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## JOHN 1:14 : GOD'S SUPREME REVELATION [6]

### ... the One and Only ...

*No. EE111*

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The single Greek word for "the One and Only" (NIV), "the only Son" (ESV), or "the only begotten" (KJV; NASB), has caused considerable controversy in church history.

Early in the 4th century a certain Alexander was bishop of Alexandria, the leading church in Egypt. On one occasion he was delivering a lecture on the dogma of the Trinity. Suddenly he was interrupted by a young elder by the name of Arius who accused the older man of underplaying the distinction between the three Persons of the Trinity. He argued that the Son had been created by the Father - admittedly before the beginning of time - and was therefore not eternal. Arius was quite prepared to admit that the Son was exalted above man, but (more or less like the Jehovah's Witnesses) insisted that He was below the Father in rank.

Arius immediately began to spread this viewpoint and soon had a substantial following.

#### THE ONE AND ONLY?

❑ Every heretic has his text!

Central to Arius' view was the concept we are looking at, namely the Greek word *monogenes*. In many versions of the Bible, to this day, it is still translated as "only begotten" (KJV, NKJ, NASB, Ampl, etc.). This is a good example of how one can stray if you allow yourself to be lead primarily by the etymology of a word, without looking at it in the light of its use elsewhere in the Bible. *Mono* quite

correctly means "only". The problem lies with the rest of the word (*genes*). It was accepted that it is derived from the word *gennao* (beget, or procreate), hence the translation of *monogenes* as "only begotten". But in actual fact *genes* is derived from the Greek word, *genos* (kind or type). John is therefore really saying that Jesus is one of his kind or type (He is therefore unique) and not that He was begotten by the Father.

❑ Confirmation of this can be found from the way the word is used elsewhere in Scripture.

It is used four times with reference to ordinary human beings. This is important, because it highlights the meaning of the word - and therefore the uniqueness of Jesus' sonship. It is used every time to emphasize a deep and loving relationship between a parent and a particular child. The widow from Nain was on her way to bury her *only* son, whom Jesus then resurrected (Lk 7:12). Jesus raised from the dead the *only* daughter of Jairus (Lk 8:42). A man begs Jesus to cast out the demons from his *only* son (Lk 9:38). And Abraham had to sacrifice his *one and only* son (Hb 11:17).

The use of the word in the last example proves that it does not necessarily mean an only child, as Abraham had another son, Ishmael. But Isaac was the apple of his eye.

It reminds one of Gn 22:2 where Abraham is commanded to offer his son, his "only son" (cp. v. 12). The Hebrew word *yachid* conveys the idea of intense tenderness and attachment (cp. Pr 4:3, Jer 6:26, Amos 8:10, Zach 12:10). This word is obviously the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek *monogenes*. These children were therefore not necessarily their parents' only children, but their most loved ones.

The word is used five times with reference to our Lord, each time by John (Jn 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1Jn 4:9). The above meaning given to the word opens up a wonderful new perspective. This is true in particular of Jn 3:16 and 1Jn 4:9, where the apostle talks of God's love for sinners: God so loved sinners,

and so important was there salvation to Him, that He was prepared to offer up his *monogenes* - the deeply loved apple of his eye - as ransom for them.

❑ This word emphasizes therefore Christ's unique sonship. Many others may also become God's children, but the sonship of Jesus is different. The Son, while truly man, still remains truly God. He remains the Creator, while the rest of God's children are his creatures. *This* is where Arius missed it.

#### GOD'S MAN FOR THE MOMENT

❑ Arianism gradually stirred up so much unrest in the church - even threatening to tear it apart - that the emperor, Constantine, called a council in Nicea in 325 (near Constantinople) to get clarity on the issue once and for all.

Alexander took with him as his secretary a brilliant young deacon, Athanasius, a man destined to become a giant in church history. Although he did not have the right to speak at the council, Athanasius was the real mind behind the powerful arguments and speeches delivered by Alexander.

In the end a strong resolution was passed against the view of Arius. In this - the first formulation of the Nicene Creed - the deity of Christ was strongly emphasized. The Creed was subsequently finalised at the Council of Constantinople (in 381).

#### A SINGLE TINY LETTER

❑ A key emphasis in the Creed is that the Son is "of one being" with the father. Behind this lies considerable intrigue. The conflict with Arius centred around two Greek words which have become famous in dogmatic history: *homoousios* (of the same nature) and *homoiousios* (of a similar nature). The difference lies in the two prefixes, *homo-* (the same) and *homoi-* (similar, of the same kind). The only difference between the words is the Greek letter, the *iota*, a short and single vertical line, the

smallest letter in the Greek alphabet. Arius was quite prepared to admit that the Son was *homoiousios* (similar) to the Father, but not that He was *homoousios* (of the same nature). But the Council realised the importance of the difference between the two views: if Christ is not of the same nature as God the Father, He is not truly God. Therefore *homoousios* (of the same nature) won the day.

## A MERCILESS BATTLE

❑ This was alas not the end of Arianism.

Three years later, in 328, Athanasius became the new bishop of Alexandria - and so became the spearhead of the fierce fight against Arianism. In fact, it was to dominate his life to a large extent. The battle over the next five decades reads like a thriller. Several times it looked as if Arianism would triumph, but Athanasius kept on fighting tirelessly for the truth. For this he paid a severe price. He was banished several times, and once had to flee for five years in the desert before the emperor's soldiers. This, however, did not deter him from proclaiming the true gospel at every opportunity.

Finally, 8 years after the death of Athanasius in 373, Arianism was finally defeated at the Council of Constantinople.

It is generally accepted that Arianism would have triumphed had it not been for the heroic struggles of the Bishop of Alexandria.

## OF VITAL IMPORTANCE

❑ Why is this such an important issue? Why did Athanasius give his all to defend something which is in any case a mystery to us? Because he realised what was at stake - *the purity of the gospel and the reality of our salvation!*

Exactly who and what Christ is, is of vital importance. *Only someone who is in the fullest sense both God and man can be the Saviour of sinners!* The Christ of Arius is not truly God, but a created being. As such it would not be possible for

Him to bear our sins without perishing himself.

Throughout his life Athanasius was concerned with one thing only: *the honour and the glory of Christ*. And he knew that the Gospel would stand or fall by the deity of Christ.

## APPLICATION

❑ A pure and exact formulation of the truth is important. Too many people take the view that you can be a mature Christian without holding to doctrine. An organisation or a church that holds the view that it is possible to function properly without clear doctrine, is really saying that it does not have the faintest idea what the Christian faith is all about.

Faith has content and genuine faith has genuine content. And sometimes a small and very short vertical line can mean the difference between life and death. Then it is not unchristian to fight tooth and nail for the truth. This Athanasius understood. And this is why the New Testament is so adamant in its warnings against false teachers.

❑ If our text teaches that Jesus Christ is God's supreme revelation to us, we can be sure that this revelation is anything but vague. The Word that became flesh was in the fullest sense of the word the eternal Son of God and also himself God. What we see in Him is exactly how God is. Admittedly, He did not reveal everything to us, but that which He did reveal, is absolutely pure and trustworthy.

Reflect for a moment on how the Bible depicts Christ for us. Whom do you see? Has there ever been anyone so pleasant, so attractive, so lovable? Was there ever love like his? Who has ever been so perfect? *Now, that is exactly how God is - and for all eternity!*

❑ We see clearly in the life of Jesus the love-relationship between Him and the Father!

One cannot read the gospels, especially that of John, without gaining the impression that nothing played a bigger role in the life of the Lord Jesus than

his relationship with his heavenly Father.

The Father addresses his Son twice from heaven, and both times it is a declaration of his love. During Jesus' baptism there came a voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1:11). Again, on the Mount of Transfiguration we find a similar declaration: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Mt 17:5).

This love between the Father and the Son is an eternal and indescribably intimate one. The final verse in John's prologue states that the Son is "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18; NKJV). In Pr 8, which is commonly regarded as a poetical description of the Son in his eternal state, it is beautifully expressed as follows: "Then I was the craftsman at his side. I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence" (v30).

❑ In conclusion, in the Father's declaration of love on the Mount of Transfiguration, He states explicitly what we must do to please Him: *we must obey the apple of his eye!* And that is what true love really is: it always desires that the object of your love be honoured. Even the Father experiences his love in this manner. If his Son is in the centre of our lives, it pleases Him more than anything else.

*Let us pray passionately that the Father will be pleased and honoured by the nations as never before - by loving and serving the Son!*

## Nico van der Walt

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