

CLOSE, BUT NO CIGAR

Who do you say I am? (Matthew 16:15)

Examine the two following sentences closely. Though at first they appear to be almost identical, you will soon discover they convey radically different meanings.

*A woman without her man is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.*

What a difference a few punctuation marks can make!

In the fourth century, a firestorm of controversy occurred over one letter of the Greek alphabet (iota). The debate concerned whether Jesus was of “one substance” (*homoousios*) with God or whether he was of “similar substance” (*homoiousios*) with God. The two words were so similar in appearance and meaning that many failed to see what was at stake. The former word claimed that Jesus *is* God. The latter, that he is *like* God. So, what’s the difference? Must we split hairs? Can’t we all just get along?

A man named Arius (circa 250-336 A.D.) was teaching that Jesus was a supernatural being who had been created by God before the creation of the rest of the universe. Gladly affirming that Jesus had a nature “similar” (*homoiousios*) to God, Arius stopped short of proclaiming that he *was* God. Other theologians realized that although Arianism¹ was close to the truth, it failed to state the biblical reality of Jesus’ identity accurately. A council was called to study the question. The Church desperately needed a better vocabulary to help her define more precisely the true identity of the One she worshipped. The Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) was the result of that meeting. Its language has enabled Christians down through the centuries to more accurately answer the question Jesus made so central to the faith when he asked his disciples, *Who do you say I am?* (Matthew 16:15).

I believe... in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance (homoousios) with the Father, by whom all things were made...

Arianism was condemned as a heresy and the biblical teaching of the deity of Christ was preserved. Today we owe a deep debt of gratitude to those early theologians who fought over an iota.

What about you? Who do you say that he is? Answers that are “nearly right” won’t do. Being close may score points in horseshoes, but in Christology it may cost you your very soul! If your Jesus is not fully God, he cannot fully save. But if he is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father, then he is *able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him* (Hebrews 7:25). Hallelujah!

Pastor Stan

¹A heresy similar to that still being propagated by cults such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses.