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### Case 1: The Arian Controversy

The patristic period of Christian history saw much debate over the person of Christ, which is known as Christology. Many of these debates were settled in ecumenical councils. The first Christological development regarded the divinity of Jesus Christ. Could Jesus Christ be described as God? Were God and Jesus Christ one or two? Early viewpoints emerged, but were later overshadowed by two prominent positions held by Arius, who believed that Christ could not be described as God, and Athanasius of Alexandria, who believed that Jesus was God incarnate.

The first position in the Arian controversy was held by Arius. It is important to note that historians only know most of Arius's beliefs through the rebuttals given by his opponents, so it is possible that his views were presented in a biased manner (*Historical Theology* 43). Arius's thinking was akin to the Neoplatonic hierarchy in that he believed that Jesus Christ and God were two distinct beings, not the same being. He argued that God was unchangeable, therefore it was impossible that Jesus Christ was God incarnate (*The Christian Theology Reader* 231). Arius wrote the famous line, "There was when he was not," in which he was stating that the Father existed before the Son, thus the Son had a beginning, while the Father did not (*Historical Theology* 43). Since the Father existed before the Son and the Father created all of creation, the Father created the Son. Arius was sure to explain that he believed the Son outranked other

creatures, but was not of the same divinity as God (*Historical Theology* 43-44). This created Arius's distinction between God and Jesus Christ.

Arius claimed that the Son was reliant on God, while God was self-reliant, so the Son could not be as divine as the Father (*Historical Theology* 44). In response, many of Arius's opponents presented him with scripture (specifically from the gospel of John) that displayed the unity between God and Christ. Arius defended himself by stating that any mention of the unity between God and Christ must be metaphorical since there was "a time when Christ was not," (*Historical Theology* 44). Finally, Arius argued that if God was unknowable to creatures and the Son was a creature because he was created by God, then God must also be unknowable to the Son. In other words, since the Son was reliant on the grace of God like any other creature, he could not fully know God (*Historical Theology* 44). Arius's belief can be summarized using one term: homoiousios, which means "of like substance," (*Historical Theology* 46). He refused to believe in the full divinity of Christ because of Christ's apparent creature-like nature, but he did believe that God and Christ were similar.

The second position in the Arian controversy was held by Athanasius of Alexandria. Many of his arguments were in response to Arius's reasoning. Athanasius contended that Jesus Christ was fully divine in that he could save humanity, but that Christ also possessed human characteristics (*The Christian Theology Reader* 232). To summarize this point, Athanasius wrote in a letter around 350 CE, "He spat in human fashion, but his spittle had divine power, for by it he restored sight to the eyes of the man blind from birth," (*The Christian Theology Reader* 232). In Athanasius's view, Christ experienced human feelings and could perform human actions, but also performed miracles. Athanasius relied on John 1:14, which stated, "The word became

flesh,” to assert that “God entered into our human situation in order to change it,” (*Historical Theology* 45). If the Son was a creature like Arius argued, then he would have been on the same level as any other creature, as there is no other type of creature that he could have been (*Historical Theology* 44). This was one of the many times that Athanasius indicated contradictions in Arius’s arguments.

Athanasius’s main argument was that the New Testament described Christ as a Savior, but if only God could save, then Jesus must be God incarnate (*Historical Theology* 45). Alister McGrath summarized Athanasius’s logic in a concise manner: “No creature can redeem another creature. According to Arius, Jesus Christ is a creature. Therefore, according to Arius, Jesus Christ cannot redeem humanity,” (*Historical Theology* 45). Using scriptural references of Jesus Christ as a Savior, Athanasius essentially stated that if only God can save, but the New Testament says that Jesus Christ saves, then Jesus Christ must be God (*Historical Theology* 45). From this, one can conclude that Athanasius firmly believed that Christ and God were one being, not two.

His final argument was regarding the way in which Christians worshiped and prayed. Christians worshiped Jesus Christ, but if Christ was a creature like Arius said, then Christians would have been participating in idolatry because they were worshiping a creature, which is prohibited by the Ten Commandments (*Historical Theology* 45). Thus, Arius made Christians look foolish for defying the Ten Commandments. Athanasius insisted that Christians were not foolish to worship Christ, because Christ was God incarnate and it was legal to worship God (*Historical Theology* 45). In contrast to Arius’s belief in a homoiousios relationship between God and Christ, Athanasius believed in a homoousios relationship, meaning “of the same

substance,” (*Historical Theology* 46). To Athanasius, God and Christ were one being, and God came to Earth in human form as Jesus Christ.

The debate had to be settled in order to maintain peace within the church. In the end, it centered around the terms homoiousios (of like substance) and homoousios (of the same substance) (*Historical Theology* 46). While only differing by one letter, the terms described two different relationships between God and Christ. Eventually, homoousios gained more popularity, as many people followed Athanasius’s line of thinking. The Nicene Creed of 381, drafted by the Council of Nicea, declared that Christ was, in fact, homoousios to God (*Historical Theology* 46). This decision became a large part of what is known today as Christian orthodoxy for Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox churches (*Historical Theology* 46).

Arius lost the debate, mostly because his arguments were full of contradictions of scripture; eventually his position was declared heretical. This controversy, combined with the later declaration that the Holy Spirit was also equal to God and Jesus Christ, developed what is known as the Trinity, in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are equal. They are one, rather than three distinct beings. Many debates followed the Arian controversy, but the Arian controversy was the first to be decided by an ecumenical council and was the first of many decisions regarding Christology.

Works Cited

McGrath, Alister E. *Historical Theology: an Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*.

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McGrath, Alister E. *The Christian Theology Reader*. Wiley Blackwell, 2017.