



MAKING MAN THE MEASURE OF GOD

Arius and the Jehovah's Witnesses

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"And is it not a grievous error, to have material thoughts about what is immaterial? . . . foolish men, they measure by themselves the Offspring of the Father."—Athanasius, *Contra Arianos*, I.15¹

Since the inception of the Church, Christians have confessed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). In the person of Jesus Christ, Christians found redemption from their sins and reconciliation with his Father. From the start, Christians recognized that the salvation they experienced in Christ was intrinsically linked to the fact that the one who had reconciled them to the Father was the very Son of the Father. As the Church expanded it carried this confession with it as it spread the good news of the redemption which Christ had brought to the world. However, along with this expansion came challenges to what Jude termed "the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints" (Jude 3, NASB).²

1. Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, I.15, cited in P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, trans. J. H. Newman, rev. A. Robertson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), hereafter NPNF.

2. This article is written from the perspective that, while the Christological and Trinitarian controversies of the patristic era may have given rise to new terminology, the formulas which arose out of ecumenical councils such as Nicaea and Constantinople are reflective of the faith of the earliest Church and fully supported by scripture. The patristic era should not be viewed as a period of theological development with increasingly Hellenistic ideas supposed to have been added to a simple, pristine core (cf. John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977]). Rather, the formulas of Nicaea and Chalcedon should be understood as the Church erecting boundaries around acceptable belief, protecting the faith from novelties that threatened the gospel.

Chief among these challenges was the theology of Arius (c. 250-336), a presbyter in Alexandria, Egypt. Arius and his followers utilized the same language to speak of Christ as did orthodox believers. They called Jesus the Son of God and even offered worship and prayers to him. Even though the Arians used the same language as orthodox Christians, it soon became apparent that they did not mean the same thing as orthodox Christians when they called Jesus the "Son of God." A controversy soon ensued surrounding the teachings of Arius. Orthodox church leaders, the most articulate of whom was Athanasius of Alexandria, argued that the Son of God whom the Church worshiped was the eternal, uncreated Word, Wisdom and Son of God, who was of the very same essence as the Father. Arius, on the other hand, believed that the Son was the first creation of the Father who, subsequent to his own creation, brought into being everything else that exists. The Son of God is called "God" in name only, for he is created out of an essence different from that of the Father. Although the controversy surrounding the teachings of Arius continued for many years, they were eventually declared to be outside the bounds of orthodox Christianity.

The theological differences between Arius and Athanasius are significant. Athanasius taught that the Son was fully divine—God of very God—while Arius believed that the Son, a mere creature, is called God in name only. How could two men living at the same time and in the same vicinity, who both claimed to worship the same Christ, arrive at such different views concerning the identity of the Son of God? One problem that Athanasius identified in Arius's thinking is his theological presumption of making human understanding the measure of what we can say about the nature of God. Arius believed that whatever we say about the Son of God must be understood within the limits of human categories. His position began with the idea that, if Jesus is a son, he must have had a beginning. Arius reasoned that, since human fathers antedate their sons, the same must be true of God the Father and his son.³ This theological presumption on the part of Arius was the beginning of his deviation from the truth of the gospel.⁴

Such theological presumption is not unique to Arius. The Jehovah's Witnesses, in their rejection of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, not only follow in the footsteps of Arius but hold him up as one of the great defenders of the "true" faith. The Jehovah's Witnesses also

3. For a more detailed analysis of the thought of Arius, in particular the possible philosophical presuppositions underlying his thinking, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). See also R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988); Manlio Simonetti, *La Crisi Ariana Nel Quarto Secolo* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1975).

4. For a discussion of the theological and spiritual presumption in Arius, see Christopher A. Hall, *Learning Theology with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2002), 41–42.

make the same presumptuous mistake as Arius—they make human understanding the final arbiter of truth regarding the nature of God. The Jehovah's Witnesses' dependence upon and positive appraisal of Arius is not news to anyone familiar with their teachings. What may not be familiar to some is the extent to which the underlying theological presumptions of Arius are echoed in the writings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. In what follows, I shall show how the teachings of Arius are consciously appropriated by the Jehovah's Witnesses as well as demonstrate how, as Arius did before them, "they measure by themselves the Offspring of the Father."⁵

THE TEACHINGS OF ARIUS

The extant primary source material from Arius is rather limited. One consequence of being declared a heretic is that one's writings are generally not preserved, because either they are destroyed or simply not copied as the originals deteriorate. Most of what we know of Arius and his teachings has been preserved in the works of Athanasius relating the details of the Arian controversy or in polemical works which Athanasius wrote in opposition to Arius and his associates. Included among these extant works are a few letters, or fragments of letters, and a confessional statement sent by Arius and his associates to Alexander, bishop of Alexandria (c. 320-323).⁶ Athanasius also quoted Arius or other Arians extensively in his *Four Discourses Against the Arians*. While Athanasius was certainly biased against the Arians, we can still reconstruct a reasonably accurate picture of the theology of Arius from the sources available.

The fullest statement of Arius's beliefs concerning the person of Christ, which we can reasonably assume came directly from Arius himself, is the confession of the Arians addressed to Alexander, bishop of Alexandria. Arius's understanding of the person of Christ contained in this confession is quite clear, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

We know that there is one God, the only unbegotten, only eternal, only without beginning . . . unalterable and unchanging. . . . Before everlasting ages he begot his unique Son, through whom he made the ages and all things. . . . [T]he Son, begotten timelessly by the Father and created before ages and established, was not before he was begotten—but, begotten timelessly before all things, he alone was constituted by the Father. He is neither eternal nor coeternal nor co-unbegotten with the Father, nor does he have his being together with the Father . . . God is thus before all. Therefore he is also prior to the Son. . . .

5. Athanasius, *Four Discourses*, 1:15, NPNE.

6. For texts of two of these documents, see Edward R. Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers* (London: SCM Press, 1954). For a compilation of Arius's *Thalia*, as well as a discussion of other textual issues regarding the writings of Arius, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*.

So therefore, as he has his being and glories from God, and life and all things were given him, accordingly God is his source. . . . But if the [phrases] "of him" and "out of the womb" and "I came forth from the Father and am come" are understood by some as [meaning] a part of the consubstantial himself and a projection, then according to them the Father is compound and divisible and alterable and a body, and according to them presumably, the bodiless God [is thought of as] suffering what belongs to a body.⁷

Arius began with the absolute, eternal, changeless unity of God. Were such a God to share his essence in common with another, a Son for example, this would mean that God was divisible and alterable. The Son of God, therefore, must have had a beginning and must have been constituted out of some essence other than the essence of the Father. While Arius used the biblical term 'begotten' to describe the Son, he used it in the sense of being created, or constituted, by God. Since God alone is without beginning, the Son of God must have had a beginning, otherwise the Son would also be eternal. This would entail a division within God and would not be acceptable to Arius's thinking.

In an attempt to provide a special place of honor for the Son, Arius said that the Son alone was constituted by God before time. All other created reality, including time itself, was created by the Son. The Son was the only being created directly by the Father. While Arius attempted to give the Son a preeminent place in all of creation, his status is still that of a creature. If the Son is a creature of God, then it must follow that he "was not before he was begotten." Therefore, the Father is "prior to the Son."

In an earlier letter written to his friend Eusebius of Nicomedia (c. 318), Arius reacts to certain language about the Son used by Alexander, then bishop of Alexandria. In this letter Arius claims that he was being persecuted because he did not agree with Alexander, who said, "'Always Father, always Son,' 'Father and Son together' . . . 'The eternal begotten' . . . 'Always God, always Son,' 'The Son is of God himself.'"⁸ Alexander's position was that, if God is Father, he must be so eternally. If God is eternally Father, then it must follow that the Son is also eternally Son, otherwise the Father could not be eternally Father. If the Father was ever without his Son, then he could not be eternally Father. Instead of agreeing with Alexander that the eternal fatherhood of God necessitates the eternal sonship of the Son, Arius argued that the idea of a son necessitates that the Son of God had a beginning. Since everyone knows that all human fathers exist prior to their sons, Arius argued, God the Father must also have existed prior to *his* son. Therefore, the Son had a beginning and is not eternal and cannot be of the same essence as the Father.

7. *The Confession of the Arians, Addressed to Alexander of Alexandria*, cited in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 332–34, brackets in citation.

8. Arius, *The Letter of Arius to Eusebius of Nicomedia*, cited in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 330.

Athanasius found much with which to disagree in Arius's position. Yet, it was this last idea, that the Son of God must be understood in ways analogous to a human offspring, against which Athanasius reacted most strongly because it showed the utter impiety of Arius's position. Athanasius, agreeing with Alexander, argued that the Son must be understood as being the eternal offspring of the Father; otherwise the Father was once incomplete, lacking his Son and Word, like a light lacking radiance. By saying that God's begetting must be analogous to human begetting, Arius failed to recognize the distinction between creator and creature. As Athanasius explained, "to beget in time is characteristic of man: for man's nature is incomplete; God's offspring is eternal, for his nature is always perfect."⁹ If we were speaking of human offspring, then the Arian argument might be valid. However, we are not speaking of human offspring and should not speak of God as if his offspring were like ours. "For God does not make man His pattern; for we men" have God as our pattern. "God is properly, and alone truly, Father of His Son . . . for of Him 'is every fatherhood in heaven and earth named'"¹⁰ (Eph. 3:15).

If God is the Father of the Son, and the two share the same essence, then should not the Son also be a father if he is indeed of the very same essence as the one who begot him? In other words, if the Son shares fully the essence of the Father, then should he not also share in the "fatherhood" of the Father and thus be a father himself? Athanasius said that such questions posed by Arius and his followers showed the same impiety and presumption as the statement that the Son of God must have had a beginning since he is a son. We might as well say that the Father must have been a son himself, since all human fathers were sons before they became fathers. Yet, as Athanasius pointed out, "If God be not as man, and He is not, we must not impute to Him the attributes of man."¹¹ Humans, after they have been created, reproduce by succession. Beginning as a son, a man becomes father to his own sons, and yet still remains the son of his father. Human fathers are always both father and son simultaneously. With God it is different, as Athanasius went on to explain:

But it is not so in the Godhead; for not as man is God; for the Father is not from a father; therefore doth he not beget one who shall become a father; nor is the Son from the effluence of the Father; nor is he begotten from a father that was begotten. . . . Thus it belongs to the Godhead alone, that the Father is properly father, and the Son properly son, and in Them only, does it hold that the Father is ever Father and the Son ever Son.¹²

9. Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, 1.14, cited in Henry Bettenson, ed. and trans., *The Early Christian Fathers: A Selection of the Writings of the Fathers from St. Clement of Rome to St. Athanasius* (London: Oxford University Press, 1956); 381.

10. Athanasius, *Four Discourses* 1.23, NPNF.

11. Athanasius, *Four Discourses* 1.21, NPNF.

12. *Ibid.*

Instead of trying to understand God in terms of human relationships, Athanasius instructs us to recognize that the relationship between father and son in the Godhead is unique. As he states elsewhere, "[T]he character of the parent determines the character of the offspring."¹³ Human fathers and sons are mere reflections, as it were, of the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. In the Godhead, we find true fatherhood and true sonship. Therefore, human familial relationships should not be used as standards for measuring God.

Using human categories again as the basis for his theology, Arius argued that the Son's being the *Word* of God also necessitates that the Son had a beginning, that he is created. As Athanasius explained the Arian position, they took human speech as their model when they asked:

How can the Son be the Word, or the Word be the image of God?
For human speech is a combination of syllables which merely signifies
the speaker's meaning, and immediately ceases and disappears.¹⁴

Human speech is not eternal; it has a beginning and an end. It does not exist until the word is spoken by the human speaker and it ceases to exist as soon as it has been uttered. Since the Son of God is also the Word of God, the Word must be analogous to human speech. Therefore, the Word is not eternal but was brought into existence by the will of God.

Athanasius argued that Arius and his associates were guilty again of measuring God by the standards of man. They failed to recognize who it is about whom they were speaking. "Was God, 'who is' ever without reason [Word]? Was he, who is light, without radiance? Or was he always the Father of the Word?" Just as it is nonsense to say that a light can exist without its radiance, so it is nonsense to say that God existed without his reason or Word. God exists eternally; "then since the Father always is, his brightness exists eternally; and that is his Word."¹⁵ Furthermore, Athanasius argued, if the Word is not of the same essence as God, then God does not have reason in and of himself but has reason only by the addition of something outside of himself. This would mean that God is not complete in himself. Such a situation, according to Athanasius, is untenable.

Arius's position, when carefully examined, proves to disintegrate into absurdities. If the Son is not eternally Son and of the very essence of the Father, then the Father is not Father in and of himself but is dependent upon something external to himself to be Father. The Father's nature would thus be lacking and dependent upon some addition from without to be complete. For this reason, Athanasius writes that it is "right to call the Son the eternal offspring of the Father. For the substance of the Father was never imperfect, so that what belonged to it might be added

13. Athanasius, *Four Discourses* 2.35, cited in Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 391.

14. *Ibid.*, 2.34, 390–91.

15. *Ibid.*, 1.25, 382.

later."¹⁶ Furthermore, if the Son of God, who is also the Word of God, is not of the same essence as the Father, then the Word must have been made of some essence that was external to the Father. This would mean that God is not reason and light in himself but is so only by the addition of something alien to himself. "No!" Athanasius protested. God's Son, his radiance and Word, are constitutive of who God is. "God's offspring is eternal, for his nature is always perfect."¹⁷

Arius and his associates were thinking and speaking about God in ways that were improper to the subject of their discourse. They committed a serious category error in judging God by human standards. God is not a man that he must conform to our ideas of what must be proper to his nature. Furthermore, Athanasius charged Arius and his associates with asking questions which are improper for us to ask about God. They ask, "'How is the Word from God?' 'How is he God's radiance?' 'How does God beget?' 'What is the manner of his begetting?'"¹⁸ Such questions are full of presumption and impiety. We might as well ask, "Where is God?" thus imputing location to God.¹⁹ Such questions are not to be asked, for we are not in a position to ask them.

Such questions show a lack of reverence and an ignorance of God; and in the same way we are not permitted to ask such presumptuous questions about the begetting of the Son of God nor to make our nature and our limitations the measure of God and his wisdom.²⁰

THE TEACHINGS OF THE JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

The presumption and impiety of Arius and his associates are echoed in the teachings of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Indeed, from the earliest days of their history, the Jehovah's Witnesses have viewed Arius as one of the great champions of the "true" faith because he rejected the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the trinity. The founder of the Jehovah's Witnesses, Charles Taze Russell, taught that the council of Nicaea, which condemned Arius, marked the beginning of the great apostasy about which the Apostle Paul warned in 2 Thessalonians 2. Russell claimed that Nicaea marked the end of the true church which was not reestablished until Russell himself founded the organization commonly known today as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In the seventh volume of *Studies in the Scriptures*, published shortly after Russell's death and containing his interpretation of the book of Revelation, Arius is given a prominent role. Russell identifies Arius as the angel of the church at Pergamum, the special messenger to the church of the fourth

16. *Ibid.*, 1.14, 381.

17. *Ibid.*, 1.14, 381.

18. *Ibid.*, 2.36, 392.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

century sent to warn the church of the false teaching of the Trinity,²¹ Arius's warnings fell on deaf ears and the church began to fall away from the truth. Arius's condemnation at Nicaea is described as follows:

How the sharp sword, God's Word, wielded by Arius before the Emperor and his brother elders at the Nicean [sic] Council, must have cut some of them to the heart when they saw the gentle and aged man banished into the Balkan mountains.²²

The Jehovah's Witnesses contend that the doctrine of the deity of Christ was forced upon the Church by the Emperor Constantine at the council of Nicaea amid the protests of many of the bishops in attendance.²³

In many respects the Christology of the Jehovah's Witnesses is the same as that of Arius, although there are some differences. For example, the Witnesses say that in his pre-human state, Jesus was the archangel Michael.²⁴ Yet, on the central issues concerning the nature of Christ, their teachings closely parallel those of Arius. According to many explicit statements found in the Witnesses' literature, the Son of God was the first creation of Jehovah who, subsequent to his own creation, brought into existence everything else that was created. Explaining the significance of Jesus being the "only begotten," or "firstborn" son of God, we are told by the Witnesses that this means that "he was created before all other spirit sons of God, and that he is the only one who was directly created by God."²⁵ This is parallel to Arius's teaching, including the claim that the Son was the only direct creation of God.²⁶

The Witnesses' teaching that the Son was created can be seen in their rendering of Col. 1:16-17 in their own translation of the Bible, the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (hereafter NWT):

Because by means of him all [other] things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible. . . . All [other] things have been created through him and for him. Also, he

21. Charles Taze Russell, *Studies in the Scripture*, vol. 7 (Brooklyn: International Bible Students Association, 1918), 30. Volume 7 of *Studies in the Scripture* is primarily a compilation from the personal notes of Russell and his previously published writings. Incidentally, Russell is said to have been the angel of the church at Laodicea and special messenger to his age (*ibid.*, 53-58).

22. Russell, *Studies in the Scripture*, vol. 7:32.

23. "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" pamphlet (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989), 8.

24. *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1985), 218. In 1942, while the Witnesses were under the leadership of Nathan H. Knorr, a decision was made that no literature published by the Jehovah's Witnesses would bear the name of the author.

25. *You Can Live Forever in Paradise on Earth* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1982), 58. See also "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" pamphlet, 14, "Neither the angels nor Jesus had existed before their creation."

26. See *The Confession of the Arians, Addressed to Alexander of Alexandria*, cited in Hardy, *Christology of the Later Fathers*, 332-33.

is before all [other] things and by means of him all [other] things were made to exist.²⁷

According to the Witnesses, the bracketed word “other” is inserted into this verse to “complete the sense in the English text.”²⁸ In reality, it is included in order to make the text fit the Witnesses’ theology. That it is included in brackets is a tacit acknowledgement that the word, and therefore the meaning, is not found in the original Greek text. The implication of the word “other” inserted into this verse is clear—Jesus did not create every thing that was created, for he himself was created by God. Jesus only created everything else that was created after he himself had been created. While the Witnesses allow the Son to maintain his role as creator, they rob him of his eternal existence with the Father.

This is not the only place where the Jehovah’s Witnesses distort the text of the Bible to suit their theology. The NWT is notorious for its unscholarly and doctrinally motivated translations. Perhaps the most infamous example of this, and one which is particularly germane to the current discussion, is the NWT’s rendering of John 1:1. Most modern translations follow the rules of Greek grammar and translate this verse along the following lines: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (NASB). The translators of the NWT translate it thus: “In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.” Note the inclusion of the indefinite article “a” and the lower case “g” in “god” in the last phrase of the verse. According to the Witnesses, while it is wrong to say that the Son is “God” or “Almighty God,” it is appropriate to say that he is divine, that he is “a god” or “a mighty god.” The Witnesses give several reasons for calling the Son “a god” or “a mighty god” instead of “God.” For example, when Isaiah prophesied of the coming messiah, Isaiah did not say that the messiah would be the same as “*Almighty God*.” Rather, Isaiah told us that the messiah would be called “*Mighty God*” (Isa. 9:6).²⁹ Also, just as the judges in Israel were called “gods” (Ps. 82:1-6), or Satan is called the “god” of this world (2 Cor. 4:4), so it is appropriate to call the Son “a god” but not “Almighty God.”³⁰ The Witnesses’ position concerning the nature of the Son is clear—the Son is the highest ranking individual among God’s created beings. However, this does not mean that he is equal to God or of the same nature as God or that he has existed eternally with God. This teaching of the Jehovah’s Witnesses is analogous to that of Arius.

27. *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*, (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1961).

28. NWT, editorial note, 6.

29. *Reasoning from the Scriptures*, 426.

30. *Ibid.*, 417, 364-65.

The Jehovah's Witnesses have one argument against the deity of Christ that bears a striking resemblance to the thinking and attitude of Arius. When we closely examine their argument we see not only that they come to the same conclusion as Arius, but also that they arrive at their conclusion via the same impious route of presumptuous thinking about God. Their pamphlet entitled "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" is a systematic attack on this central doctrine of the Christian faith. In this pamphlet the Witnesses set out to explain why Jesus' being the "only begotten Son" does not mean that he is of the same nature as God the Father or co-eternal with him. Their argument begins by noting that the Greek word *monogenes*, which is translated "only-begotten" in John 3:16 to describe the Son of God, is the same word used in Heb. 11:17 to describe Isaac, the "only begotten" son of Abraham. It is certainly clear, the Witnesses argue, that Isaac was only-begotten in the normal sense of the word, "not equal in time or position to his father."³¹ Abraham certainly existed prior to his only begotten son Isaac. The Witnesses go on to assert, based upon the fact that *monogenes* is used to describe both the Son of God and Isaac, that what is true of the begetting of Isaac must also be true of the begetting of the Son of God:

So Jesus, the only-begotten Son, had a beginning to his life. And Almighty God can rightly be called his Begetter, or Father, in the same sense that an earthly father, like Abraham, begets a son. . . . Hence, when the Bible speaks of God as the "Father" of Jesus, it means what it says—that they are two separate individuals. God is the senior. Jesus is the junior—in time, position, power, and knowledge.³²

The begetting of God's Son, the Witnesses argue, must be exactly like that of human sons. Taking human begetting as their model, the Jehovah's Witnesses conclude that there must have been a time when the Son did not exist, that the Father existed prior to the Son, and that the Son must be of some other, lesser essence than the Father. They reject the full deity and eternality of the Son because, as Athanasius criticized the Arians before them, the Jehovah's Witnesses have made man the measure of God and have failed to recognize that "[t]he character of the parent determines the character of the offspring."³³ The Witnesses need to be reminded that, since God is not a man, we should not expect his begetting to be the same as human begetting.

At this point I would like to interject two counter arguments against the Witnesses' claim that the Father's begetting must be completely analogous to human begetting. First, while the Witnesses correctly note that the term *monogenes* is used to refer to both the Son of God and Isaac, they are wrong in their contention that the term is meant to convey something

31. "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" 16.

32. Ibid.

33. Athanasius, *Four Discourses*, 2.35, cited in Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 391.

about the *method* by which each was—for lack of a better word—generated. Unfortunately, the traditional translation of this word, “only begotten,” brings to mind the idea of a physical birth, whereas the term *monogenes* primarily conveys the idea of *uniqueness*.³⁴ Indeed, to use the Witnesses’ own example, Isaac was not the “only begotten” son of Abraham in the sense of being the “only born,” or “only offspring,” for Ishmael was also Abraham’s offspring. Instead, the term *monogenes* is used of Isaac to indicate that he was the *unique* son of Abraham—the son of promise. Given that the term *monogenes* primarily conveys the idea of uniqueness, we should not understand that when the Apostle used this term to describe the Son of God he intended to communicate information about the *method* by which the Son of God was generated. Instead he meant to underscore the uniqueness of his status as *the* Son of God. We should conclude that there is nothing in the term *monogenes* or in the Apostle’s use of this term that precludes the orthodox Christian idea of the eternal generation of the Son of God by the Father.

A second argument can be brought against the Witnesses’ more general claim that the “only begotten” status of the Son of God should be understood to be analogous to human begetting. In the passage from “Should You Believe In the Trinity?” cited above, the Witnesses claim that the begetting of Isaac by Abraham should be the model for understanding the Father’s begetting of the Son. They fail to see the absurd implications of making Abraham, or any human father for that matter, the model or pattern of God’s begetting. An obvious question arises if we assume that human begetting is to be our pattern for understanding God’s begetting—“Where is Jehovah’s wife?” The Scriptures tells us that Abraham’s wife Sarah gave birth to Isaac, Abraham’s “only begotten son.” Presumably, if Isaac is our model of a begotten son and Isaac had a mother, then the Son of God must also have had a mother, a goddess of some sort. (By the way, do not use this argument in conversation with your Mormon neighbors because this is exactly what the Mormons believe!) Certainly the Jehovah’s Witnesses would object to the idea that there was some goddess who gave birth to the Son of God. Furthermore, they would probably object by saying that we have failed to understand that God is not a human being and does not need a female counterpart, a wife or goddess, in order to beget a son. If that is the case, and I would certainly agree with them on this point, then it follows that God’s begetting is not like human begetting. If God’s begetting is not like our begetting, then the Son of God could have existed eternally with the Father. Therefore, what does Isaac, the only begotten son of Abraham, teach us about the only begotten Son of the Father? Virtually nothing—for, as Athanasius reminds us, “God does not make man His pattern.”³⁵ Instead, God’s begetting is unique to his

34. See entry on *monogenes* in Colin Brown, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 2, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 725.

35. Athanasius, *Four Discourses*, 1.23, NPNF.

nature; as Athanasius explained, "God's offspring is eternal, for his nature is always perfect."³⁶

One final example from their writings will go far to demonstrate how the Witnesses make human understanding the final arbiter of truth concerning the nature of God. Their pamphlet "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" contains an interesting argument based upon the idea that the doctrine of the Trinity is a difficult doctrine to understand. After citing several Christian sources that comment on how the Trinity is a difficult concept to grasp, the Witnesses ask: "How could such a confusing doctrine originate?"³⁷ The standard answer given by Christians, the Witnesses say, is that the doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately a mystery which could not have been known apart from divine revelation. Yet, the Witnesses argue, the very notion that the doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible goes against the clear teaching of scripture which says that "God is not a God of confusion" (1 Cor. 14:33). The Witnesses go on to ask, in light of this verse, "would God be responsible for a doctrine about himself that is so confusing that even Hebrew, Greek, and Latin scholars cannot really explain it?"³⁸ The obvious answer, say the Witnesses, is "No!" God could not be the source of such a confusing doctrine about himself. Thus, God cannot be triune.

The sheer presumptuousness of this argument is astounding, as a simple examination of it demonstrates. We can summarize the Witnesses' argument as follows:

God is not a God of confusion.
The doctrine of the trinity is confusing.
Therefore, God cannot be triune.

In response to this argument, we should begin by noting that in 1 Cor. 14:33 Paul is emphasizing that God is a creator of peace and order and not a creator of confusion. His point in this passage is that worship utilizing spiritual gifts that are truly from God should be characterized by order and not mayhem. While Paul would certainly affirm the truth that the being of God is not "confused," it is not Paul's intention to convey any information about the internal life of God in this statement. Therefore, we should not use this verse as a criterion to judge God's revelation of himself to us simply because we might be confused by that revelation. Also, the Witnesses clearly intimate that, since the *doctrine* of the Trinity is confusing, then this must entail confusion within the *being* of God himself, if God is indeed the source of this doctrine. This simply does not follow. Our failure to comprehend God is only an indication of our human limitations. Our failure fully to comprehend God is in no way indicative of the nature of God as he is in himself.

36. Athanasius, *Four Discourses*, I.14, cited in Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers*, 381.

37. "Should You Believe in the Trinity?" 4.

38. *Ibid.*, 5.

Nevertheless, overlooking the fallaciousness of the argument itself, it is clear that the Witnesses presume to make humanity's inability to grasp the nature of God the final measure of truth regarding God's nature. The Witnesses presume that, if something is beyond our comprehension, then certainly God cannot be that. Since the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our grasp, then God cannot be triune. This is the very height of impiety and theological presumption—claiming that God cannot be other than that which we can comprehend. The Witnesses' argument exhibits an attitude towards human reason that is theologically inappropriate. Like Arius before them, the Witnesses have forgotten that God is not a man and does not make man his pattern, either in knowledge or being.

CONCLUSION

In many respects, the Christology of the Jehovah's Witnesses is analogous to that of Arius. Jesus in his pre-human state was a creature. Before the Father created him, he did not exist. The Son alone was created directly by the Father, while the Son brought into being all other created reality. The Witnesses' attitude toward human knowledge of God is also similar to that of Arius—the Father's begetting must be completely analogous to human begetting. The Jehovah's Witnesses claim that God must be wholly describable in human terms and cannot exist in a way that is contrary to human reason and experience. As we saw above, this position ultimately leads to absurdities. In the final analysis the Witnesses' position is found wanting because, like Arius before them, they have made human reason and experience the final arbiters of truth. Athanasius's appraisal of Arius's position is applicable to the Jehovah's Witnesses: "is it not a grievous error to have material thoughts about what is immaterial? . . . foolish men, they measure by themselves the Offspring of the Father:"³⁹

39. Athanasius, *Four Discourses*, 1.15, NPNF.