

"When Catchy Worship Songs Teach Bad Theology"

Colossians 1:15

5 March 2023

Turn in your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1. And, while you do that, I'm going to warm up the time machine because I want to take you back to the beginning of the 4th century. Things are pretty stable as far as the church is concerned. Martyrdom and persecution is almost a thing of the past. Christians are not experiencing persecution as much as they did in earlier centuries. There's no heat or pressure coming down upon the church from the government, because Constantine is the Emperor, and he is partial to the church. So, outside the church, things have cooled off. Martyrdom and persecution is now a thing of the past.

But, now there is a problem *within* the church. There are people who call themselves believers, they call themselves Christians, but they are confessing something different than what the church has proclaimed for the first 3 centuries. Things which directly contradict the passage we're looking at today.

In the 4th century, the main issue facing the church was this: *How are we to understand the relationship between God the Father and His Son, Jesus? Is the Son created by the Father? Is Jesus eternal, or did He have a beginning point in time? Is the Son's essence, His nature, the same essence and nature as the God the Father?*

So, the problem facing the church in the 4th century was *inside* the church. But, that's not exactly accurate because it eventually spilled out into the streets! Literally spilled out into the streets. But, before I tell you about that, let's read God's word. And, today's sermon will be more of a sermon/lecture hybrid because I want us to go back in time and look at something that happened in church history. Anytime I can bring in some church history, I will.

And, what we'll see today is that-

IF YOU MAKE JESUS LESS THAN GOD, THEN YOU MAKE THE GOSPEL LESS THAN GOOD.

If you mess up the person of Jesus, then you mess up His work. If you get the person of Christ wrong, then you get the work of Christ wrong. If you get Jesus wrong, then you get the Gospel wrong. If Jesus is not God's eternal Son, *being loved by His Father*, in the Spirit, in eternity past, then the Gospel is not good news. If Jesus is not God's eternal Son *loving His Father*, in the Spirit, in eternity past, then the Gospel is not good news. If the Triune God is not sharing love in eternity past before He ever created anything, then the Gospel is not good news.

Okay. Colossians 1. I want to read all of verses 15-20, but we're just going to be focusing on verse 15 today. Many New Testament scholars believe this is actually some kind of worship song that churches in Paul's day sang in church. If it is, then this is an example of a catchy worship song teaching good theology.

LOOK AT VERSE 15...

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

My goodness! This passage should humble us. This passage should make us drop to our knees in awe and adoration. Why? Because when Paul said in verse 14 that we were transferred into the kingdom of the Son of His love, *this* is that Son, and *this* is His kingdom! Verses 15-23 explain who the Son of His love is and the scope of His kingdom. And, if we want to walk in a manner worthy of Him and please Him, as we saw last week, we have to know Him, who He is, and what He has done for us. And, Paul spells that out for us.

So, who is the Son of His love? Answer: He is the eternal Son of God who reigns over all. His kingdom extends over all, over everything. All creation. All nations and people groups. All languages. All animals. All plants. All artwork. All music. All everything! But, this was being questioned in the 4th century. People began to question if Jesus was the eternal Son of God. And, eventually the internal problems of the church actually began to spill out onto the streets. Think *theological riots*. Can you imagine a riot over theology?

Here's what happened. In A.D. 318 a riot broke out in the city of Alexandria (in Egypt), and people flooded the streets, and they were chanting, *"There was a time when Christ was not! There was a time when Christ was not!"* These people believed that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God, but that He was actually created by God- the very first thing created by God. So, you had people on one side of the street chanting that Jesus was a created being, and then on the other side of the street, you had people shouting that Jesus was the eternal Son of God.

It was like that old beer commercial:

"Less filling!"

"Tastes great!"

*"There was a time when Christ was not!
"Jesus is the eternal Son of God!"*

Back and forth they went. Back and forth on *Facebook* and *Twitter*. But, this shouting match didn't just spill out into the streets of Alexandria in Egypt. It eventually spread all throughout the Roman empire. People went back and forth on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, debating whether or not Jesus was the eternal Son of God. And, it threatened to split the church right down the middle.

So, how did the church get here? How did this "doctrinal shouting match" come about? Well, we owe that to one of the most infamous heretics in all of church history. His name: *Arius*. And, here's why the church eventually condemned him as a heretic: Arius taught that Jesus was not the *eternal* Son of God. Arius believed that Jesus was the very first created being.

But how did Arius get there? What led him to believe that Jesus was created by God? Well, let's go back in time to a Bible church in Alexandria, Egypt where Arius is the pastor. Arius began to teach that Jesus was not the eternal Son of God. That Jesus did not exist in eternity past. That you could point to a date on the calendar when God made Him.

But please understand: Arius didn't just make this up out of thin air. Arius preached from the Bible... *just like most heretics!* And he was doing a series on the book of Proverbs, and he came to Proverbs 8 where he was teaching on "wisdom." And Arius read Proverbs 8:22, which says this-

The Lord possessed me, at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old.

Now, Proverbs 8:22 is saying that it was with wisdom that God created the world; that God possessed wisdom when He created the world. But, the Hebrew word here for "possessed" has 2 Hebrews roots though, and it can also mean, "to create," depending on the context.

So, when Arius was preaching through the book of Proverbs, he took the translation as "*The Lord created me at the beginning of His work...*" Arius did not teach that God *possessed wisdom* as He created the world. Arius took the word to mean that God created "wisdom" at the beginning of creation. So, for Arius, wisdom was the very first thing that God created.

And, as Arius is working on his sermon on Proverbs 8:22, the lights go off in his head and he says to himself: "*There's another place in the New Testament that mentions wisdom!*" So, Arius turns to 1 Corinthians, which says-

1 Corinthians 1:24
Christ the power of God and wisdom of God...

1 Corinthians 1:30
And because of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God...

So, as Arius puts these 2 verses together, with Proverbs 8:22, he comes to the conclusion that:

- 1) *Since Christ is the wisdom of God according to 1 Corinthians, and*
- 2) *Since wisdom was the first thing that God created according to Proverbs 8, then-*
- 3) *Jesus must have been the very first thing that God created.*

Arius believed that since Jesus is the wisdom of God, and since wisdom was the first thing that God created, then Jesus was the first thing that God created. And then Jesus, as the Creator, created all other things. Jesus was more than a human, according to Arius, but He did not have the same essence or nature as God the Father.

So, instead of seeing Proverbs 8:22 as saying that it was through wisdom that God created the world, Arius took it to be that God created wisdom before He created anything else, and since Jesus is the wisdom of God according to 1 Corinthians 1, then Jesus was the very first thing that God created.

Crazy, huh? And guess where Arius came up with this idea? Where did Arius get this idea? From the Bible. For instance, our passage in Colossians 1.

LOOK AT VERSE 15 AGAIN...

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.

Arius read that and said, "See! Jesus is the firstborn of all creation. The first thing God made. And then He created everything else." Arius did not understand what Paul was saying here, that Jesus is the image of the invisible God. He makes God seen and known. That He is God. That to see Jesus is to see God. As Jesus Himself says in John 14-

John 14:8-9

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"

Jesus makes the invisible God visible with flesh and blood, bone and tissue, spleen and big toes. But, it isn't just in the incarnation that Jesus is the image of God. It also applies to His pre-existence. As G.K. Beale says, "...it is clear that the main thought in verse 15 is of Christ being in God's image before creation began...Paul is speaking of the eternal relationship of the Son to the Father."

And, when Paul says that Jesus is the "firstborn of all creation," he means that Jesus has all the rights and privileges of a firstborn son. Like the son of a king is the rightful heir of the kingdom. That's how the word *firstborn* is used. Paul is saying that Jesus is preeminent. The first in rank and honor. But, Arius read that and thought Jesus was the first created being. And where did Arius get this idea? From the Bible.

Understand this: We must be very careful when we read the Bible because we can make the Bible sing any song we want to. People use the Bible to justify all kinds of beliefs and behavior- because you can make the Bible sing any song that you want to. Arius used the Bible, he used God's word, used the book of Proverbs to claim that Jesus did not exist in eternity past. This is why we are to read Scripture in community. One of my church history professors, Dr. Jeff Bingham, said it this way-

"You cannot trust me to be a gentleman with Scripture on a date by myself (unobserved and unmonitored). You must send a chaperone: tradition. I don't want to date tradition, but Scripture. I am interested in having a relationship with Scripture, but in order for it to be fruitful, I have to bring in tradition. Tradition helps me stay in the straight and narrow."

We need a chaperone when we read the Bible. We need tradition. We need the community of God where the Spirit of God is. We need the traditions that have been passed down to us in the creeds and councils of church history. Otherwise, we'll come up with some crazy ideas about God, just like Arius.

But, understand this about Arius: He wasn't some small town, backwoods, unknown preacher! Arius was extremely popular in his day! He had the blue check mark next to his name on *Twitter*. Arius was a very popular Bible teacher. He was a great communicator. His books were popular. You could hear his sermons on the radio, right after Alistair Begg and just before Chuck Swindoll.

Arius even managed to turn his beliefs about Jesus into catchy worship songs! Did you know that? He was like the first Chris Tomlin- *just crankin' out catchy worship songs after catchy worship songs*- but his lyrics were terrible! His songs were very catchy, with catchy melodies that got stuck in your head, and so repetitive- *so repetitive!*- but his lyrics were terrible because the theology in his worship songs denied the eternality of Jesus, the Son of God.

Arius would have even given Chris Tomlin a run for his money when it came to writing worship songs. He was a gifted songwriter. And, all the churches throughout Egypt were singing his songs. But his lyrics were terrible. His lyrics probably went something like this:

*Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord
We will wait upon the Lord
We will wait upon the Lord*

*Our God, You reign forever
The Creator before you were the Father
You aren't the everlasting God
Aren't the everlasting God
You were made by Him
You aren't eternal*

*You're the first thing God ever made
The first thing He did create
He made you then He made all the eagles*

Arius wrote catchy songs. He was a dynamic preacher. And he was extremely popular. Arius had the #1 downloaded podcast on iTunes. He won every Dove Award for songwriter of the year, year after year. He was a sought-after conference speaker. His books were all over every Christian bookstore. People lapped up his writing like thirsty dogs.

But, there's a lesson here: Just because you're preaching from the Bible, and just because you're extremely popular, and just because your church is growing, and just because the numbers of members keeps escalating, doesn't mean that you're preaching the truth. It doesn't mean you're preaching the Gospel.

So, in the 4th century, a division was sweeping through Constantine's empire because Arius is becoming more and more popular. Some people are on board with Arius and others aren't.

Then a bishop named Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria, brought forth a rebuttal of Arius' teaching. And, later, a bishop named Athanasius took over for Alexander in leading the fight. Alexander was a gentle pastor, and generally very tolerant, and he did not like conflict. But he knew that he had to speak up because what Arius was teaching was 1) not Orthodox Christian belief 2) it was causing divisions and separations in the church (and tearing apart Constantine's empire). So, some churches were on Arius' side, some were on Alexander's.

But, Alexander realized that he could not keep having theological battles with Arius on social media, he couldn't keep writing letters to him, he couldn't keep calling Arius out in his sermons, it was time to do something more. So, Alexander called a *synod*- which is just a fancy name for a gathering- he called for a synod of all the bishops and pastors to discuss whether Arius' beliefs were heretical.

But, before the synod could make a decision, Arius and his followers flooded the streets of Alexandria to add pressure on the bishops. People wrote slogans and songs, and it was like a typical protest that you see nowadays. It was a theological flash mob. Then, Alexander's crew showed up and things got hot! And a riot broke out.

But, as people rioted in the streets, the synod of bishops and pastors kept meeting to discuss the issue. This was in 324 A.D. and we know it as "The Council of Nicaea."

To be sure, Arius was a monotheist. He believed in the one God. But Arius only believed in one God, the Father. Arius was not Trinitarian. He did not believe that there is one God eternally existent in three persons- Father, Son, and Spirit. He only believed in one God- God the Father, and even then He would only admit that God became a Father *after He created Jesus*. Arius believed in one God that he said was first and foremost and foundationally Creator. Arius believed that God was first Creator before He was ever a Father, and God only became a Father after He created Jesus.

So, when Arius started talking about God, he did not begin talking about the Son of God or even God the Father. Arius began his idea of God by calling Him the "Unoriginate" or "Uncaused." And what Arius meant by these terms was that God was the "Uncreated Creator." God was the Creator who was not created.

Arius began his discussions and preaching and understanding of God by referring to God as the *Creator*. The problem, however, with beginning any discussion of God as, first and foremost Creator, is that you are defining your idea of God based on His works, what He does, and not by His relationships, not by His nature or essence.

Arius began his understanding of God as Creator and *not Trinity*, as the Creator and *not as Father*. And it seems so subtle, like it's not a big deal, but it is! We must begin our understanding of God not based on His works, what He does as Creator, but based on His essence, His nature, His relationships within the Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit.

Any concept of God that does not *from the outset* include the mutual relations of Father and Son, the Father begetting His begotten Son (e.g. meaning, the Son having the same nature or essence as the Father), that discussion bears no relation to the living God. It is Arian. It is heresy.

What group today believes this? Jehovah's Witnesses. They do not believe that Jesus is God's eternal Son. They believe that God created Jesus; they believe that Jesus was the first being that God created. That's Arian. That's heresy. It's not a biblical view of God.

Jesus didn't become the Son in relationship to His Father at His birth and incarnation, contrary to what Arius was teaching. He was always the Son. For all of eternity past, Jesus was the eternal Son of God. Interestingly, a few years ago a very notable theologian and famous Bible teacher that all of you most likely know, changed His views to express this. Anyone know who? John MacArthur.

John MacArthur used to believe that Jesus took the title "Son" at the time of his incarnation. He says this on his website, www.gty.org, in answer to the question, "*Is it true that John MacArthur has reversed his position on the eternal Sonship of Christ?*" MacArthur's reply:

Careful study and reflection have brought me to understand that Scripture does indeed present the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son as an eternal Father-Son relationship. I no longer regard Christ's sonship as a role He assumed in His incarnation...

("Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ" from, <https://www.gty.org/library/articles/A235/reexamining-the-eternal-sonship-of-christ> Accessed on 13 February 2020)

See! We need chaperones when we read the Bible. We need to read the Bible in community. Paul will admonish the Colossians in chapter 3 to "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Colossians 3:16). That's plural. We can't be trusted all by ourselves with the Scriptures. Someone eventually came along and helped correct John MacArthur on this issue.

John MacArthur was in error. He believed that Jesus was eternally existent with the Father, that's Orthodox. But he didn't believe that this Father/Son relationship existed until the incarnation.

So, how did the church deal with Arius? In response to this, the emperor Constantine called together the church's theologians and pastors and Christian thinkers to discuss Jesus, to discuss the Son's essence and His relationship to God the Father. And during the winter of 324-325 A.D., the first ecumenical council was called in Nicaea (modern-day Turkey) to discuss the teachings of Arius.

And after many meetings and many discussions, which were centered on God's word, then on June 19, 325 A.D., the Nicene Creed was composed and it affirmed that Jesus, the Son, shared God the Father's nature and essence as God. And it affirmed that Jesus the Son had always existed as God in eternity past and that He was never created. The Nicene Creed made *explicit* what was already *implicitly* believed by the church.

The Nicene Creed is the best commentary on Colossians 1:15. I've put it on the cover of your worship bulletin so that you can read and study it on your own after this sermon. But, I want you to listen for these phrases that appear in the Nicene Creed because they are direct quotations that Arius and followers were saying about Jesus:

"there was once when he was not"
"he was not before he was begotten"
"he came into existence from nothing"

Those are the ways that Arius was describing Jesus: that there was a time when He did not exist, that He was not before He was, and that He came into existence at a point in time from nothing.

The Nicene Creed was written to let all the churches know that-

IF YOU MAKE JESUS LESS THAN GOD, THEN YOU MAKE THE GOSPEL LESS THAN GOOD.

The Nicene Creed said that if you mess up the person of Jesus, then you mess up His work. If you get the person of Christ wrong, then you get the work of Christ wrong. If you get Jesus wrong, then you get the Gospel wrong. And if you get Jesus wrong, then you don't have salvation, you don't have the forgiveness of sins.

So, what the Nicene Creed did was to draw a circle around what was acceptable to believe about Jesus being God. And that's why the creeds and councils of church history are so important! Because Arius interpreted Colossians 1:15 differently. My church history prof Dr. Jeff Bingham says, "*The interpretation of Scripture passed down by the apostles and preserved by the bishops was a safeguard in the face of heretics who also appealed to Scripture.*"

And that's exactly what the councils and creeds do. The councils and creeds of church history carry on the tradition that was passed down from the apostles and prophets. They highlight and make *explicit* what was already *implicit*. So, what the creeds and the councils of church history do is draw circles around what we can or can't say about God. They give us parameters that we must stay within when we think and discuss God. They remind us that-

IF YOU MAKE JESUS LESS THAN GOD, THEN YOU MAKE THE GOSPEL LESS THAN GOOD.

And if Jesus is not God, then we can't say-

It is finished. John 19:30

And if Jesus is not God, then we can't say-

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Romans 8:1

And if Jesus is not God, then we can't say-

...as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us. Psalm 103:12

But, because He is, we can eat and drink at the Lord's Supper knowing that Jesus paid it all. This is good news. Good news for bad people.

"When Catchy Worship Songs Teach Bad Theology"

Colossians 1:15

Sermon Study Questions

1. READ Colossians 1:15-20. What did Arius believe about God? What group today is Arian in their beliefs about Jesus?

2. The eighteenth century witnessed the rise of groups who, frustrated with denominations and confessions, advocated a "No Creed But Christ" approach, in the hopes that this would lead to unity. It didn't. So, why are the creeds and the councils of church history important?

3. Discuss this thought from the sermon:

We must be very careful when we read the Bible because we can make the Bible sing any song we want to. People use the Bible to justify all kinds of beliefs and behavior- because you can make the Bible sing any song that you want to. Arius used the Bible, he used God's word, used the book of Proverbs to claim that Jesus did not exist in eternity past. This is why we are to read Scripture in community. One of my church history professors, Dr. Jeff Bingham, said it this way-

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4. READ Colossians 3:16. Why do we need to read Scripture in community? Discuss how even John MacArthur needs chaperones when he reads the Bible because he had to revise his own beliefs regarding Jesus.

5. The Nicene Creed begins this way: *We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign, maker of all things seen and unseen...* Discuss this thought from the sermon:

When Arius started talking about God, he did not begin talking about the Son of God or even God the Father. Arius began his idea of God by calling Him the "Unoriginate" or "Uncaused." And what Arius meant by these terms was that God was the "Uncreated Creator." God was the Creator who was not created.

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