and went, supporting either the Nicean position or the teachings of Arius, Arianism went in and out of fashion. In both halves of the Roman Empire, people were persecuted for their beliefs based on who occupied the throne at the time. Finally, in 381, at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople, Arian teachings were denounced for good, and the Nicean

creed was permanently ratified.

As far as the Roman Empire was concerned, Arianism was dead. But for the Germanic tribes living to the north, the teachings of the renegade bishop were just taking off. Among the Gothic converts to Christianity was a man by the name of Ulfilas who had been sent as a missionary by Constantius II, a Roman emperor who favoured Arianism.

The teachings of Arius spread like wildfire, and by the time the Germanic kingdoms became a part of the Roman Empire, they had already favoured Arianism for more than a century. Most heavily influenced were tribes like the Vandals, the Lombards, the Burgundians, and the Goths. The teachings were so deeply entrenched that it took many generations for the Christian church to finally weed them out.

Today, with the exception of some smaller sectarian groups, it's difficult to find any real Arians in the world of Christianity. Every once in a while, however, the challenge leveled by the bishop from Alexandria surfaces again: Is Jesus Christ really *God*?

Thousands of pages of ancient Christian writings prove to us that the early church fathers were agreed on this issue: not only is Jesus fully human, but He is also fully God. But as much as I respect the thoughts and work of those who helped to establish the early Christian church, there is only one place I believe we can find a solid answer: the Word of God. What do the writings of the prophets and apostles tell us about the nature of Jesus Christ?

Please remember this: the Arians argued that Jesus was some sort of lesser,

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created god who was adopted by God as a Son. Is this in fact what you find the disciples of Christ teaching in the pages of the New Testament?

There are those who say yes. The primary text they use to prove their case is found in the book of Colossians, chapter one:

He has delivered us from the power of darkness and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:13,14).

This is a good place to begin, because we can all agree that Jesus Christ redeemed us through His blood and that He offers us the forgiveness of sins. However, the next few words are more awkward:

He is the image of the invisible God, the

firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15).

This appears to be much more of a roadblock. Those who choose to believe that Jesus was nothing more than a created being will claim this text as solid evidence. “See?” they will say. “It says right here that Jesus is the firstborn over creation!”

At first glance, this might appear to be correct. It *does* say, after all, that Jesus is the “firstborn” over all creation, so doesn’t that mean that He was simply the first and best Person ever to *be* created, just as Arius and his followers claimed?

Not exactly. The problem with that interpretation of Colossians 1:15 is that you have to isolate it from the context of the rest of Bible to make it mean that. We will return to this verse shortly, but first,

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let us consider a few of the passages in the Bible that completely refute what the Arians would have you believe.

The first is found in Paul's letter to the Philippian church, chapter two. It's important to remember that the man who wrote that passage in Colossians is the same man who wrote this:

*And being found in appearance as a man,
He humbled Himself and became obedient
to the point of death, even the death of
the cross. Therefore God also has highly
exalted Him and given Him the name
which is above every name, that at the
name of Jesus every knee should bow, of
those in heaven, and of those on earth, and
of those under the earth, and that every
tongue should confess that Jesus Christ
is Lord, to the glory of God the Father
(Philippians 2:8-11).*

This passage does not immediately appear to refute anything. It simply states that Jesus has been exalted by the Father. Of course, Jesus doesn't necessarily need to be equal with the Father for that to happen. *Not exactly.* That answer may be difficult to understand, so let us investigate further.

Firstly, let us remember that much of the New Testament is quoted from the Old Testament. That's exactly the case with this passage in Philippians. It turns out that Paul isn't creating this imagery from scratch. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he's actually quoting from the Old Testament book of Isaiah:

"And there is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Saviour; There is none besides Me. Look to Me, and be saved, All you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other. I have sworn by Myself;

The word has gone out of My mouth in righteousness, And shall not return, That to Me every knee shall bow, Every tongue shall take an oath” (Isaiah 45:21-23).

Please compare those two passages. When Paul wrote that every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, he was referring to this passage in Isaiah. When we look at the source material, we discover that it's talking about God Himself! In fact, the language could not be clearer: *“I am God, and there is no other...to Me every knee shall bow, Every tongue shall take an oath.”*

Here we have one of the reasons that the apostolic church drew so much heat from the nation of Israel. They weren't unpopular because they believed that Jesus was a great teacher; it was because they believed Him to be God.

You don't have to read very far through the Gospels to find out that Jesus believed the same thing of Himself. Take, for example, the story where the religious leaders tried to stone Jesus for some of the things He was saying.

Notice particularly the words of Jesus in this passage:

"I and My Father are one." Then the Jews took up stones again to stone Him. Jesus answered them, "Many good works I have shown you from My Father. For which of those works do you stone Me?" The Jews answered Him, saying, "For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God" (John 10:30-33).

There's just no question about it. Jesus wasn't hated because He claimed to be a

great teacher or even some sort of angel. They hated Him because He claimed to be equal with *God*.

There are a great many texts in the Bible that prove the divinity of Christ. I will mention one other, irrefutable text here.

It is found in the book of Revelation, where Jesus is introduced to John as the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. In this particular passage, Jesus Himself is speaking:

“I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End,” says the Lord, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (Revelation 1:8).

Notice that Jesus describes Himself as the *Almighty*. That is not all, for John goes on to record:

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last" (Revelation 1:10,11).

The picture is repeated in the next chapter:

"And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, 'These things says the First and the Last, who was dead, and came to life'" (Revelation 2:8).

To remove any final doubt, the same statement occurs yet again in the very last chapter:

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last" (Revelation 22:12,13).

The Bible leaves no doubt about this matter. The One who died and rose again is Jesus, and the Bible calls Him the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, and the First and the Last. Exactly how does that prove that He is God? The simple and powerful answer is that John is referring us back to the writings of the prophet Isaiah:

“Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, And his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God” (Isaiah 44:6).

As we return to this passage in the Old Testament, we understand more fully what John is saying. God is identified as the Redeemer, and the First and the Last. Then, to settle the matter forever, He goes on to say that beside Him, there is no God. Over and over again, the language of the New Testament borrows from the

descriptions of God in the Old Testament to describe who Jesus really is.

Let us now return to that verse in Colossians where we are told that Jesus is the firstborn over all creation. The simple explanation is contained in the original Greek word that Paul uses: *prototokos* (πρωτότοκος, ον). Its meaning has more to do with *status* than *chronology*. Jesus wasn't *created* first; He is simply the *head* of all creation, the One who presides over it all. And that is in perfect keeping with the next few words:

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist (Colossians 1:16,17).

According to Paul, Jesus is the Creator. You can find that fact stated clearly in the first chapter of John's Gospel and repeated in the first chapter of the book of Hebrews. And in addition to creating all things, the Bible says that Jesus holds them all together.

Every breath you take, you have Christ to thank. Every day that you have life is a gift from Jesus. And the reason this planet doesn't simply spin off into outer space is because the Person of Jesus Christ has determined the limits and boundaries of physics. He holds the cosmos together.

The fundamental issue is that if Jesus is really a created being, as the Arians among us would suggest, then we would have a Saviour who is less than God. Our case would be hopeless, because only Someone who is equal to the law of

God can pay the penalty for sinners who have broken it. Additionally, if Jesus isn't really God, then the Arians would have us worship a created being, and the Bible calls *that* idolatry.

Search through the Bible some time to see if you can find Jesus refusing the worship of mortal men. I can assure you that there is not one instance of that. One modern version of the Arian teachings would have us believe that Jesus is nothing more than the highest of the created angels, but that creates an immediate theological problem. Jesus never refused the worship of men, but angels did. Just take a look at the double incident in the book of Revelation where John was told to get up off his knees because he was worshipping an angel:

Now I, John, saw and heard these things. And when I heard and saw, I fell down to

worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things. Then he said to me, "See that you do not do that. For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book. Worship God" (Revelation 22:8,9; see also Revelation 19:10).

Unfallen angels will never accept your worship because they are created beings, just like us. Our worship, as human beings, is reserved for God only. Furthermore, the Bible tells us that one day soon, every knee *will* bow, and every tongue *will* confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

I believe that one of the major reasons that people continue to construct strange ideas about the Person of Jesus Christ is precisely because He *is* God.

We sometimes struggle to understand

how in the world Jesus could possibly be fully man and fully God at the same time, but that is simply because we have human minds that operate within the finite limits of human existence, and we cannot possibly conceive of something outside of our experience.

A person who has spent all his life in a remote jungle could not possibly imagine what the city of Sydney is like, even if it was described to him. In the same way, perhaps we simply cannot understand what we are told about the nature of God, so we write it off as magic. Or worse yet, we simply refuse to believe it.

However, just because we are not able to understand something fully does not mean it isn't true. When you were five years old, there were many things you had trouble understanding. When it comes to the

universe we live in, it turns out that we are all cosmic five-year-olds.

I find it comforting to know that my salvation is not in the hands of some angel or lesser holy being. I hope you feel the same way.

According to the Bible, the God who made you is the same God who saves you. That is why, when Jesus was born, the angel told His parents to call him Immanuel, which means “God with us”.

The remarkable fact of the Bible is that God Himself gave up the glories of heaven to walk this problem-ridden planet with us.

He was willing to sacrifice the worship of billions of angels to live a poor man’s life and then hang on a cross to make sure you could be in the kingdom of God.

He was willing to take your sins so that you could have His righteousness. The question that confronts you today is this: Why *wouldn't* you trust a God like that?

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