

THE THIRD OPTION

By Peter Barfoot

Few of us, I trust, would be so uncharitable as to dismiss Athanasius as a mere dogmatist who pressured his fellow bishops into accepting the Doctrine of the Trinity so harshly that they eventually consented. Had we caught Athanasius on a good day, which is to say an Arius-free day, we might well have found ourselves enjoying with him the Alexandrian equivalent to coffee and muffins.

The same might also be said of Arius, who was a priest of the same city. Alexandria was the second-largest city in the Roman Empire, and by far the most multicultural. But for the doctrinal division between the two, they might have become close colleagues and even good friends. "Iron sharpens iron, so a man the countenance of his friend." Still, it is inevitable that sparks fly in the process.

While it is also true that one cannot make an omelet without breaking an egg or two, the confusion that resulted from Athanasius' claim of an Eternal Son ended up breaking dozens. But if Athanasius was controversial, he was no more so than Arius, who held that the Son preexisted as a created God.

The division between the two was essentially their argument as to who Jesus was prior to the Incarnation – was he the Eternal Son, and thus equally God, or was he the Created Son, and therefore a lesser God? The assertive and unyielding nature of

both bishops ensured that what ought to have been a matter of understandably intense discussion between two leaders was unfortunately seen in public excoriation and even imperial exile. Their mutual antipathy ended when the bowels of Arius burst in a public toilet just before what was to have been a conclusive debate. God had judged Arius, the disciples of Athanasius were quick to say (not altogether unexpectedly).

Was Arius poisoned? Who knows? But to Athanasius the sudden and unexpected death of Arius would have come as a great relief. Not that the matter was then settled, because Arius – he of the quick, fiery temper – had for years busied himself spreading his doctrine in what we know as the Balkans and Bulgaria, where its roots would hold fast for hundreds of years.

Athanasius was by nature no less aggressive, but it was his persistence that finally decided the matter, and at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD the whole thing was finally resolved. The Roman emperor Constantine, who presided over the gathering, had decided that enough was enough. The bishops agreed with Athanasius that Jesus had preexisted in eternity as God the Son, and that he was of the same substance as the Father. It was the unity Constantine had wanted and had worked towards for a decade.

Although ostensibly a Christian, the Emperor was a worshipper of Helios, the sun god, so it was probably no great leap of faith for him to accept the concept that the Son of God was also God the Son.

Endless library shelves have been filled with books, many written by authors of note, about the men and the events here covered in brief. Would that more time was spent on the physiology of the apostles' doctrine – how it worked in church life – than on the anatomy of church tradition – the kind that produced theologians such as Arius and Athanasius!

The Doctrine of the Trinity was the product of a bishop who, while a follower of Christ, was also an ecclesiastical operator. Its final acceptance was stamped with the approval of a pagan emperor of Rome whose claim to be a Christian has long been called into question, and whose Damoclesian Sword of Disapproval hung over the uneasy heads of the bishops assembled at the Council.

Imagine our politicians in Federal Parliament being refused recess for the summer holidays until they all agreed to pass legislation many of them disliked, and you get the picture (although Constantine was certainly no democrat).

But what if the two unbending adversaries had thought of a third option: that Jesus Christ was neither a created nor a preexistent God? Might not they have agreed that Jesus, though divine in nature, was in every other way human? And might not that conclusion have preserved the Church from errors that have long divided it – the error of the Trinity in particular?

The Doctrine of the Trinity built a bridge to a theological blend of Christianity and Greek philosophy. Sadly, most Christians

still cross the same bridge today. It is a bridge that Jews have never crossed, despite severe medieval Church persecution; a bridge which we who have come to the truth of the One True God also refuse to cross, the disapproval of our Christian brethren notwithstanding.

The divide is unnoticed by non-Christians. The followers of Arius' doctrine, known today as Jehovah's Witnesses, are sidelined in the debate, which is now between Christian Trinitarians and equally Christian non-Trinitarians. The debate is nowhere near as rancorous, thank God, as it was in the time of the Nicene Council.

The Third Option is the belief that neither a created Son nor God the Son preexisted in eternity, but rather the word that was with God, and that was God. That word was made flesh 2000 years ago in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God.

The Son of God was "begotten" by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, and so had the sinless nature of his heavenly Father. This "begetting" of Jesus Christ was unique, the Spirit of God overshadowing Mary and enabling her to conceive (receive, enclose) the *logos*. (Luke 1:31) It was a spiritual act, not a sexual one. The Greek literally reads, "The Holy One *who is being generated* shall be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:35) Jesus the Son of God had the divine nature of His Father when "*made of a woman*", as Paul put it, in referring to his humanity. (Galatians 4:4)

The “power of the Highest” overshadowed the lowly Mary, and so was generated “the Son of the Highest.” Christians respect Jesus as our Elder Brother whom the Apostle Paul refers to as “the firstborn *among* many brethren” (Romans 8:29), a position that gives him the preeminence over his younger brothers and sisters. “For both he who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all from One (God), for which cause he is not ashamed to call *them* brethren, saying, I will declare Your name to my brethren; in the midst of the church I will sing praise to You.” (Hebrews 2:10–12)

“For of course it was not angels but the descendants of Abraham that he was to help, so he had to be made like his brethren, so that he could be a merciful and faithful high priest in things relating to God, to make atonement for the sins of the people.” (Hebrews 2:16, 17)

When the Jews protested to Jesus, “We are Abraham’s seed”, and “Abraham is our father”, Jesus rejoined, “If you were Abraham’s children you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth I have heard from God: Abraham did not do this.” (John 8:39, 40)

Jesus added, “You are of your father the devil...” (Verse 44) It’s clear that Jesus was pointing out their sinful nature, because, when later speaking of their natural lineage, he said, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it, and was glad.” (John 8:8:56)

A true child of Abraham exhibits Abraham's faith. Jesus called a woman he had loosed from a spirit of infirmity "a daughter of Abraham". (Luke 13:16) When Zacchaeus vowed to give half of his goods to the poor and to restore, fourfold, anything taken by false accusation, Jesus said to him, "This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham." (Luke 19:9)

Since we and our elder brother both have the same Father, we also share the same nature. We are made "partakers of—share with one another in—the divine nature." (2 Peter 1:4) This is because we are "born again, of (from) incorruptible seed, by (means of) the word of God..." (1 Peter 1:23)

Paul writes in Romans 4:16 of Abraham being "the father of us all", and in Galatians 3:29 of those belonging to Christ being the true descendents of Abraham, and heirs according to the promise God made to him—that he should own the world.

Jesus was "begotten" when the Holy Spirit "overshadowed" Mary, when she received the word. Similarly, we were "born from above" *of* "incorruptible seed" *through* the word of God. (John 3:3) The word itself was not the seed but rather the medium by which the seed was sown. When the virgin, Mary, said, "Be it unto me according to your word", she consented to receive and to enclose the word spoken by Gabriel.

Jesus alone in history was born of a virgin. However, those who are "born again" share the nature of their heavenly Father, for they are His Son's spiritual siblings. That nature is sinless!

“Whosoever is born of God does not commit sin; for his seed remains in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.”
(1 John 3:9)

We gain our understanding of the true nature of Jesus from the clear teaching of the New Testament, from which Arius and Athanasius, but for their blindness, would have seen a Third Option: that Jesus was neither a preexistent God the Son nor a preexistent, created (and therefore lesser) God.

If all Christ’s followers were to choose this Third Option, the Church as a whole would enjoy the unity of which Jesus spoke, and for which he prayed: that we might be one, even as he and the Father are one. Jesus saw unity not an option but a fellowship to die for.