Chapter 10

**The Son**

Jesus as the recognized messiah presents several intriguing avenues of exploration, none of which we will take here, of course. The professions about the Son make up the bulk of the Creed. If just the idea of the Trinity was enough to cause trouble, then the nature of Jesus only exacerbates and complicates things. These statements turn us more toward the Arian controversies of the 4th century. Still, the problem is not with the Revealed nature of Jesus but in our ability to comprehend the mystery of the Christ.

**The Words**

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| ***Nicene Creed*** | ***Some Biblical References*** |
| I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, | Acts 11:17; Eph 4:5; Phil 2:11 |
| the Only Begotten | Mt 14:33, 16:16; Jn 1:14,18, 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9 |
| Son of God | 2 Cor 1:19 |
| born of the Father before all ages; | Jn 1:2, 17:24 |
| God from God | Jn 17:3; 1 Jn 5:20 |
| Light from Light | Ps 27:1; Mt 17:2,5; Jn 1:4-9, 8:12; 1 Jn 1:5 |
| true God of true God, | Jn 17:1-5; 1 Jn 5:20 |
| begotten not made | Heb 1:5 |
| consubstantial with the Father, | Jn 10:30; 14:10-11 |
| through him all things were made. | Jn 1:1-3; Eph 3:9; Heb 1:1-2 |
| For us and for our salvation | Jn 12:47; Rom 1:16; I Tim 2:4-5 |
| he came down from heaven, | Jn 6:33,35, 16:28 |
| and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, | Lk 1:30-31,35 |
| and became man. | Jn 1:14; Phil 2:7-8; Heb 2:16 |
| For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, | Mk 15: 25; Jn 1:14, 9:15-16; Acts 13:28; I Cor 15:3; 1 Tim 6:13 |
| He suffered death, was buried | Mk 8:31; Jn 19:30; Acts 17:2-3; Heb 2:18; 1 Pt 2:21; Mk 15:46; Mt 27:59-60; Lk 23:53-58; Jn 19:41-42; I Cor 15:4 |
| and rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. | Ps 16:10; Hos 6:2; Mk 16:6; Mt 28:6; Lk 24:1-7; 1 Cor 15:3-4 |
| He ascended into heaven | Lk 24:51; Acts 1:9-10 |
| and is seated at the right hand of the Father. | Mk 16:19; Lk 22:69; Acts 7:55-56; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 1 Pt 3:22 |
| He will come again in glory | Mt 24:27-30; Mk 13:26; Lk 21:27 |
| to judge the living and dead, | Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1; 1 Pt 4:5; Rev 20:12 |
| and his kingdom will have no end. | Lk 1:33; 2 Pt 1:11 |

**God As Son**

If the Father is the Creator who creates and sustains everything, then why do we need the Son anyway? What role does the Son play? What does it mean to be “Son”?

The biblical title “son” is used throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. In the New Testament, while such titles are applied to him by others, Jesus uses the word himself, for example “*Foxes have dens and birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head*.” (*Lk* 9:58) Of course the titles of Jesus are mostly post-Resurrection imposed but as we can read, Jesus does use some himself and especially places himself as “Son” when he refers to “my Father” (cf. *Jn* 5:17, for example[[1]](#footnote-1)).

Initially in the Old Testament, “son of Man” is used to distinguish humans from other created beings like angels but in later Jewish apocalyptic literature (like *Daniel*), the "*Son of Man*" is a figure of divine judgment. Jesus appears to use the title in terms of his earthly ministry, pointing to his physical nature (i.e. “*the Son of Man has nowhere to rest his head*”). The title “son of God" is a title given initially to the angels, is eventually applied to the whole of Israel after the Sinai Covenant (the “Chosen People”), and finally directly to their kings and denotes a very special relationship, and its application to Jesus in the New Testament may only be in that sense. But according to the fullness of Revelation in Jesus, we also see development of the understanding of Jesus as more, especially in the use during Peter’s confession of Jesus as "*the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (*Mt* 6:16). Paul especially uses this sense of Jesus’ earthly titles.

Just from a legal point of view, the son is the heir. Upon the death of the Father, the son gets *everything*. In Jewish terms, that includes the whole household: all its goods, chattel, and its people. Additionally, and probably most importantly, it includes the covenant with God. The Son has been handed the Kingdom by the Father. There is obviously a special relationship beyond Creator/Created between Jesus and the Father. God the Father, the Creator and the one who sustains but in the first chapter of Genesis, we see God’s Word as being spoken, from that we see Jesus as God the Word, the *Logos*, per John. This implies both a divine nature as well as a human nature to the ministry of Jesus.

“Son” then has two meanings, on the one hand the earthly, physical, human Jesus and on the other, the heavenly, spiritual, divine Jesus. Probably the most confusing part of Christianity is the understanding of Jesus as both God and as human.

**Christology**

Which brings us here. This is not only a real term it is what we are talking about in this chapter. “Christ” is Greek for the Jewish word “Messiah” meaning “anointed one” (think *chrism* – the oil used in anointing). So what we are talking about here is not really the historical Jesus but the “anointed one”. Priests, prophets, and kings were all anointed in the Old Testament, so the idea is not new. It is the transformation of this title that we study, Jesus as the Messiah, the *post-resurrection* experience of the Apostles and early disciples. This event created many questions as to what they understood before the Resurrection and what they understood after the Resurrection (all dealing with Jesus’ teaching). The earliest disciples were Jews (and “lovers of God” – Greek converts) for the most part and so their understanding of God was monotheistic. Ergo most early Christians wanted to retain that understanding of God – as one. They were still monotheists. Per Judaism there was only one God, the God of the Creator, the “God of Israel” the one Jesus called "Father."

But if there was only one God, what was Jesus? If there is only one divine, and Jesus acknowledged him as Father, how could the “Son” also be divine? What was the precise relationship between the Father and the Son? If Jesus was divine, what was the nature of the Jesus they knew, who was obviously human, who needed nourishment, could be beaten, bleed, and die. And then, in their post-Resurrection experience, he could be solid, eat, and yet pass through walls, or appear and disappear at will?

How did the human and the divine fit together, as they must from their experience both pre and post Resurrection? If Jesus had been divine when they knew him, then how could he also be human? Such questions about the nature of Jesus and his relationship with God the Father were not solved right away (remember the Apostles only had 50 days to ask questions – all the while being taught in light of the Resurrection, and in total and complete awe of the situation, I defy you to do better) meaning that this Revelation was hotly debated in the first few centuries. As we can tell from our earlier chapter on heresy, many different opinions, arguments, and solutions were put forth. Hence the need for hefty Christological studies (not Jesusological studies).

The main point, reiterated over several lines of the Creed, is that the Son, though “*in human form*” is God. Jesus accepts Peter’s confession of “*Christ*” and “*Son of the Living God*” because he understands it in terms of the Economy – he accepts it and then immediately places it within the context of his imminent death and resurrection.

**The Problems**

There is really no need to rehash all of the heresies we mentioned before, but if you recall that short list, then you remember that they were Legion. The two problems we have been focusing on deal with Jesus’ dual nature, as both God and human. The Gnostics could not accept Jesus’ human nature and the Arians could not accept his divine one, the former based in human practice the latter on human reason. An additional benefit to their adherents was the removal of the prickly problem of the Trinity. If not human no need to wonder how God works as Trinity; if not divine then no need to define how Trinity works either. There is no need for the mystery of the Trinity because it becomes completely rational, not revealed.

We have covered this before but it probably bears a retelling within the present context. As with trying to get a handle on Gnosticism as a whole body of belief, their notions about the material/divine nature of Jesus fall into several lines. While as a whole Gnostics thought that the orthodox teaching that Jesus became human was wrong, why they thought it was wrong comes in several flavors with the only common driving point being the fallen, evil nature of the material. The exact nature of Jesus was fuzzy, with some differentiating base on the title “Christ”. There were some who vaguely understood the Christ to be the divine and the Jesus to be some sort of human mouthpiece through whom the divine Christ spoke to humans. Some saw Jesus as a human vessel, merely imbued with the Spirit during his ministry and bereft of the Spirit before his death. This keeps the divine from being overly tainted by the flesh, making it a tenuous relationship at best. For others, there was never a material version of Jesus, only a non-material being with the appearance of a human. This vessel was similar to the angels of the Old Testament who were merely the mouthpieces of God, being of human appearance but remaining corporeal beings. For others it was more about Jesus’ death and suffering as being an event outside of normal time and space, or only an appearance of suffering and death.

Arianism comes later, is more cohesive, and focuses more on the divine nature. Arius, for whom the heresy is named, was a priest in Alexandria in the early 4th century. Whereas Rome of the earlier centuries was a clearing house for mystery cults and various religious beliefs, Alexandria was the center of learning and rational debate.[[2]](#footnote-2) Arius was bothered by the logic of Jesus being *begat* and countered with a more rational argument. He argued that there was the Father, who alone existed before all time, and who then first created (*begot*) the Son, and that the newly created Son, in conjunction with the Father, proceeded to create heaven and earth. By this, the Son was not God at all but a created being, like us or the angels – problem solved. Rational, though it echoes of the earlier Gnosticism in that it reflects some of the mystery cults which relied upon pagan beliefs in the structure of their gods. There is also the echo that the perfect immaterial God would not be part of the material world, relying upon more material intermediates to reveal Himself.

That said, the Bishop of Alexandria, coincidentally name Alexander, banded with the other Egyptian bishops in questioning, condemning, and eventually excommunicating Arius for this line of thinking. So Arius high-tailed it out of there and headed into Asia Minor where he taught and wrote at length. Bishops as well as faithful began to fall under his sway, which caused political as well as religious unrest and eventually prompted Constantine to call the Council for the Creed we now examine.

**The Solutions**

Historically, in terms of creed development, the earliest statements are those about Jesus’ humanity, that is, the ones we say in the ‘second part’ if you will, which in their own way address the Gnostic material/evil issue. The Arian development though is focused completely upon the divine nature, the statements made in the ‘first part’. So it makes sense that the human Christ is determined first and the divine second. We can also see this though in the experience of the disciples. They first knew the human Jesus, knew him “*in human likeness; and found human in appearance*” (*Phil* 1:7b) and after the Resurrection came to know him in his divinity. As said, the Early Church is a post-Resurrection entity[[3]](#footnote-3) and so that same hymn quoted by Paul starts with “*Who, though he was in the form of God*…” (*ibid* 1:6a). So, our human knowledge of Jesus moved from his humanity to his divinity, whereas the Church moves from his divinity to his humanity (and back again) because, once again, we are professing the economy of salvation.

But his divinity did not really become an issue until challenged by the Arians, and so creeds do not focus on it for centuries. But remember that the creed is not just concerned with repudiating the Gnostics and the Arians. The flow speaks to us of both the two natures of Jesus, first of his relationship with the Father and second of his Incarnation *and* mission among humanity. They are, in the same sense that Jesus is one, two sides of the same coin.

The solution to the problems lie in the words we use. Words are what we need. As we have discussed earlier, one of those words is *Logos*, but interestingly enough it is not one of the ones used in the Creed. The words of the Creed are carefully chosen and bear great meaning.

**The One Lord**

As we profess “*one God*”, so we profess “*one Lord*”. As the three persons are in concert one God so the two natures in Jesus are simultaneous. He is “one Lord”. Additionally the proclamation of “Lord” also carries some significance. “Lord” is not a new title, but comes from the Old Testament, and is ascribed to God (the replacement for *YHWH*, *Adonai* in Hebrew, *Kyrios* – think *Kyrie Eleison* – in Greek), in lieu of using His *name*. The title is given to one who is recognized as in charge of things, especially life and death.

So we tie in life to the Creation. “…*through him all things were made*” also points to the relationship within the Trinity. The Word, as Genesis and Paul tell us, was there at the beginning. Life depends upon him and his role in the constant creating of the Father; without the Logos, there is no Creation.

On the other side, when we think about the Resurrection, then Jesus’ statement “*I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father*” (*Jn* 10:18) puts him squarely in the realm of someone who has the power over life and death, given to him by the Creator, the Lord God. Death now comes in two flavors, in light of the Resurrection: “the death that leads to life’ which comes from following Christ and ‘the death that is once and for all’ which comes from sin (i.e. not following Christ).

From a legal point of view, for the Christians to call Jesus “Lord” meant that they were in conflict with the Roman lord – the emperor – who also apparently had some power over your life and death – but not for as long as God.

**The Begotten**

We read in the Old Testament that ‘so-and-so begat so-and-so, who begat so-and-so’ and so on. We understand begetting to mean that so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, in terms of human generation. So if the main beef with Arius was that Jesus was a created creature born, then why would you go to the effort of using a word which means “born”? Genesis tells us that the Word was with God before creation. Paul reiterates that, clarifying that “*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*.” (*1 Col* 1:17) and John bluntly states that “*the Word was with God, and the Word was God*.” (*Jn* 1:1) So how is he “begotten”?

One of the ideas being combated by the notion of being born deals with *Adoptionism* – where God ‘adopted’ the human Jesus. This says that God merely granted Jesus powers and then “adopted” him as a Son. But in terms of our discussion we are fighting with Gnostics and Arians.

The Father sends his Son. We can see this statement throughout the New Testament, in the epistles and even in Jesus’ parables (cf. *Mt* 21:33-39).

Of God and returning to God. "*I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father*." (*Jn* 16:28)

***Consubstantial***

This word comes to us courtesy of the new translation of the Creed. Previously the phrase was “*one in being*” which I think may have cause confusion due to the modern meaning of the word “*being*”. This term harkens back to the difference between essence and existence. Think back to Aristotle’s definition of substance as that which makes a thing what it is. Being means existence not essence and essence (substance) precedes existence. So if the Father existed before time (as Creator, the one who holds both his essence and his existence within himself), Arius believed that if the Father had “begotten” the Son, then the Son must be inferior to the Father, as existence springing from essence, material from spiritual is inferior. He likened it to a prince (the son) being inferior to a king (the father).

Herein lies the problem with words. Athanasius returned that a son is precisely the same sort of being as his father using the word “*homoousios”* (Gk meaning “same essence”)[[4]](#footnote-4), and that the only son of a king is destined himself to be a king – in other words, king was more the substance than was father/son genetics. A human son is certainly younger than his father he is only has the potential of what he will be within him (think back to Aristotle). But we are not talking about a human father and a human son. So when we say that a human prince *may* someday hope to become a king like his father is now, we are talking about potential. God is fully realized and has no potential within Him. What we are saying of God the Son is that He is from all eternity what God the Father is – fully realized.

This is because God is not in time or space. Humans deal in the physical particulars. Time, as Augustine tells us, only comes into existence within Creation and has meaning only in the context of the physical universe. When speaking about God though, when saying that the Son is “begotten” of the Father, we are not talking about a Creation event. Still, just as we see the Father in relationship to His creation creating, sustaining we come to understand the nature of the relationship within the Trinity. With the Father and the Son we are speaking about an external to Creation realm, the eternal and timeless relationship between the Father and the Son, creative and nourishing. They are of the same substance (con-substantial).

**True God and True Man**

So when we keep the discussion in context, God becomes human but human does not become God. The Son *assumes* humanity, enters within human time and space. This human nature is as important to us as is his divine. It goes back to creation and the goodness of the material world. God creates the heaven and earth, visibly and invisibly. Without this fact, we question the reality of reality and therefore the Truth of the Economy. If we can question the existence of the physical world and our relationship to it, then we have to question our relationship with the Creator and whether or not Jesus the Son even dwelt among us. It starts a cascade failure which causes the Economy of Salvation itself to fall into doubt. So, if we believe that Revelation is Truth then we must maintain the Truth. Jesus is both God and human.

We can easily understand Jesus as Son, mainly because the events of his life happened so long ago. But distance can also make the heart grow confused. The previous section addresses many of the divine aspects so we will dwell mainly here on his human self. We must remove from our minds the image of two souls/wills crammed into one body at odds with one another or controlling one half of his body while the other controlled the other half, or of the divine will suppressing the human will. Instead, what the divine did was take on (*assume*) all of the human aspects, our human substance. This means that he had a true human physical body – a body which scratched and grew. It also means that he had a human mind and human knowledge – *limited* knowledge, which was bounded by the geological, political, scientific, and historical conditions of his *time*. All that means he experienced all that we experience and that he "*advanced [in] wisdom and age and favor before God and man*." (*Lk* 2:52). He had to learn from experience just as we do. He had to bend his human will to the divine will through effort.

All that said, Arius held to the material/immaterial incompatibility stance. It is a rational, common-sense approach to the problem of Jesus – water and oil do not mix. He also objected to the non-biblical term *homoousios* being used to explain the God/Man. Let us face it. This is a tough idea. The Fathers sought to come up with a word which satisfied the meaning of what Revelation tells us about Jesus. Like *personae*, this is a theological word, a word of explanation and therefore an imperfect solution at best. But Arius was actually not alone in the latter position, and many saw it as a non-orthodox *innovation* – cause for heresy. When it made it into the Creed it helped to fuel Arius’ position and popularity. Many rejected the Nicene Creed because of it. Ironically then, Athanasius, who proposed the word in opposition to Arius, was actually seen as the liberal radical because he was trying to stretch the understanding which was obviously deficient – as seen by Arius’ argument.

But I digress. Humanity falls back under that whole creation discussion we had in the last chapter and section, on Heaven and Earth as well as Visible and Invisible. All things created are good. Period. That is what has been revealed. While there may be a struggle between the spiritual and the material it is more in terms of practice, in recognizing sin not in substance. There is not a dualism between material and spiritual, where one is evil or imperfect and the other good or perfect. We are body *and* soul, head and heart, so, while there was a fall where the flesh and soul are pulled down, there is ultimately restoration within the God/Man. This is the Economy of Salvation.

We use the word “will” here. Jesus *assumed* humanity and therefore a human will, meaning that he freely took on a human nature but without surrendering his divine nature (which gave him the freedom to take on human nature). There is a joining of the fully realized (divine) with the potential (human). Without loss of freedom (*Jn* 10:18) he became human. His human will he turned toward his Father’s will (the divine will). Basically that means that he submitted his human will to his divine will – which is nothing radical; it is something Mary did and something we are called to do as well.

**Mariology**

So, speaking of Mary, Christology begs a study of Mary. Mary is “virginal”, and not just that but “ever virgin”. We will not spend a lot of time here, this being a course all in itself, but it is important to the Creed, important enough to be mentioned. Mary is instrumental in the Incarnation, the “in-fleshing” of the Son. Without her, and not just someone like her, there would be no Salvation. We will not address the titles of Mary here but it bears remembering that there are many. In and through Mary, Jesus “became man”. Mary was fully human and gave to Jesus his human form.

At the same time, *Theotokos* is the generally accepted title of Mary. It means “God bearer” in Greek and speaks not to the human aspect of Jesus but to his divine. The Creed keeps up the tension between the divine and the human, keeps it before us by stating that at one and the same time he was by the Holy Spirit and “of the Virgin Mary” “incarnate” and “and became man” – two separate things. It is the power of God and the true human nature that the Creed emphasizes by mentioning Mary.

***It’s The Economy…***

Incarnation. “*For us and for our salvation*” – what more needs to be said?

**Covering A Multitude Of Sins**

So speaking of the Economy of Salvation, why is it necessary for Jesus to come as “*expiation for our sins*” (*1 Jn* 2:2)? What is the nature of sin and evil? The Gnostics present that dualism as the explanation. Loosely stepping through each profession, orthodoxy counters with the statements which affirm that Jesus was human, that he was conceived through the action of the Holy Spirit, with whom he, with the Father, was always one. This physical conception implies also a physical birth which countered the Gnostic teaching that Jesus humanity was just an appearance. This also counters the teaching by other Gnostics that the Spirit had nothing to do with Jesus until his Baptism. Next, contained within and following from that, the nature of the person who conceives is that of a virgin, not just virginity in the physical sense but also in the spiritual sense, of someone who was totally devoted to God. That physical response to God, with mind, heart, and womb speaks to the special nature of the woman who said “Yes” and the special nature of the child in her womb, from the first moment of his life, and not just from the baptism on.

So the Incarnation, life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus are important events both in and out of time. They all emphasize the dual nature of the Son, and the insertion of God into His Creation, creating and sustaining it. Still the cultures at the time had many stories that came to them of the god who is killed but rises again. Within the culture at the time, they had become stories more than religious myth and practice, tied more to the physical death and rebirth of the seasons. The Creed on the other hand takes great pains to say that Jesus is a historical figure, not a myth or story. He lived and died under a known historical figure – “*Pontius Pilate*” who we know was Procurator of Judea from 26-36 AD while Tiberius (16-37) was Emperor. Cold, hard facts. The other cold, hard fact was that “*he suffered death and was buried*” under said Pontius Pilate. A real human body that felt pain, died horribly, and could in fact be buried in a tomb. He did not swoon, or fall unconscious, or in a coma, or only seem dead, or slip down off the Cross, or get replaced, or any of the other possible explanations offered because of the confusion over his dual nature.

As Lord, he will also return “*to judge the living and dead*” and a new Heaven and new Earth, a “*kingdom*” with “*no end*”, will be created. The Father has given him the power. In the Western *Apostle’s Creed*, he is also said to have descended to the dead. This bit of theology is not covered in the Nicene Creed, but bears a bit of mentioning. The ramifications of this are two-fold. First, in that he really did die, such that he entered *Sheol*, the Jewish realm of the dead (not Hell per-se, just the place where the dead souls go – but that is another class) and that the souls there, who were locked out of Paradise after the fall, people like “*our Father in Faith*” – Abraham, Isaac, Moses, David – all of those who trusted in the Covenants of God and followed His divine will, that they were finally able to come into Heaven. Once again: Jesus is the fullness of Revelation – everything God publicly reveals comes to fulfillment in him.

**Putting It Together**

Okay this was a long one. Even so, it barely scratched the surface of the power and meaning of these professions. The most important thing is that Jesus is both a physical and a spiritual being. His Church, his Body, which we are, is therefore a physical and a spiritual thing. Our profession of Faith, our expression of the action our belief and the action of our response has both a divine and a physical nature. We like the human Jesus bend our human will, our limited human rationality, our flawed “earthen vessels” (2 *Cor* 4:7) toward the divine will. We are created in the “*image”* and “*likeness*” of God. Our sin causes us to lose that likeness, but Jesus, because he is true God and true man, restores us to the Created state.

God undertakes the task of creating and sustaining – a part of which is restoring Creation and the humans who have dominion over it.

We follow Christ because that is how God ordains it. The Economy of Salvation was written long before we came on the scene and will continue long after we have gone to our eternal reward. But we profess and hand on this mystery because it is the Truth, and we guard it jealously.

*“We have all heard people say that the Jesus of the New Testament is indeed a most merciful and humane lover of humanity, but that the Church has hidden this human character in repellent dogmas till it has taken on an inhuman character. The truth is that it is the image of Christ in the churches that is almost entirely mild and merciful. It is the image of Christ in the Gospels that is a good many other things as well. [...] There are a great many things about the Gospels which nobody would have invented, things which have remained rather as puzzles. It is anything but what these people talk of as a simple Gospel. Relatively speaking, it is the Gospel that has the mysticism and the Church that has the rationalism. It is the Gospel that is the riddle and the Church that is the answer.”*

***G.K. Chesterton****, The Everlasting Man*

1. You might notice that many references to the divine Jesus come from the Gospel of John, and Paul. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Recall the famous Library of Alexandria which was burned to the ground by Julius when he invaded and conquered Egypt. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Post-Pentecost if you really want to push it, but we are talking of the Son here, not yet the Spirit. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some argued for the term “*homoiousia*” meaning “similar essence” – but Athanasius would have none of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)