

## *The Nicene Age (AD 325–381)*

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In this lecture we begin a new time period in the ancient church, a time period which we would call the Nicene age. If you remember from the last part of our last lecture, we were introducing this time period as a, in a sense, radical time of change and discontinuity between what we have learned from the past lectures and what we're about to investigate. Some of the hallmarks that differentiate the differences between the pre-Nicene age and the Nicene age are the social change or the political change in the Roman Empire. We'll be looking at those social and political changes in more detail later, but what we need to notice immediately is that in the beginning of the Nicene age in the year 312, we have the movement from Christianity as an illegal religion that was persecuted to the religion of the empire.

Before we look at that time period politically, what we'll do in our lecture today is take a look at the theological thought, the theological development inherent in the Nicene age, and look at some of the main characters on the field of battle, the theological field of battle. Some of the people that we'll be introducing in today's lecture is the heretic named Arius and some of his opponents, especially Athanasius, and mention Alexander of Alexandria and Eusebius of Caesarea.

To understand the Nicene age, we have to understand why the Council of Nicea was called. The Council of Nicea, meeting in AD 325, was called to check the flow, to stop the wave of the theology of Arius that was sweeping across the Christian church. We've talked about various crises which have afflicted the church before this time: the crisis that comes when persecution afflicts the church, and we've talked about the schism related to Novatian, the problem of the lapsed. But until this time, the church had never faced such a grave problem as the development of the theology of Arius and the spread of that theology which spread like a wildfire throughout the Christian church and which threatened the gospel itself. So the church goes from one crisis to another.

Finally there is peace on the home front, finally we're no longer a persecuted minority, but we find ourselves catapulted into a majority position, into an accepted position, but hand in hand with that political blessing comes the demonic head of a threat to the church from within the church. And so, the Nicene age begins with an analysis of Arius and the background to this time period from the philosophical and theological standpoints. If you remember from our earlier lectures, it was important for us to trace some of the background material, especially philosophically, to help us to find pegs on which we can hang the clothing of the development of theology. The cultural developments in the church or in the time period of the church in which we're investigating, these cultural developments always influence theological developments, and we must see the interaction between these two movements, and we need to do that to understand Arius as well.

So, Arius: some of the background. Especially in the last twenty-five years, there's been a considerable amount of material written on the origins of Arianism. And as so often is the case in scholarship, the amount of material that is written on any subject is indirectly proportional relationship to the amount of disagreement among the scholars concerning the subject matter. And so to facilitate our study of Arianism, it would be very helpful for us to briefly trace the history of Arius research and then go on to make a few critical observations concerning that material.

In the nineteenth century a few pioneering works were done, and as you can imagine, in the nineteenth century there was no agreement concerning these theological or philosophical origins of Arianism. One scholar argued that there was a Jewish influence on Arius coming from the city of Antioch. Another scholar maintained that Arianism is non-Jewish and had its roots in pagan thought. These are pretty different conclusions. Other ideas were propagated in that century as well. Some thought that Arius could be connected with the Gnostic teaching of the same time period.

The controversy that was begun in the last century has continued to this day concerning the relationship also between Arianism and Origen. We briefly mentioned Origen, especially his biography, and haven't talked too much about his theological articulations. I would remind you that our textbook covers that very well and in great detail. But the relationship between Arius and Origen perhaps is a good way to begin an investigation of Arius. What do we know about Origen? We know that Origen studied with

a famous Neo-Platonic philosopher, and perhaps then Plato provides some of the roots for Origen's theology. Can Plato also be the ground from which Arianism has grown? Some have thought so and argue very vigorously that that's the case. Perhaps Origen himself provided the background for Arius's thoughts concerning the Trinity, and I should perhaps mention that during this time period the subject for dispute is concerning the Trinity, but primarily concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son, between God the Father and His Son, and the issues are going to be what is the precise relationship between God the Father and God the Son? And in what ways is Jesus Christ fully God and fully man and is such a strange communion of Godhood and human being—is a mixture of Godness and humanness even possible? These questions seem rather old to us, they seem like they're easy to answer, but we're going to find as we investigate further in the next few minutes that the first articulations as to this relationship were not easy to find, and this is the issue of the theology of Arius.

Does Arius find the roots of his teaching in the church fathers themselves, especially seeing what we've talked about very briefly and we'll talk about in more detail later, the idea of subordinationism, and that word should be underlined in your notes. That's an important word to understand as we begin to investigate this relationship between the Father and the Son.

How did Arius begin his thinking? Probably Arius did adopt from Origen a subordinationistic theory of the Trinity, that is, that the Son is very much subordinate to the Father, and I've explained that word before looking at its Latin roots. Perhaps Arius also took from Origen the doctrine of human free will and self-determination, but perhaps not. Again, the discussion has been intense over the years. Many names have been connected with different theories concerning the roots of Origenism, and without going into a lot of detail and our bibliography connected with the lecture notes will give us some of that material that we can investigate on our own, but without going into a lot of detail in the lectures themselves, I hope that I have communicated with you the intensity of the discussion concerning these roots, and the complexity of Arius's theology helps to contribute to the amount of confusion and discussion concerning this.

What's the bottom line for us? It seems to us that certainly in Arius there is an influence of Origen, and the important thing to remember is that subordinationism, which is a hallmark of

Origen's thought, but not just Origen, is a key characteristic of the theology of Arius. How do we understand Arius then? As a subordinationist, where does his thought come from? Probably from Origen, but also from other church fathers, some of whom we haven't even investigated in detail, like Paul of Samosata. Is there also pagan thought inherent in Origen's teaching? Yes, we see that a cosmology, a theory of how the world is created and how it is developed, is also inherent in Arius's thought. So we see a number of influences, and it's very difficult for us to narrow down one particular person or one particular school of thought as providing the ground structure for Arius himself.

There are some other problems with attempting to determine the roots of Arius's thought, and that is we don't have a lot of his works left anymore. He was considered a heretic from the very beginning, and there doesn't seem to be a great propensity in the church to keep heretical literature beside your bed at night next to the Bible. Those books were thrown out; they were destroyed. So we only have some scraps, some figments, especially scraps relating to the refutation of Arius's thought. And so a very difficult question has been wrestled with by scholars of the ancient church, and I think we understand now the bottom line of a complex thinker who has taken from various streams of thought and molded them together to create a counter-Christology, a counter-Christian way of looking at the relationship between the Father and the Son, and we'll see why Arianism was attractive, and we'll see why it posed such a threat to the church.

The issue that we face as we look at Arianism is the issue of salvation itself. Only such an issue would cause the church to come into such an uproar. At this point we need to introduce another player in the field of battle, and this player's name is Athanasius. He is a very, very important figure in the ancient church. He's one person whom I deeply admire and I really look forward to meeting Athanasius at a time in the future. He was a man of great courage. He was a man who was able to cut through theological issues. He was also a man of great pastoral concern. Yes, the Lord blessed the church richly in giving us Athanasius, and he was just the man for the hour.

Athanasius approached theology from an entirely different vantage point than Arius. The primary motive in Athanasius's thought was neither philosophical nor cosmological speculation, but rather he was convinced that the important thing to communicate to those outside of the church and to remind those within the church

was what he calls the “conviction of redemption.” He maintains, Athanasius, that the Father, God the Father, and God the Son are alike, that is, that they are similar to each other; and he uses the important Greek word which you should write down, *homoioi*, that they are alike. He rejects the proposal of Arius that if there is any type of likeness between the Father and the Son, it’s in their willing; that is, that the Son willed to will the same things that the Father wished.

Athanasius also differs from Arius in maintaining that the Son is, and here’s another technical phrase, eternally generated from the Father, eternally generated. Those two words are self-explanatory, that the Son from all time, eternally, comes forth, proceeds from the Father. And we’ll be talking more and more about eternal generation as we go on, but that idea, which is a biblical one, was implemented by Athanasius in refuting Arius’s argument that if the Son is eternal, then He should not be termed *Son* but rather brother. Arius thinks that just like in human generation, if I am born at the same time as someone else, then that person is my brother rather than my son; that is, my son would be born twenty-five or thirty years after I am born. So a son by definition, according to Arius, must be born later than the father. Now doesn’t that make sense? Doesn’t it make sense that all sons are born after their father? Of course it does. And so we begin to realize that here are some difficult issues: that if we are going to call Jesus the Son of God, can we also say that He is eternally with God? And if we say that He’s eternally with God, wouldn’t it be better to call Him the brother of God rather than the Son of God? All of these terms, words like “son,” words like “eternal,” will come under intense scrutiny by the ancient church as the church tries to take the Bible’s message and hammer out a positive, a solid, a simple gospel of the relationship between the Father and the Son. So we must see that the whole way in which Arius and Athanasius approach the doing of theology in the cultural context of the church of the fourth Century, that they approach that theology from different vantage points. As we do that, we can begin to see why such a heated discussion will come.

Let’s take a look at Athanasius’s theology as a good and proper theology, and as we understand Athanasius, we’ll be able to understand Arius in contrast to Athanasius. We begin with Athanasius’s doctrine of the Son of God, also the Word of God. Word of God and Son of God are coterminous. It’s easy to see that Athanasius maintained the complete divinity of the Word of God. Jesus is completely divine. It’s easy to see that God always had His

Word, and therefore the Son of God is eternal. That generation of the Son from the Father is an eternal process. The Son might be called the eternal offspring of the Father. The Son shares the nature of the Father, a nature that is immaterial as well as without parts, yet, and this is very important to maintain too, yet the Son is distinct from the Father. Let's quickly summarize. What do we see so far? The Father and the Son are in a relationship. They are the same or alike; that is, that they are equally immaterial as well as without parts. And the Son is eternally, even now, being generated from the Father. He's the eternal offspring of the Father, and so He too is fully eternal. And yet because they are Father and because they are Son, the two are certainly distinct—unified and yet distinct.

Very important for our discussion of the doctrine of the Son, and doctrine by the way just means teaching here, is that in Athanasius's thought an identity of substance between the Father and the Son is firmly established. Athanasius is going to become the leader of a group of theologians who are convinced that if the Father and the Son share the same Godhead, they must have identity of substance. Now how can we talk about substance when we talk about God? A substance is something, for example, you pour from a bottle or you cut a steak, that's substance. What kind of substance is immaterial and without parts? That word *substance* is also going to be a word that is hotly debated and hotly contested. What kind of a substance is invisible?

As the theologians wrestle with this definition of the nature of their God, Athanasius, as I've mentioned before, maintains that with this identity of substance, they are alike, *homoioi*. "The Son," he says, "is the image of the Father." Because as Jesus Himself says, "When we see Christ, we also see the Father," and therefore that identity of image is important. This identity of image or of likeness between the Father and the Son is not just that of man to man—for example, that I look like any other man, having two arms and two legs and two eyes—but it is also a likeness of nature. Athanasius says the Son is the offspring of His Father's substance. Again, that's a very important development in terms of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

This idea of the identity of substance leads Athanasius to affirm oneness and identity of being between the Father and the Son. Does any of this sound new or radical to you? No, it shouldn't. This should sound like old stuff, old theology. These are things that we assume without question, and that's correct. These are not new



issues for us, but we as twentieth-century Christians are relying upon the articulations of the past; things that we take for granted must still be ironed out. Yet Athanasius does hold intention, that even though there is a union in the Godhead between the Father and the Son, yet there is still a difference between the two. And how is that difference understood? We've mentioned it briefly once before. That difference is understood in that the Son is offspring. He is being generated. And that difference, and at this point, that difference alone, makes the Father and the Son to be distinguishable.

And so we can say in summary that the deity, the divinity of the Father and the Son is actually identical. Very, very important to make sure we understand. When we're talking about divinity itself, there's not more divinity to the Father because He generates the Son and less divinity of the Son because He is eternally generated. This distinction is going to be carried through; that is, of a lesser deity or of a lesser divinity by those who are fighting against the church.

So Athanasius tells us the deity of the Father is that of the Son. Athanasius also says that the being of the Father is proper to the Son and that He is of the same nature as the Father, but the Son is of another essence and of another kind from all creatures. The nature of the Father and the Son is one. The Son is seen as offspring and because of being offspring He is different from the Father, and yet as God, He is the same. The Father and the Son are one in the identity of that one deity; they are both fully God and so whatever is predicated of God the Father as God must also be given to God the Son. Whew! That's difficult to understand, and I want to emphasize that it's very important, and that's our summary—God the Father and God the Son are identical in their deity and yet they are different? How are they different? They are different because the Son is generated from the Father, but all the attributes, the divine attributes that we give to God the Father must be given to God the Son as well. Is that understood? That in terms of their divinity they're the same, and yet they are distinct.

They are different. If this is clear, then we can understand the theology of Arius.

But let's continue to look at Athanasius to fill in some of the details that we have gone over quickly, and once again we'll be able to reflect the theology of Arius against this understanding of Athanasius. Concerning Athanasius's doctrine of the Godhead,

there are two emphases in his thought, and I'll introduce another word that is important. God is both monad and yet distinct, and that word *monad* is an important one. Obviously it comes from the Greek language meaning "one," God is one, and yet they are distinct. That's a summary of everything we've seen before. The Father and the Son share the same *ousia*, another technical word that you should write down. The Greek word *ousia*, and we'll begin to define that word in just a minute, yet the distinctions between them are real. The distinction lies between the Godhead considered as eternally activating, eternally begetting, and the self-saying Godhead being acted upon, being expressed, being begotten.

Now this idea of monad—unity—and distinction means that as the Son works, He is accomplishing the Father's works and yet the Father's works are always expressed through the activity of the Son. Whatever Jesus does, He does in union with the Father, in calm union with the Father, and what the Father wants to be done is done in union with the Son, they work together. There is what we call a unity of activity. This unity of activity is important, because as there is a unity of activity, this gives us another glimpse at how Athanasius is going to strive against what we call subordinationism or any subordination of the Son to the Father. But you know for Athanasius, we can't speak of the Godhead and only talk about the Father and the Son, for Athanasius the Godhead exists as a triad. This triad, like the Father and the Son, shares the same essence, and that essence is indivisible. They have the same activity—the Father and the Son and the Spirit. Athanasius is convinced that the Scriptures demonstrate that the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, belongs to and is one with the Godhead, which is a triad.

At this point we need to think about what we have seen so far in the previous lectures. Has there been much discussion of the Holy Spirit? I'm not sure that I've even mentioned the name of the Holy Spirit once. We're going to see that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the least developed part of Christian theology in the ancient church period. We're going to notice that Athanasius in these developments, in his articulations and expressions concerning the nature of the Trinity, is making important, even radical moves forward. In maintaining especially that the Spirit is one in Godhead with the Father and the Son, he is once again avoiding another form of subordinationism. Just as an example, let's move backwards historically and talk a little bit about Origen.



Origen considered the relationship between the Father and the Son and the Spirit as one of tremendous subordination; that is, the Father is fully divine, He is fully transcendent; that is, beyond being, He is so high, He is so beyond us that He's unknowable, and between the Father and the Son is a huge gap of divinity, a huge descending spiral is the best way to understand Origen's conceptualization of the relationship between the Father and the Son. And between the Son and the Holy Spirit is another huge gap of divinity, another huge descending spiral downwards, and so the difference between the Holy Spirit and God the Father is tremendous. Athanasius says, "No, this teaching is wrong. All three persons of the Godhead are fully divine."

Athanasius, now returning back to Athanasius, maintains that the Spirit is fully divine and consubstantial with the Father and the Son. That word *consubstantial* is going to be another technical term that we'll be looking at extensively in the forthcoming lectures. Once again, we should understand that from its Latin roots—*con* meaning "with"—consubstantial. He is with the same substance as the Father and the Son. And then in terms of summary, we should understand that this is in radical discontinuity from Origen's frame of thought concerning the relationship between the three persons of the Trinity.

Continuing Athanasius's understanding of the Holy Spirit, I need to say a few more things just so that you have a clear picture. The Holy Spirit, because He is fully divine, is also eternal; the Holy Spirit is also indivisible; the Holy Spirit must also then be consubstantial. The Son belongs to the essence of the Father, as we have already understood. In Athanasius's thought, then, since the Son and the Spirit are closely related, then the Spirit belongs to the essence of the Son as the Son belongs to the essence of the Father. For Athanasius, and we might see some subtle distinctions between his teaching and later teaching, for Athanasius the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son, and later on I think that you'll see that we consider the Spirit to be the Spirit of the Son and the Father. Athanasius at this point is talking about the Spirit as the Spirit of the Son; that is, as the Son is in close relationship with the Father, so the Spirit is in a close, and we say closer relationship to the Son, and so the Spirit is the Spirit of the Son bestowed by the Son to Christians and to the church to sanctify the church and to enlighten the church, and those are two of the main functions of the Spirit—sanctifying and enlightening—but the Spirit shares in the activity with the Son inspiring the prophets. The prophets, both the apostles in the New Testament and the prophets of the

Old, were inspired by the Spirit with the activity of the Son.

So we need to think that in concluding his doctrine of the Holy Spirit that the Spirit is more proceeding from the Son rather than the Father, and so, although he's making tremendous advances in Trinitarian theology, it has not yet reached the full-orbed expression that is familiar to us in twentieth-century America.

Now concerning the doctrine of the Spirit, all advances in doctrine come with fighting in the church. Let me say that again. If the church advances in its doctrine, that never comes without a fight, and so theological discussion through the centuries, and I say this to comfort those of you who are pastoring and involved in theological discussion, theological advance never comes without someone fighting against that advance, and the same is the case during the time of Athanasius. Of course, the main battlefield will be concerning Christology, the doctrine of the Son, but also there are those who fight against Athanasius's conception of the deity of the Holy Spirit, and these people were called the "Spirit fighters," that would be our translation of the Pneumatomachians. They are the ones who had reservations concerning the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They pointed out that the silence of the Bible concerning the divinity of the Spirit and the rather impossible notion of them intellectually to see a Godhead as containing more than a Father and a Son means that there really can't be a fully divine third person of the Trinity.

They argued, "It's hard enough to see a fully divine Father and a fully divine Son. Please don't confuse the issue with talking about a divine Holy Spirit." And these people thought that the Holy Spirit was perhaps an angel that inspired the prophets, an angel that helps us in our sanctification. The Spirit fighters never built themselves up to be a strong faction in the church; they were probably more a local sect in the area where Athanasius is pastoring, but they too are fought by Athanasius. And so be encouraged that as the church comes into a fuller and more complete understanding of the Scriptures, together with that fuller and more complete understanding, will be those who take the counter position, and in taking that counter position force the church to come to a deeper reflection on the Scriptures. And this important practical lesson will be seen over and over again as we detail the events between especially the years 325, the Council of Nicea, and 381.

Moving on quickly to some of the other fields, some of the other players, excuse me, in the field of thought, let me introduce the church father by the name of Alexander of Alexandria. That's an easy name to remember. He too thought that the Father is the one ingenerate. The Father is unchangeable and immutable, and he maintained that the Son, or as he would rather call Him, the Logos (that's the Greek word for "Word") is coeternal with the Father. He too is generated without beginning, and He is an intermediary between God the Father and the created universe. He's inseparable from the Father. He's also the only begotten of the Father, who was also unchangeable and immutable.

Alexander also thought that there was a unity in the Trinity, and especially he found the text of Jesus, the words of Jesus, "I and my Father are one," as an important proof for the unity between the two persons of the Trinity. But although they are one, they are also distinct. So Alexander of Alexandria played also an important role in the discussions concerning the heresy of Arianism.

The next person that I would like to introduce very briefly now is Eusebius of Caesarea, and I'd like to summarize his life and teachings very quickly. For Eusebius God is a monad. Now we've used that word before. Monad means "one." And as we thought about Athanasius do you remember I mentioned two things—look in your notes—God is monad and yet what? He is monad and yet distinct. For Eusebius, the emphasis on the nature of God the Father is on His oneness, and listen for this theme as we begin to further elaborate the discussion surrounding the theology of Arius.

It is absolutely essential that we hold both the unity of the Godhead and distinctions within the Godhead, and if we emphasize one or the other, then we'll be underemphasizing the important truths of the corresponding doctrine. In other words, if you see God primarily as monad, and some characters do during this time period, or later on as you see God primarily as distinct, then the emphasize upon one or the other of the attributes of God skews the other attributes. And this is what Eusebius does. God is a monad and, therefore, to talk about any other co-deity will necessarily push those theologians who hold to extreme monadism into subordinationism. In other words, if God is one, and we have to think, we have to become sympathetic to this teaching (although it's wrong), if God is one, and remember the cry of Israel, "Hear, O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one." If we hold to that, then we move into subordinationism; that is, yes, there can be a Son

who is divine, but He can't fully be divine in the same way that the Father is divine. That will move us to subordinationism, and this is what Eusebius does.

So given that, those two important points, the third things we should remember about Eusebius and a following corollary is that the Logos, this Son, is the power of God, the wisdom of God, he says is however second to the Father. Eusebius maintains that the Father preexists the Son, and again Eusebius is dependent upon normal definitions of terms. All fathers necessarily preexist their son; therefore, since Jesus calls God the Father His Father, He must necessarily preexist the Son, and so the Son is begotten by an act of the Father's will. Just like children are generated today by an act of the father's will, so the Son is generated by an act of the Father's will and therefore cannot coexist eternally with the Father. That would imply for Eusebius two ingenerate first principles and would fly in the face of his first presupposition which is that God is a monad. And this thought of Eusebius, as you can imagine, is going to be closely aligned with the thought of Arius.

And I'd like to say in concluding today's lecture on Eusebius that the Logos is in all points perfectly similar to the Father, and He's considered the only begotten of the Father, and yet He's radically different from the Father, that being only begotten means that the Son doesn't resemble the creatures, however, that the Son made, but He's more like the Father who begat Him. Summarizing, God is a monad for Eusebius; therefore, his Christology will be subordinationistic. This Logos or Son is the power and wisdom of God, second to the Father, the only begotten of the Father, similar, perfectly similar to the Father in being only begotten, and yet distinct from the Father in that as perhaps even a creation of the Father by the act of His will, He's different from the creatures who are made by the Son or the Logos.

Thank you very much. We'll pick up on this theme in our next lecture.