How Did We Get Here?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History



Lesson 2

The Nature of the Son

Who Is Jesus Christ?

The Questions We Must Keep Together

Lesson 2 asks how the Church came to confess Jesus Christ as fully divine and genuinely human.

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?

Key texts: John 1:1–18; Philippians 2:5–11; Hebrews 1:1–12; Matthew 28:19

From Authority to Doctrinal Formulation

Lesson 1 asked who has the final word. Lesson 2 shows why interpretation still matters.

Arius and Athanasius both appealed to Scripture.
They interpreted key passages differently.
The Church used terms like essence, person, and nature to state the combined implications of many passages.
Those terms can clarify Scripture, but must remain servants of the text.

Question: When is theological language a faithful servant of Scripture?

The New Testament Evidence

A responsible doctrine must hold together the whole biblical witness.

Texts that emphasize obedience or dependence

“The Father is greater than I.”
The Son does not know the hour.
The Son obeys, prays, suffers, and is sent.

Texts that place the Son with God

The Word was God.
All things were made through him.
Thomas confesses: “My Lord and my God.”

John 14:28 and Mark 13:32 must be read with John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1, and John 20:28.

The Creator–Creature Divide

The decisive question was not whether Jesus was unusually exalted.

Arius placed the Son above every creature — but still on the created side of reality.
Athanasius argued that Scripture places the Son on the Creator side.
If all created things came through the Son, the Son cannot be one of the things created through him.

Key texts: John 1:1–3; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:2–3

Ignatius, Gnosticism, and Docetism

Before Nicaea, the Church was already defending Christ’s real humanity.

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

Question: What is lost if Jesus only appears to become human?

Arius and What He Taught

Arius was an ordained presbyter in Alexandria who considered himself a Christian teacher.

He argued from Scripture and wanted to protect the Father’s unique, unbegotten status.
He taught that the Father brought the Son into existence before the rest of creation.
The Father then created all other things through the Son.
The Son was the highest creature, but did not share the Father’s eternal essence.

Arius’s slogan: “There was when he was not.”

The Biblical Case Used by Arius

Arius collected real biblical texts, but separated them from the wider biblical witness.

“The Father is greater than I.”
The Son does not know the hour.
Christ is called “firstborn.”
Proverbs 8:22 was read as Wisdom saying the Lord “created” her.
Arius identified Wisdom with the preexistent Son.

A collection of genuine texts can still be misread when isolated from the whole Bible.

Athanasius

Athanasius of Alexandria (c. AD 296–373)

> *“Nicaea did not immediately settle the controversy.”*

Athanasius was a deacon at Nicaea and later bishop of Alexandria.
He became the best-known defender of Nicaea.
His repeated exiles show the controversy remained intense.
His argument joined biblical interpretation, Christian worship, baptism, and salvation.

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.
Colossians calls him firstborn because of supremacy and inheritance, then identifies him as creator of all things.

Key texts: John 1:1–3; Colossians 1:15–18

Why Christ’s Deity Matters for Salvation

For Athanasius, this was not technical precision alone.

A creature might teach or assist.
Only God can unite humanity to God, conquer corruption and death, and give divine life.
Christian baptism, prayer, and worship become incoherent if the Son is a creature.
The Church would be giving divine honor to someone who does not possess the divine nature.

Question: Can anyone less than God save us by uniting us to God?

The Creed of Nicaea

Council of Nicaea, AD 325

> *“God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God… begotten, not made… of one substance with the Father.”*

“Begotten, not made” denies that the Son was created from nothing.
“Of one substance” denies a lesser kind of divinity.
The creed protects the biblical confession by drawing a boundary around it.

Homoousios and Homoiousios

The one-letter difference mattered because “similar” could leave the Son short of full deity.

Homoousios

“Same essence” or “one substance.”
Used to confess that the Son fully shares the divine nature.
Protects full deity, not merely likeness to God.

Homoiousios

“Similar essence.”
Could preserve distinction from the Father.
But could also leave the Son as less than fully God.

Not every opponent of homoousios was an Arian; some feared it erased Father–Son distinction.

Why the Controversy Continued

Nicaea did not instantly create agreement.

Imperial policies changed.
Bishops were deposed or restored.
Terminology remained unsettled.
Several different positions were labeled “Arian.”
The Cappadocians later helped distinguish one divine essence from three persons.

Greek philosophical vocabulary was adapted to preserve both divine unity and real personal distinction.

Two Questions About the Holy Spirit

Answering only one question is not enough.

Question 1: Personhood

Is the Spirit personally distinct from the Father and Son?
Or is the Spirit merely God's power, activity, presence, or influence?

Question 2: Deity

If personally distinct, is the Spirit created and subordinate?
Or is the Spirit fully divine with the Father and the Son?

The Spirit cannot be confessed as fully divine if he has already been reduced to an impersonal force.

The Spirit in Scripture

The biblical descriptions resist reduction to an impersonal force.

The Spirit teaches, reminds, testifies, guides, hears, speaks, commissions, wills, intercedes, and can be grieved.
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.

Key texts: John 14–16; Acts 5:3–4; Acts 13:2; 1 Corinthians 2:10–11; 12:11

Gregory, Basil, and the Cappadocians

The Church had to answer a range of views about the Spirit.

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 divine dignity.

Question: Should Christian worship reveal what Christians truly believe about God?

Constantinople and the Creed of 381

The fuller language about the Spirit belongs to the 381 form of the creed, not the original creed of 325.

The Spirit is “the Lord and giver of life.”
He “proceeds from the Father.”
He is “worshiped and glorified with the Father and the Son.”
That final phrase places the Spirit within divine worship, not among created servants.

Constantinople extends Nicene faith by speaking more fully about the Holy Spirit.

The Filioque

The original creed says the Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Western Church later added “and the Son.”

East: distinguishes the Spirit’s eternal procession from the Father from his historical sending through the Son.
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.”
Scripture also says both Father and Son send the Spirit.

Key texts: John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13–15

Apollinarius and Complete Humanity

Apollinarius protected Christ’s unity by denying complete human nature.

He taught 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: “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.

Question: What part of human nature would remain unhealed if Christ did not assume it?

Nestorius, Cyril, and Eutyches

The Church had to preserve unity without confusion and distinction without division.

The Nestorian controversy raised the danger of dividing Christ into two acting subjects.
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 protect both the unity of Christ and the integrity of both natures.

Chalcedon

Council of Chalcedon, AD 451

> *“One and the same Son… truly God and truly man… in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”*

Chalcedon does not explain the incarnation exhaustively.
It establishes boundaries for faithful confession.
It prevents one truth from being protected by denying another: deity, humanity, unity, or distinction.

Modern Echoes of the Ancient Debates

Ancient categories still help identify modern doctrinal patterns.

Arian-like subordination

Jehovah’s Witness teaching treats the Son as God’s first creature.
It also treats the Spirit as God’s active force rather than a divine person.
Latter-day Saint teaching has structural parallels but is not a direct descendant of Arius.

Opposite danger

Oneness teaching echoes the opposite problem.
It denies eternal personal distinctions within God.
The ancient debates help clarify what is being lost or protected.

Agreement on biblical words does not always mean agreement on biblical doctrine.

Biblical Synthesis and Review

The biblical witness requires several truths to be held together.

There is one God.
The Father, Son, and Spirit are personally distinct.
The Son is fully divine, not a creature.
The Spirit is personally distinct and fully divine.
The Son became fully human: body, mind, and soul.
The one Christ is one person in two natures.

Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon guard the Church from solving one problem by denying another.

Homework

1. Read John 14 - 16 carefully, focus only on things said about the Holy Spirit
    1. What is His Nature
    2. What is His purpose / What does He do

2. Consider the difference between
    1. Created being
    2. Being Who proceeds from, or is begotten of…