

The Trinity Class 13: The Nicene Creed vs Arianism

Truro Anglican Church Sunday School November 10, 2024

We have arrived at the year 318 AD and the City of Alexandria in Egypt. The Bishop is a man named Alexander. One day, he was delivering a sermon on the nature of the Godhead. In the congregation was one of the presbyters of one of the wealthy churches in the city. His name was Arius.

He was well-educated, scholarly, well-spoken, and adamantly opposed to the theology being presented by his bishop.

Bishop Alexnader was presenting a sermon extolling the Trinity and some of the conditions for God to exist as One God in Three Persons.

Arius was a persuasive speaker and argued powerfully for his views in which he adamantly denied the existence of the Trinity and argued that Jesus was not God by nature, but by creation.

A summary of his key points:

1. There is One God who exists as a Monad- a singular being. This is a concept borrowed from Plato and Greek philosophy. The Monad was conceived as being eternal, immutable (meaning he can't change), and indivisible.
2. By definition, a Monad is indivisible- you cannot cut it up into parts or pieces. Thus, there is no Trinity because to have a Trinity, God would exist in three pieces or parts.
3. God is not Father from all eternity because there was a time when He had no Son.
4. This Monad created secondary deities, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, to bring about the rest of creation. They share a "similar substance" to God, but they are not God in the same way. This is also a concept borrowed from Platonic philosophy.
 - a. Arius' system argued that Jesus was a "duas" who was created by the Monad. Duas is also a Greek philosophical concept for a being that resembles the emanations or demiurges of Gnosticism- an intermediary deity creature that does what the Monad wants, but is lesser to and inferior to the Monad.
5. To argue that God is a Father implies that He has a Son. When you look at all other Father-Son relationships, the Father in the relationship exists prior to the Son. Therefore, the Son of God does not exist eternally like God the Father. One of Arius' catch phrases was "There was time when the Son was not." God only becomes a Father when He creates the Duas known as Jesus.
6. Thus, Jesus come in the flesh represents God, but he is not God Himself.
7. To explain Jesus' ability to perform miracles, Arius uses a variation of adoptionism, arguing that Jesus acquired that ability when the Spirit descended at His baptism.

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There is more to his system of theology. What we see once again is that someone tried to impose a foreign philosophical system onto the evidence and record of the scriptures and then reinterpret the Scriptures to fit the philosophical system.

Arius was very successful and managed to convince a number of bishops, priests, and deacons that his system was the right one.

It would take 15 Roman Emperors, five popes of Rome, scores of patriarchs in the Eastern church, hundreds of bishops, and 12 called synods of the church to finally ban Arius' views.

The controversy became entwined with Roman Imperial politics; caused older tensions between various factions in the church to flare up and create strife and separation in the church. It also highlighted that the Empire was rapidly changing- the Western portion of the Church was becoming a Latin speaking church while the Eastern portion remained Greek speaking. This becomes a problem way down the road as both East and West struggle to find the concepts and terms to accurately describe the Trinity without falling into some of the other heresies out there.

This became critical as the Latin West lost its familiarity with Greek and the Grecian East didn't pickup the nuances of Latin very well. This creates misunderstandings and confusion between the halves of the church as each struggles to make sense of the words the other side uses.

This system is the same system used by the Jehovah's Witnesses when they come to your door. It is somewhat ironic that they will argue that the doctrine of the Trinity is a Greek and pagan philosophical system (it isn't) when the very system they represent most definitely is.

Historically, Arianism causes the most damage to the church of any and all the heresies ever propounded and it leads into other heresies that profoundly weakened the church's witness to the deity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Trinity.

In a real sense, it also opened the door for the eventual triumph of Islam across the Middle East, north Africa, and well into Europe because it fractured the unity of the church.

Arianism is the Big Daddy of Heresy.