HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

THE NATURE OF THE SON

Who is Jesus Christ?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Ignatius of Antioch: Truly God and Truly Human

Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Ephesians 7 and Letter to the Smyrnaeans 1-2 (early 2nd century) - condensed reading

Ignatius writes at a time when some Christians were tempted to treat the humanity and suffering of Jesus as an appearance rather than a physical reality. Against that tendency, he insists on holding together what later theology would call the divine and human realities of Christ. Jesus Christ belongs to the life of God and yet was genuinely born, genuinely suffered, and genuinely died.

For Ignatius, salvation depends on this union. If Christ only seemed to have a body, then his suffering and resurrection would also be only apparent. The gospel therefore requires more than saying that a heavenly being temporarily appeared in human form. The one Christians worship is the same one who truly entered human history.

Ignatius does not yet use the technical vocabulary of Nicaea or Chalcedon. Nevertheless, his language shows that very early Christians were already resisting accounts that protected Christ's divinity by weakening his humanity, or protected his humanity by treating him as merely human. The tension that later councils would define more precisely is already present.

Reading 2 - Arius: The Son Is Not Eternal in the Same Way as the Father

Arius, surviving fragments and letters associated with the Arian controversy (early 4th century) - condensed reading

Arius wanted to protect the uniqueness and absolute transcendence of the Father. He therefore argued that the Son, although incomparably exalted above every other creature, did not share the Father's eternal existence in the same way. The Son had a beginning. Before the Son was begotten, the Father existed without him.

In this account the Son is the Father's supreme agent in creation and revelation. The Son can be called divine and can be honored above all created things, but he does not possess the same unoriginated divine essence as the Father. Arius therefore distinguished sharply between the one God who is without beginning and the Son who receives being from God.

The controversy was not simply over whether Jesus was important or divine in some broad sense. Arius could use very high language about Christ. The decisive question was whether the Son belongs eternally on the Creator side of the Creator-creature distinction, or whether even the Son ultimately belongs on the created side.

Reading 3 - Athanasius: Only the True God Can Save

Athanasius, Orations Against the Arians and On the Incarnation (4th century) - condensed reading

Athanasius argues that the identity of Christ cannot be separated from the work of salvation. The Word who became flesh is not a creature promoted to divine status. He is the eternal Word through whom all things were made. Because humanity's problem is corruption, death, and alienation from God, only the Creator can restore the creature to life.

If the Son were himself a creature, Athanasius reasons, union with the Son could not truly unite human beings to God. A creature cannot bestow the divine life that it does not possess by nature. The Christian practices of baptism, prayer, and worship would also become incoherent if believers were directed toward one who did not fully share the Father's deity.

Athanasius therefore makes the doctrine intensely practical: the church confesses the Son as truly God because the church believes that in Christ God himself has acted to save. Christ's deity is not an abstract metaphysical luxury. It is bound to the claim that the saving work of Jesus is God's own work.

Reading 4 - Nicaea and Constantinople: Begotten, Not Made

Nicene Creed (325) and Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) - condensed reading

The Council of Nicaea confessed the Son as begotten from the Father and not made as creatures are made. Its decisive word was homoousios: the Son is of the same essence or substance as the Father. This language was chosen to exclude the idea that the Son could be the highest creature while still being less than the true God.

The creed also ties doctrine to salvation and worship. Jesus Christ is the one through whom all things were made, who came down for human salvation, became incarnate, suffered, rose, ascended, and will come again. The eternal identity of the Son and the historical work of Jesus belong to one confession.

The expanded creed associated with Constantinople in 381 became the standard Nicene confession across the major branches of Christianity. It fixed a boundary: whatever mysteries remain in speaking of Father and Son, orthodox Christianity cannot describe the Son as a creature, a lesser god, or a temporary manifestation of the Father.

Reading 5 - Chalcedon: One Person in Two Natures

Definition of the Council of Chalcedon (451) - condensed reading

After Nicaea settled that the Son is fully divine, another set of disputes focused on how Christ's deity and humanity relate. Chalcedon confessed one and the same Son as perfect in deity and perfect in humanity, truly God and truly man. His human nature includes a rational soul and body and is like ours in all things except sin.

The council then used four famous guardrails. The two natures are united without confusion, without change, without division, and without separation. The divine nature does not turn into humanity, and the human nature does not disappear into deity. At the same time, Christ is not divided into two persons acting side by side.

Chalcedon's purpose was not to explain mechanically how the incarnation works. It was to preserve the biblical affirmations that had to be kept together. The one born of Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and raised from the dead is the eternal Son, while remaining genuinely human.

Reading 6 - B. B. Warfield: The Person of Christ

B. B. Warfield, essays on the person and deity of Christ (late 19th-early 20th century) - condensed reading

Warfield emphasizes that the New Testament does not present Christ's deity as a late doctrinal addition. The apostles speak of Jesus within the identity and work of the God of Israel while also depicting him as fully human. Christ receives worship, exercises divine authority, creates, sustains, judges, forgives sins, and shares the divine name and glory.

At the same time, the New Testament portrays ordinary features of human life: birth, growth, hunger, weariness, grief, suffering, and death. Warfield therefore treats the later creedal formulas as disciplined summaries of biblical data rather than replacements for Scripture.

The classical doctrine of Christ is thus a refusal to solve the mystery by deleting one side of the evidence. The church confesses one person, the eternal Son, who possesses the fullness of deity and the fullness of humanity.

Reading 7 - Contemporary Comparison: Nicene Christianity and Latter-day Saint Teaching

Course reading summarizing official Latter-day Saint teaching in comparison with Nicene Christianity

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints speaks of Jesus Christ in strongly devotional and divine terms. Jesus is identified as Jehovah, the premortal Son of God, Creator under the Father's direction, Savior, risen Lord, and future Judge. Latter-day Saints worship the Father in the name of the Son and affirm Christ's unique saving role.

The difference appears in the doctrine of God itself. Historic Nicene Christianity confesses the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as distinct persons who share one divine being or essence. Latter-day Saint teaching rejects the post-biblical creedal formulation and describes the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as distinct beings united perfectly in purpose. The Father and the risen Son are embodied, while the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit.

Latter-day Saint teaching also places Jesus within a larger account of premortal existence in which human beings are spirit children of Heavenly Father and may, through Christ, receive exaltation. Nicene Christianity instead draws an absolute Creator-creature distinction: the Son is eternally begotten, not created, and human beings are created persons who can be adopted and glorified but never become gods by nature.

The disagreement therefore cannot be reduced to whether both traditions call Jesus divine. The central question is what 'divine' means and whether the Son eternally shares the one uncreated being of God. That is precisely the boundary the Nicene controversy forced the early church to define.