

## *Jesus: God the Son*

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A group of 318 Church leaders met in A.D. 325 at Nicea, in the northwestern part of what is now Turkey, to resolve a controversy over the exact nature of Jesus and His relationship to God the Father. They met in response to the teachings of a man named Arius, who said that Jesus was a creature made by God, that He had a beginning, and that He was subject to change.

The Nicene Council responded with what has become known as the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father, through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and in earth; Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human. He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into the heavens. And he will come to judge both the living and the dead.

And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.

But, those who say, Once he was not, or he was not before his generation, or he came to be out of nothing, or who assert that he, the Son of God, is of a different *hypostasis* [essence] or *ousia* [being], or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.<sup>1</sup>

This man-made creed states that Jesus is “of the essence of the Father,” “true God from true God,” “begotten, not created.” Those participating in the meeting further solidified their position by pronouncing an official “anathema” (curse) on all who held opposing views. The production of the Nicene Creed did not completely settle the question of Jesus’ nature; debates continued, just as they do today.

Part of the problem with the Nicene Creed is that its authors resorted to a non-biblical term, *hypostasis* (meaning “essence” or “reality”), to describe what they believed about Jesus.<sup>2</sup> However, the best clarification of the nature of Jesus is not found in any man-made creed, but in John 1:1–18. It directly addresses the issue of the nature of Jesus and especially answers the age-old questions “Was Jesus God, or was He only like God?”; “Was He a ‘divine man,’ a human with some divine qualities, being half God and half man?” John 1:1–18 answers these for us, so let us look carefully to see what the text tells us about the nature of Jesus.

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Leith, *Creeeds of the Churches* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1973), 30–31.

<sup>2</sup>It is typical of creeds to resort to non-biblical language to try to express biblical ideas (otherwise the creed itself would simply be a repetition of Scripture). This is exactly the reason they are subject to so much debate and discussion, with later creeds written to clarify or correct earlier ones.

### JESUS IS FULLY GOD

In John the story of Jesus begins farther back than in the other three Gospels. Matthew and Luke both relate the story of Jesus' conception and birth, while Mark begins with Him as an adult. In contrast, John goes all the way back into eternity: "In the beginning was the Word." That is why we can speak of the "preexistence" of Christ—because "in the beginning," the Word already was. The words "In the beginning" naturally take our minds back to Genesis 1. In fact, this phrase means the same thing in John 1 that it means in Genesis 1: not "in the beginning" of Jesus' existence, but before anything else existed, the Word was.

Why did John call Jesus "the Word"? Before answering that, we should note that verse 14 shows he was talking about Jesus: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." He then proceeded to tell the story of Jesus—but why did he call Him "the Word"? John was the only New Testament writer to use this strange designation for Jesus (assuming that John also authored the Book of Revelation; see Revelation 19:13). What did he mean by it?

First, "the Word" (*λόγος*, *Logos*) indicates that Jesus is the expression of God's mind. A "word" is a means of conveying thought from one mind to another, whether we are thinking of the spoken or the written word. John was saying that Jesus is the means of conveying God's mind, His will, to us. Hebrews 1:1, 2 says the same thing: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . ." (ESV).

Second, calling Jesus "the Word" suggests that

He is the expression of God's power. According to Isaiah 55:8–11, God's Word has a quality that our words do not have: It is always effective and always accomplishes God's purpose. Whatever God says, happens. That is why Genesis 1 repeatedly describes the creation process with "Then God said." Whatever God said was so. "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made" (Psalm 33:6a). In the person of Jesus, God supremely manifested His power—His power to bring life and light (vv. 4, 5) and His power to make sinners into His children.

By saying, ". . . the Word was with God," John indicated that Jesus the Son and God the Father are not identical beings, but separate personalities. This is an important point: We must not think that, in Jesus, God simply assumed a different form for a period of time. The idea that God exists in only one person who at times assumed the form of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is called "Modalism." "Modalists," as its advocates are called, argue that this interpretation does justice to the biblical statements that there is only one God and avoids the confusion of speaking of "three persons in one." However, Modalism overlooks some important biblical data. For example, we are told that God "sent" the Son into the world, and that Jesus later "sent" the Spirit to be with His disciples (among many examples; see John 16:5–11). These expressions make it impossible to ignore the fact that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons yet still one God.

Next we read, ". . . and the Word was God." Jesus is Deity, just as the Father is Deity. The two are so closely intertwined that both the Old and the New Testaments declare that there is only one God. This

concept is difficult to grasp, and that is the reason for all of the controversy. However, this same idea is reflected later in John, when Jesus appeared to Thomas, who had declared that he would not believe in the resurrection until he could see proof for himself. When Jesus invited him to put his finger in the nail-prints and his hand in the spear-wound, Thomas responded by confessing, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

That Jesus is God is further expressed in John 1 by the statements regarding the Word's role in the creation of the universe: "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (v. 3); "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him" (v. 10).

Only God exists from eternity to eternity. Only God could create the universe. Only God gives light and life. John's Gospel says that all of these statements are true of Jesus, the Word.

### **JESUS WAS FULLY HUMAN**

John 1:14a expresses as bluntly as possible that Jesus took on human form when He came to this earth: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." John could have said, "The Word became human" or "The Word became a man," but he chose to emphasize the fleshly nature of Jesus' earthly presence. Some have suggested that in doing this, John was taking a slap at people in his day who claimed that Jesus did not actually take human form, but only seemed to do so. They were called "Docetists," from the Greek word *δοκέω* (*dokeo*, "to seem, to appear to be"). These people also believed that matter is evil and spirit is

good; so John made his point in the most deliberate manner possible: "the Word became flesh." Whether these Docetists were John's target audience or not, he made the point quite clearly.

The statement that the Word "became" flesh shows that humanity was not originally part of Jesus' essential nature, but was His condition while on earth. This is further emphasized by John's use of the words "dwelt among us." "Dwelt" is from the Greek word which means "tabernacled," or "pitched His tent." A tent is not usually a permanent dwelling place, but a generally portable and impermanent one. So it was with Jesus' fleshly nature. He was merely "pitching His tent" among us for a while. We call this the "incarnation," from the Latin word for "flesh." Literally, it was the "infleshment" of Jesus. That means Jesus was fully capable of experiencing everything that is characteristic of human existence. He got hungry, tired, and sleepy, just as we do. Mark 14:33 even indicates that He became "distressed and troubled" at the prospect of going to the cross (although this is obscured in many English translations). Everything that is true of our fleshly bodies was true of His.

Why would Deity become flesh? John 1:18 answers that clearly: "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him." "Explained Him" comes from the Greek verb ἐξηγήομαι (*exegeomai*), from which we get our English word "exegesis." "Exegesis" is what an interpreter does in uncovering the meaning of a biblical text and expounding it to others. It means "to reveal, to explain." That is exactly what the coming of Jesus did for all of us: The Word became flesh to teach us some truths about God that we could not

have learned in any other way. Being finite humans, how else could we ever have understood the infinite glory, power, and lovingkindness of God than by “seeing” Him in the flesh? First John 4:9, 10 says, “By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” Of course, God has always been a God of love; but not until Jesus came and died on the cross could His people know the depth of His love.

When Philip later requested of Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us,” Jesus replied, “Have I been so long with you, and yet you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father . . .” (John 14:8, 9). To “see” Jesus, whether in person, as Philip did, or through the pages of Scripture, as we do, is to see something of God that could have been known in no other way.

John 1:17 says that “the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ.” We should not take this to mean that prior to Jesus’ coming there was no grace and truth or no knowledge of either. That would be a serious distortion and misunderstanding of the Old Testament. Naturally, before Jesus came, there was grace and there was truth. A mere glimpse at God’s patient dealings with Israel is sufficient to establish His gracious nature. His truth has always been expressed in His Word, as in the “Ten Commandments” and through the prophets. John’s point was not that grace and truth did not exist (or were not expressed) until Jesus came, but that they were not known in their fullness

until He came. Psalm 103:8 tells us that “the LORD is compassionate and gracious,” but we never knew how gracious this grace was until it was incarnated in the person and life of Jesus, and until His death on the cross.

John 1:1–18 makes two bold statements about the nature of Jesus: *He is fully God*, and *He was fully human while on this earth*.

### TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

John’s words raise two questions about the nature of Jesus that must be addressed. First, we ask, “*Is this teaching [that Jesus was both fully God and fully human] consistent with the rest of the Scriptures?*” Paul furnished an excellent response to that question in three of his letters. In Philippians 2:5–8, he wrote,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed *in the form of God*, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and *being made in the likeness of men*. *Being found in appearance as a man*, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Emphasis mine.)

The italicized phrases show that Paul’s thought was directly parallel with John’s: Jesus was “in the form of God” (“the Word was God”), but He took on an “appearance as a man” (“the Word became flesh”).

Likewise, in Colossians 1:15–19, Paul said,

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things



have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him.

This is further reinforced in Colossians 2:9: "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." What is true of God's nature is true of Jesus. Again, the parallel between Paul's references to "all the fullness" of God and John's saying "the Word was God" is obvious. Some have suggested that this text teaches what Arius maintained in the fourth century—that Jesus was in fact created by God as the first creature ("the firstborn of all creation"). However, that interpretation would make no sense in this context. If "all the fullness" of God dwelled in Jesus, then He could not possibly have been a created being. The expression "firstborn" has more to do with priority and privilege than with chronology. In the Old Testament, a firstborn son was given a double portion of his father's inheritance and assumed the leadership of the family at the time of the father's death. This idea of privileged status—not Jesus' being "the first creature"—is definitely what Paul had in mind. Otherwise, he wrote something that makes no sense.

Then there is Titus 2:11–13:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.

Here Paul explicitly called Jesus “God” (θεός, *Theos*, just as in John 1:1). It is true, as indicated by footnotes in the RSV and the NRSV, that this expression can legitimately be translated, “of the great God and our Savior,” drawing a distinction between God and Jesus, rather than calling Jesus “God.” However, this is not the most natural reading of the Greek text. Very few English translations render it that way. It is far more likely that Paul was joining John in calling Jesus “God.”

Moreover, John and Paul were not alone in this view of Jesus’ nature. Hebrews 1:3 says that the Son “is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.” The “exact representation of His nature” means the exact duplication of God’s nature. A few verses later, Hebrews applies Psalm 45:6, 7 and other Old Testament texts to the Son and calls Him “God” (1:8). The epistle also calls Him “Lord,” the usual Old Testament designation for God (see 7:14). It is clear that John’s declarations of Jesus’ deity and humanity are entirely consistent with the rest of the New Testament revelation.

The second question raised by John’s assertions is “*How can we believe that the Father and the Son are one God?*” Logically, two beings cannot be one—so how can God the Father and Jesus the Son both be God? The situation is further complicated when we add the Holy Spirit into the equation, so that we have three persons but still only one God. This is a legitimate concern, and two important responses can be given.

1. The first response is to believe what we do not understand. All of us do it all the time. For example, I have never understood how airplanes fly. I have

heard all the explanations about lift and thrust, but I still do not understand it. When I look at the size and bulk of a 747 jet and add in the weight of all those passengers, the luggage, and the fuel, it still does not seem possible to me. In spite of this, I have flown in one and so am convinced that it works. Similarly, we just have to believe what John 3:16 tells us: “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” I do not understand that either. How could God love sinful people enough to give His one and only Son? To the finite human mind, it makes no sense—but, as Christians, we believe it. Why, then, should we balk at accepting something about the nature of God that we do not understand?

2. The second response is to accept that we do not understand some things about God and His nature. This should not surprise us. What kind of God would He be if we could fully comprehend Him? Actually, there are many things we do not understand about God. How did He create the world from nothing? How can it be possible that His word has such power that He can “speak” things into existence? With the billions of people on earth, how does He know what is going on in each of our lives? Jesus said that God knows us so well that the hairs of our heads are numbered. Perhaps the greatest mystery of all is this: Why does He care about us? How could He give His Son to die for a world full of sinners, most of whom do not even care about Him? Let us confess it: We do not understand many things about God.

### CONCLUSION

Is Jesus God? Yes. Was He human? Yes. Do we

understand that? No, but we can still believe it. Our souls depend on it! “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1); “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12).