Lesson 2 The Nature of the Son: Who Is Jesus Christ? Study Notes

How Did We Get Here

These self-contained notes explain the historical and theological issues in Lesson 2 and point to biblical and primary texts. Christ's full deity, real humanity, personal unity, and relation to the Father and Holy Spirit are related questions but must not be collapsed into one another.

Slide 1 The Questions We Must Keep Together

Lesson 2 asks how the Church came to confess Jesus Christ as fully divine and genuinely human. Christians were trying to hold together the whole biblical witness while explaining who acted, suffered, died, rose, and who saves. Four questions guide the lesson: Is the Son eternal or created? Is he fully God or a lesser divine being? Did he become fully human or only appear human? How are Father, Son, and Spirit distinct without becoming three gods?

Read or search *John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-12; Matthew 28:19; John 1:1-3, 14; Colossians 1:15-20*

Notes

Slide 2 From Authority to Doctrinal Formulation

Lesson 1 asked who/what is authoritative and who/what has the final word. Lesson 2 shows why the answer does not remove every difficulty: Arius and Athanasius both appealed to Scripture but interpreted key passages differently. The Church therefore used terms such as essence, person, and nature to state the combined implications of many passages. These words can clarify Scripture, but they must remain servants of the text.

Read or search *Athanasius, Discourse I Against the Arians, sections 1-10; Athanasius, De Decretis, sections 18-24*

Notes

Slide 3 The New Testament Evidence

Some passages emphasize Jesus' obedience, dependence, limited knowledge, or the Father's greatness. Others call the Son God, place him before creation, identify him as creator and sustainer, and give him divine worship. A responsible doctrine must explain John 14:28 and Mark 13:32 without weakening John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, or Thomas's confession, 'My Lord and my God.'

Read or search *John 14:28; Mark 13:32; John 20:28; Colossians 1:15-20*

Notes

Slide 4 The Creator-Creature Divide

The decisive question was not whether Jesus was unusually exalted. Arius placed the Son above every other creature but still on the created side of reality. Athanasius argued that Scripture places the Son on the Creator side: all created things came through him. If everything created came through the Son, the Son cannot be one of the things created through him.

Read or search *John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:16-17; Hebrews 1:2-3*

Notes

Slide 5 Ignatius, Gnosticism, and Docetism

Around AD 110 Ignatius of Antioch insisted that Jesus was truly born, truly suffered, truly died, and truly rose. He opposed Docetism, the claim that Christ only seemed to possess a physical body or to suffer. Gnosticism was a broader family of movements that often treated matter as inferior and offered salvation through special knowledge; it frequently produced Docetic Christologies, but the terms are not synonyms.

Read or search *Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book I; Ignatius, Smyrnaeans 1-7*

Notes

Slide 6 Arius and What He Taught

Arius was an ordained presbyter in Alexandria who considered himself a Christian teacher and argued from Scripture. Seeking to protect the Father's unique, unbegotten status, he taught that the Father brought the Son into existence before the rest of creation and created all other things through him. The Son was therefore the highest creature but did not share the Father's eternal essence: 'There was when he was not.'

Read or search *Alexander of Alexandria, Epistles on Arianism; Athanasius, The Deposition of Arius; Athanasius, De Synodis, section 15*

Notes

Slide 7 The Biblical Case Used by Arius

Arius emphasized texts in which the Father is greater, the Son does not know the hour, and Christ is called firstborn. He also read Proverbs 8:22 in the Greek Old Testament as Wisdom saying the Lord 'created' her, then identified Wisdom with the preexistent Son. His case illustrates how a collection of genuine texts can be misread when separated from the Bible's wider claims.

Read or search *Proverbs 8:22; Mark 13:32; John 14:28; Colossians 1:15*

Notes

Slide 8 Athanasius

Athanasius of Alexandria, about AD 296-373, became the best-known defender of Nicaea. He was a deacon at the council and later bishop of Alexandria. Repeated exiles show that Nicaea did not immediately settle the controversy. His argument joined biblical interpretation, Christian worship, baptism, and salvation rather than resting on one philosophical term.

Read or search *Athanasius, Four Discourses Against the Arians*

Notes

Slide 9 Athanasius's Biblical Answer

Athanasius distinguished the Son's eternal generation from the making of creatures. 'Begotten' names the Son's unique relation to the Father; it does not place him among created works. John says the Word already was in the beginning and that all things came into being through him. Colossians calls him firstborn because of supremacy and inheritance, then identifies him as creator of all things.

Read or search *Athanasius, Discourse II Against the Arians; John 1:1-3; Colossians 1:15-18*

Notes

Slide 10 Why Christ's Deity Matters for Salvation

For Athanasius, this was not a debate about technical precision alone. A creature might teach or assist, but only God can unite humanity to God, conquer corruption and death, and give divine life. Christian baptism, prayer, and worship also become incoherent if the Son is a creature. The Church would be directing divine honor toward someone who does not possess the divine nature.

Read or search *Athanasius, On the Incarnation, sections 6-10 and 54*

Notes

Slide 11 The Creed of Nicaea

The creed called the Son 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God,' and then added two decisive safeguards: 'begotten, not made' and 'of one substance with the Father.' These words denied that the Son was created from nothing, came into existence after the Father, or possessed a lesser kind of divinity.

Read or search *The Original Nicene Creed, AD 325*

Notes

Slide 12 Homoousios and Homoiousios

Homoousios means 'same essence' or 'one substance'; homoiousios means 'similar essence.' Homoios simply says the Son is like the Father, while anomoios stresses unlike essence. The one-letter difference mattered because 'similar' could leave the Son short of full deity. Yet not every opponent of homoousios was an Arian; some feared it erased the personal distinction between Father and Son.

Read or search *Athanasius, De Synodis, sections 41-54*

Notes

Slide 13 Why the Controversy Continued

Nicaea did not instantly create agreement. Imperial policies changed, bishops were deposed or restored, terminology remained unsettled, and several different positions were labeled Arian. The Cappadocians later helped distinguish one divine ousia, or essence, from three hypostases, or persons. Greek philosophical vocabulary was adapted to preserve both divine unity and real personal distinction.

Read or search *Gregory of Nazianzus, Third Theological Oration; Athanasius, Ad Afros*

Notes

Slide 14 Two Questions About the Holy Spirit

The debate then pressed two questions about the Spirit. Is the Spirit personally distinct from the Father and Son, or merely God's power, activity, presence, or influence? If personally distinct, is he created and subordinate or fully divine? Answering only the second question is insufficient if the Spirit has already been reduced to an impersonal force.

Read or search *Gregory of Nazianzus, Fifth Theological Oration, sections 5-6*

Notes

Slide 15 The Spirit in Scripture

The Spirit teaches, reminds, testifies, guides, hears, speaks, commissions, wills, intercedes, and can be grieved. These personal actions resist reduction to an impersonal force. Acts 5 associates lying to the Holy Spirit with lying to God; Matthew 28 places the Spirit with Father and Son in the one baptismal name; Paul presents the Spirit as knowing God's depths and giving divine life.

Read or search *John 14-16; Acts 5:3-4; 13:2; 1 Corinthians 2:10-11; 12:11*

Notes

Slide 16 Gregory, Basil, and the Cappadocians

Gregory of Nazianzus reported that some called the Spirit an activity, some a creature, some God, and some refused to decide. The Pneumatomachians, or 'fighters against the Spirit,' opposed his full deity. Basil argued from Scripture, baptism, sanctification, divine works, and Christian worship that the Spirit shares the divine dignity and is inseparably joined with Father and Son.

Read or search *Gregory, Fifth Theological Oration, sections 5-12; Basil, On the Holy Spirit, chapters 9, 16, and 27*

Notes

Slide 17 Constantinople and the Creed of 381

The creed associated with Constantinople calls the Spirit 'the Lord and giver of life,' says he proceeds from the Father, and confesses that he is worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son. That final phrase places the Spirit within divine worship rather than among created servants. This fuller language belongs to the 381 form of the creed, not the original creed of 325.

Read or search *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, AD 381*

Notes

Slide 18 The Filioque

The original creed says the Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Western Church later added filioque, 'and the Son.' The East distinguishes the Spirit's eternal procession from the Father from his historical sending through the Son. The West sees the Son's sending and the communion of Father and Son as supporting procession from both. Scripture explicitly says 'proceeds from the Father' and also says both Father and Son send the Spirit.

Read or search *John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13-15; OCA, The Holy Spirit*

Notes

Slide 19 Apollinarius and Complete Humanity

Apollinarius protected Christ's unity by teaching that the divine Word took the place of a complete human rational mind or soul. The result was not full humanity. Gregory of Nazianzus answered with the principle, 'What has not been assumed has not been healed.' For Christ to redeem complete human nature, he must assume complete human nature - body, mind, and soul.

Read or search *Gregory of Nazianzus, Letter 101 to Cledonius*

Notes

Slide 20 Nestorius, Cyril, and Eutyches

The Nestorian controversy raised the danger of dividing Christ into two acting subjects, one divine and one human. Cyril defended the unity of the incarnate Son: the one born, acting, and suffering in the flesh is the eternal Word. Eutyches reacted against division in a way that seemed to absorb or confuse Christ's humanity. The debate had to preserve unity without confusion and distinction without division.

Read or search *Cyril of Alexandria, Third Letter to Nestorius; Council of Ephesus, AD 431*

Notes

Slide 21 Chalcedon

Chalcedon confessed one and the same Son as truly God and truly man, complete in deity and complete in humanity. He is one person in two natures, known without confusion, change, division, or separation. The definition does not explain the incarnation exhaustively. It establishes boundaries that prevent Christ's deity, humanity, personal unity, or distinction of natures from being protected by denying another.

Read or search *Definition of Faith of the Council of Chalcedon*

Notes

Slide 22 Modern Echoes of the Ancient Debates

Jehovah's Witness teaching closely parallels Arian subordination by treating the Son as God's first creature and the Spirit as God's active force. Latter-day Saint teaching is better described as an Arian-like structural parallel, not a direct descendant: Father, Son, and Spirit are separate beings united in purpose, and Jesus is the Father's premortal firstborn, within a theology unlike Arius's. Oneness teaching echoes the opposite danger by denying eternal personal distinctions.

Read or search *LDS: Godhead; Jehovah's Witnesses: What Is the Holy Spirit?*

Notes

Slide 23 Biblical Synthesis and Review

The biblical witness requires us to hold together one God; the full deity and personal distinction of Father, Son, and Spirit; and the Son's complete humanity. Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon did not make the mystery easy, but they guarded one truth from being preserved by denying another. Review the argument by asking: Which claims are explicit texts, which are necessary inferences, and which creedal terms protect those conclusions?

Read or search *John 1:1-18; Matthew 28:19; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-12; Nicene Creed and Chalcedon*

Notes