

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

CHRISTOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

UNIT 2: THE PRE-EXISTENCE AND ETERNAL SONSHIP OF CHRIST

Lesson 3

In the Beginning Was the Word

The Eternal Pre-Existence of the Son of God

Before Bethlehem, Before Time, Before All Things

Key Texts: John 1:1–3; John 8:58; John 17:5; Colossians 1:15–17; Micah 5:2

“Before Abraham Was Born, I Am”

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SERIES VERSE

*“For we do not preach ourselves
but Christ Jesus as Lord,
and ourselves as your bond-servants
on account of Jesus.”*

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5, NASB 1995

INTRODUCTION

We have arrived at the threshold of the most staggering claim in the entire theological enterprise: that the man who stood in the Jordan River to be baptized by John, who grew weary at Jacob's well, who wept outside the tomb of Lazarus, and who was nailed to a Roman cross outside the walls of Jerusalem, this man had no beginning. He did not come into existence at Bethlehem. He was not created at the moment of His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary. He did not begin to be when the Father elected to send Him into the world. Before the first act of creation, before the first moment of time, before there was anything that could be called "before," the Son of God was. This is the doctrine of the eternal pre-existence of the Son, and it is the necessary foundation upon which every other christological affirmation rests.

The prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:1–18) is the supreme christological text of the New Testament, and it announces this truth with three words that have reverberated through the history of Christian theology with undiminished force: "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1, NASB 1995). Not "in the beginning, the Word came to be." Not "in the beginning, the Word was created." The imperfect tense of the Greek verb ἦν (en), "was", carries no sense of beginning or origination. It is the language of continuous, unoriginated existence. When the beginning began, the Word was already there. The beginning presupposes Him; He does not presuppose the beginning.

This lesson works through the primary texts of the New Testament that establish the eternal pre-existence of the Son: the Johannine prologue, the great pre-existence sayings in John's Gospel (8:58; 17:5), the Colossian hymn (1:15–17), and the prophetic testimony of Micah 5:2. It engages the ancient heresy of Arianism, the claim that the Son is the first and greatest of all creatures, and demonstrates why the biblical evidence and the theological logic of the gospel together demand the affirmation that the Son is not a creature, however exalted, but the eternal, uncreated, self-existent God. The distinction between the eternal existence of the Son and the temporal beginning of the incarnation, which lies at the heart of the Nicene settlement, will be carefully drawn and defended. And the whole inquiry will be oriented, as always, toward the doxological goal that gives all theological labor its proper motivation: the adoring knowledge of the One who is before all things.

I. THE JOHANNINE PROLOGUE: A THREEFOLD AFFIRMATION

John 1:1 and the Three Great Claims About the Eternal Word

A. The Word's Eternal Existence: "In the Beginning Was the Word"

The opening clause of John’s Gospel is a deliberate and unmistakable echo of the opening clause of Genesis: “In the beginning” (Ἐν ἀρχῇ, *en archē*). The reader of the Greek Bible would immediately hear the resonance with Genesis 1:1 (LXX: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἐποίησεν ο θεός, “In the beginning God made”). But where Genesis describes what God did in the beginning, John describes what was already the case when the beginning began. The Word was not made in the beginning; the Word was already there when the making began. The imperfect ἦν (*en*), consistently used throughout the prologue for the pre-incarnate Word, contrasts with the aorist ἐγένετο (*egeneto*, “became”) used in verse 14 for the incarnation: “the Word became flesh.” The distinction is precise and intentional. The Word’s existence is eternal; the incarnation is an event in time.

This opening clause alone is sufficient to refute every form of adoptionism and creaturely Christology. The Word was not adopted into a pre-existing relationship with God at some point in time. He was not created as the first and greatest of all things and then elevated to divine status. He was not a divine attribute that became personalized in the process of revelation. He was, in the most absolute and unqualified sense, already existing when the beginning of all things began, which means He has no beginning, because He was there before beginning was possible. The aseity of the Son, His existence from Himself, without origin or cause, is the necessary implication of John’s first three words.

B. Personal Distinction from the Father: “The Word Was With God”

The second clause of John 1:1, “and the Word was with God” (NASB 1995), establishes the personal distinction of the Word from the Father. The Greek preposition πρὸς (*pros*, “with”) in this context does not merely indicate spatial proximity; it carries the sense of face-to-face relationship, of one person directed toward and in communion with another. The Word was not simply in God, as an attribute or thought is in the mind that thinks it. The Word was with God, in the eternal, personal, face-to-face relationship of one distinct Person with another.

This second clause is the Johannine foundation for what the later Trinitarian tradition would articulate as the distinction of persons within the unity of the divine essence. The Father and the Son are not the same Person; there is a genuine personal distinction between them that is eternal, not merely functional or revelatory. The Word’s eternal communion with the Father is the foundation of the eternal love that the Father has for the Son (“For the Father loves the Son,” John 3:35; “I love the Father,” John 14:31) and of the eternal glorification that the Son will receive from the Father (“Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was,” John 17:5). The love and the glory are eternal because the relationship is eternal.

C. Full Deity: “And the Word Was God”

The third and climactic clause of John 1:1, “and the Word was God” (NASB 1995), has been, and continues to be, one of the most disputed phrases in the history of biblical interpretation. The Jehovah’s Witnesses, following an argument developed in the nineteenth century by certain liberal

scholars, translate this clause “the Word was a god”, a lesser deity, a subordinate divine being, on the grounds that θεός (theos) lacks the definite article in the Greek text. But this argument fails on multiple grounds.

First, in Greek, the predicate nominative (the noun in the predicate position, here θεός) regularly lacks the article when it precedes the verb, this is Colwell’s Rule, established in 1933. The absence of the article does not indicate indefiniteness or lesser deity; it indicates that θεός is functioning as a qualitative predicate, describing the nature of the Word: the Word is, in His very nature, divine. Second, the three clauses of John 1:1 display a deliberate and careful progression: eternal existence, personal distinction, essential deity. To render the third clause as “a god” would be to introduce polytheism into a document written by a thoroughly monotheistic Jewish author who repeatedly insists that God is one (John 17:3). Third, the entire prologue builds to the declaration of verse 18: “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him” (NASB 1995). The Word is not a lesser divine being; He is the one, true God in the fullness of deity.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

JOHN 1:1, NASB 1995

II. THE PRE-EXISTENCE SAYINGS IN JOHN’S GOSPEL

The Son’s Own Testimony to His Eternal Existence

A. “Before Abraham Was Born, I Am”, John 8:58

The most explosive of all of Jesus’ self-declarations in John’s Gospel comes in the context of a heated exchange with the religious authorities in John 8. The Pharisees have questioned His authority and His claims; Jesus has responded with a succession of assertions about His relationship with the Father that have progressively intensified the confrontation. In verse 56, He makes the extraordinary claim that Abraham “rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (NASB 1995), a reference to the patriarch’s faith in the promise of a coming Redeemer. The Pharisees respond with incredulous scorn: “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” (v. 57, NASB 1995).

The reply Jesus gives is, on any naturalistic reading, a claim so extraordinary that it can only be the utterance of a madman or the testimony of the eternal Son of God: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am” (John 8:58, NASB 1995). The grammatical structure of the original is stunning. The verb for Abraham’s coming into existence is the aorist infinitive γενέσθαι (genesthai), the language of created, temporal origination. The verb for Jesus’ own existence is the present indicative εἰμί (ego eimi), “I am.” Not “I was.” Not “I existed before Abraham.” But “I am”, the

timeless, absolute present of eternal being. Abraham came into existence at a point in time and ceased to exist at another point in time. The Son of God simply is, with the kind of underivative, unconditioned, beginningless being that belongs to God alone.

The audience understood the claim perfectly. They immediately took up stones to kill Him (v. 59), not because they thought He was claiming merely to be older than Abraham, but because they recognized the declaration as a claim to the divine name revealed to Moses at the burning bush: “I AM WHO I AM” (Exodus 3:14, NASB 1995). The ἐγὼ εἰμί of John 8:58 is the New Testament’s most direct echo of the Exodus divine name, the name that announces the self-existent, underivative, eternal being of the God of Israel. Jesus is not merely claiming to predate Abraham; He is claiming to bear the divine name, to possess the divine nature, and to be the eternal I AM who spoke to Moses from the burning bush.

B. “The Glory Which I Had with You Before the World Was”, John 17:5

The high-priestly prayer of John 17 is the most intimate window in all of the Gospels into the relationship between the Father and the Son, and it contains, in verse 5, one of the most explicit affirmations of the Son’s pre-existence in all of Scripture: “Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (NASB 1995). The prayer is offered on the eve of the passion, and in it Jesus looks both backward, to the glory He possessed before creation, and forward, to the glory that awaits Him beyond the cross.

The phrase “before the world was” (πρὸ τοῦ τὸν κόσμον εἶναι, *pro tou ton kosmon einai*) reaches behind the creation of the world to a state of affairs that preceded temporal existence altogether, the eternal, pre-temporal relationship of the Father and the Son in the communion of the divine life. The glory that Jesus requests to be restored is not something newly given to Him as a reward for the incarnation; it is something He possessed eternally and voluntarily veiled in the condescension of the incarnation. This is the Johannine foundation for what Paul will describe in Philippians 2:6–7 as the kenosis: the Son “emptied Himself” not of His divine nature but of the independent, unveiled exercise of the divine glory.

Notice also the personal, relational character of the pre-existence affirmed here. Jesus does not say “the glory which I possessed in eternity” in an abstract, impersonal sense. He says “the glory which I had with You”, a glory that was shared, a glory that existed in the eternal face-to-face relationship of the Father and the Son before a single creature had been called into being. The pre-existence of the Son is not a bare metaphysical fact about the duration of His existence; it is the description of an eternal personal relationship characterized by glory, love, and communion. This is the relationship into which the redeemed are invited through union with Christ: “I in them and You in Me” (John 17:23, NASB 1995).

III. THE COLOSSIAN HYMN: BEFORE ALL THINGS

Colossians 1:15–17 and the Son’s Ontological Priority to All Creation

A. “The Firstborn of All Creation”, Colossians 1:15

The Colossian hymn (Colossians 1:15–20) has already been introduced in Lesson 1 as one of the two great architectural texts of New Testament Christology. Here we return to it with more focused attention on its affirmation of the Son’s eternal pre-existence, and particularly on the phrase that has generated more christological controversy than perhaps any other in the Pauline letters: “the firstborn of all creation” (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως, *prōtotokos pasēs ktiseōs*).

Arius and his followers seized on this phrase as evidence that the Son is Himself a creature, the first and greatest of all created beings, but a creature nonetheless. If He is “firstborn of all creation,” they argued, He must belong to the category of creation. The Arian reading is not merely exegetically wrong; it is contextually incoherent. The very next verse demolishes it: “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” (Colossians 1:16, NASB 1995). The one through whom all things were created cannot Himself be a creature. The creator of all things is, by definition, not among the things He created. If the Son created “all things,” and Arius insists He is one of those things, then the Son would be both creator and creature, a logical and theological impossibility.

The term *πρωτότοκος* (*prōtotokos*) in biblical usage does not primarily denote temporal priority (the first one born) but relational preeminence and sovereign dignity. When God says of David, “I also shall make him My firstborn” (Psalm 89:27, NASB 1995), He is not claiming that David was literally the first human being ever born; He is declaring David’s unique status, dignity, and priority among the kings of the earth. So in Colossians 1:15, “firstborn of all creation” declares the Son’s supreme dignity and sovereign authority over all creation, not His membership within it. He is the sovereign Lord of creation, not its first product.

B. “He Is Before All Things”, Colossians 1:17

Paul removes any remaining ambiguity with the declaration of verse 17: “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (NASB 1995). The verb translated “is” is again the present indicative *ἐστί* (*estin*), the timeless present of eternal being, not “was” or “became.” The Son’s priority to all things is not merely temporal (He existed before them) but ontological (His being is of a categorically different order from theirs). Created things came into existence at the beginning; the Son simply is, with the kind of absolute, underivative, unconditioned being that cannot be said to have begun.

The second half of the verse, “in Him all things hold together”, extends the affirmation from ontological priority to ongoing sustaining causation. The Son is not merely the one through whom

creation was brought into being at some past moment; He is the one in whom creation continues to cohere, to maintain its order and its integrity, at every subsequent moment. The universe does not merely owe its origin to the Son; it owes its continued existence to Him. This is the Pauline parallel to the declaration of Hebrews 1:3 that the Son “upholds all things by the word of His power” (NASB 1995). The pre-existent Son is not a figure from the past; He is the present ground of all created reality.

“For by Him all things were created... He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

COLOSSIANS 1:16–17, NASB 1995

IV. OLD TESTAMENT ANTICIPATIONS: MICAH 5:2

The Prophetic Witness to the Eternal Origin of the Coming One

A. The Prophecy and Its Stunning Conclusion

The prophetic testimony to the pre-existence of the coming Messiah is concentrated in Micah 5:2 with remarkable economy and extraordinary force. The prophet addresses Bethlehem Ephrathah, the smallest and most obscure of the clans of Judah, and announces that from it will come the one who is “to be ruler in Israel” (NASB 1995). So far, the prophecy fits the pattern of many Old Testament messianic texts: a future ruler, a son of David, will arise from the royal city of David’s birth. But then comes the clause that shatters all merely temporal expectations: “His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity” (Micah 5:2, NASB 1995).

The Hebrew of this clause is striking. The word translated “goings forth” (מוצאותיו, *motsa’otav*) refers to originations, proceedings, or comings forth, the acts by which someone proceeds from their source. And the phrase “days of eternity” (ימי עולם, *yamê ‘olam*) does not refer merely to the distant past of human history; it refers to eternity itself, to the timeless realm that precedes and transcends temporal existence. The one who will be born in Bethlehem has proceedings, originations, that reach back into eternity, into the realm where only God dwells.

B. The New Testament Fulfillment

The New Testament’s application of Micah 5:2 to Jesus is straightforward and unanimous. Matthew 2:5–6 records that when the Magi asked where the Messiah was to be born, the chief priests and scribes immediately cited this text. John 7:42 reflects popular awareness that the Christ was to come from Bethlehem. But what the New Testament adds to the prophetic testimony is the full christological context that illuminates the depth of Micah’s remarkable phrase: the one whose goings forth are from eternity is the eternal Son of God, the Word who was in the beginning with God and

who was God (John 1:1), the one who possessed glory with the Father before the world was (John 17:5).

Micah 5:2 is a remarkable instance of the way in which the Old Testament prophets spoke of things whose full significance exceeded their own comprehension, what Peter describes as the Spirit of Christ within them “testifying beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow” (1 Peter 1:11, NASB 1995). The prophet could not have articulated a full doctrine of the eternal Son as the second Person of the Trinity; but inspired by the Spirit, he pointed beyond the coming ruler of Israel to the One whose origin lies not in the womb of a Bethlehemite mother but in the eternal depths of the divine life. The manger is the beginning of the incarnation; it is not the beginning of the Son.

V. AGAINST ARIANISM: THE SON IS NOT A CREATURE

The Ancient Heresy, Its Biblical Refutation, and Its Contemporary Recurrences

A. The Arian Claim and Its Appeal

Arianism, the theological position associated with Arius of Alexandria (c. 256–336 AD) and condemned at the First Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, represents the most thoroughgoing and influential attempt in the history of Christian thought to reduce the Son to the status of a creature. Arius’s central thesis was captured in the slogan that became the battle-cry of his opponents: “There was a time when He was not” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, *ēn pote hote ouk ēn*). On Arius’s account, the Son is the first and greatest of all created beings, brought into existence by the Father before the creation of the world, exalted above all other creatures, and worthy of honor and worship, but He is nonetheless a creature, and therefore not co-equal, co-eternal, or consubstantial with the Father.

Arianism had a certain theological appeal. It appeared to protect the absolute uniqueness and transcendence of the Father (if the Son is divine in the same sense the Father is divine, does this not compromise divine unity?); it seemed to account straightforwardly for the New Testament passages that speak of the Son’s subordination, limitation, and dependence on the Father; and it offered a more immediately intelligible account of the incarnation (a supreme creature taking on a lower form is more intuitively comprehensible than the infinite God becoming finite). The appeal of Arianism in various forms, from fourth-century Alexandria to contemporary Jehovah’s Witnesses to certain strands of open theism, reflects the perennial temptation to resolve the paradox of the incarnation by diminishing one of its terms.

B. The Biblical and Theological Refutation

The Nicene response to Arianism, articulated with unsurpassed precision by Athanasius of Alexandria in his treatise *On the Incarnation* and in his polemical writings against the Arians, rests

on several decisive lines of argument. First, the worship offered to the Son throughout the New Testament, by the angels (Hebrews 1:6), by Thomas (John 20:28), by the redeemed of Revelation 5, is not the worship of a creature, however exalted. In the thoroughly monotheistic framework of the New Testament, the worship of a creature is idolatry. If the Son is a creature and the New Testament calls for His worship, the New Testament is commanding idolatry, an impossible conclusion.

Second, the soteriological argument: only the Creator can redeem the creation. Athanasius's great insight was that the logic of the incarnation, the reason God the Son became man, demands that the one who became man be truly and fully God. A creature, however exalted, cannot bear the infinite weight of divine wrath against sin; cannot provide the infinite righteousness that justification requires; cannot secure an eternal and indestructible life for those who are united to Him. The Arian Christ cannot save, not because his intentions are insufficient but because his nature is inadequate. The Savior must be of the same order as the Creator, or the creation cannot be redeemed.

Third, the exegetical argument from John 1:3: "All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being" (NASB 1995). The scope of "all things" (pānta) is absolute and unrestricted. If Arianism is true and the Son is a creature, He falls under the scope of "all things", He would be one of the things that came into being through Himself, which is a logical absurdity. The only coherent reading of John 1:3 is that the Son, as the agent of all creation, stands outside the category of created things altogether. He is not one of the all things; He is the one through whom all things exist.

C. Contemporary Recurrences of Arianism

Arianism did not die at Nicaea; it has recurred in every century of the church's history in various forms. The Socinians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries denied the pre-existence and deity of Christ. The Unitarianism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reduced Jesus to the greatest of human moral teachers. Contemporary Jehovah's Witnesses represent the most numerically significant Arian movement in the world today, with their translation of John 1:1 ("the Word was a god") and their insistence that Jesus is Michael the Archangel in human form. Certain strands of open theism and social Trinitarianism have been accused, with varying degrees of justice, of functional Arianism.

The pastor who has worked through the Nicene arguments, the argument from worship, the soteriological argument, and the exegetical argument from John 1:3, is equipped to engage every contemporary recurrence of the Arian error. And the engagement matters, not merely as an academic exercise, but as an act of pastoral protection: the congregation that is clear about the eternal deity of the Son is a congregation that cannot be deceived by any form of creaturely Christology, however attractively packaged.

VI. THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PRE-EXISTENCE AND INCARNATION

The Son Was Before He Became, The Eternal and the Temporal

One of the most important conceptual distinctions in all of Christology is the distinction between the eternal existence of the Son and the temporal event of the incarnation. The Son has always been; the incarnation had a beginning. The Son's divine nature is eternal and uncreated; His human nature was assumed at a specific moment in the history of first-century Palestine. Bethlehem is the beginning of the incarnation, not the beginning of the Son. This distinction, which lies at the heart of the Nicene and Chalcedonian settlements, is not a subtle theological nicety; it is the foundation on which the entire edifice of orthodox Christology rests.

John's prologue makes this distinction with characteristic precision. The eternal existence of the Word is expressed with the imperfect ἦν (en, "was"): "In the beginning was the Word" (v. 1); "The Word was with God" (v. 1); "The same was in the beginning with God" (v. 2). The incarnation, by contrast, is expressed with the aorist ἐγένετο (egeneto, "became"): "The Word became flesh" (v. 14). The becoming is an event; the being is eternal. The Son did not become God at the incarnation; He became man. The incarnation is the assumption of a human nature into union with the eternally existing divine Person of the Son, an addition, not a transformation; an assumption, not a conversion.

Paul's great christological passage in Philippians 2:5–8 makes the same distinction from a different angle. The Son "existed in the form of God" (ὑπάρχων ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ, hyparcheōn en morphē theou) before the incarnation, the verb ὑπάρχων carries the sense of already existing, of antecedent being. He "emptied Himself" and "became" (γενόμενος, genomenos) in the likeness of men. The contrast between the pre-incarnate "existed" and the incarnate "became" is identical to the contrast in John 1. The eternal Son assumed a human nature; He did not cease to be divine. The incarnation is the most astonishing event in the history of the universe, the eternal becoming temporal, the infinite becoming finite, the Creator becoming a creature, but it is an event in the life of the Son, not the beginning of His life.

"Now, Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was."

JOHN 17:5, NASB 1995

Key Texts: *John 1:1–3, 14, 18; John 8:58; John 17:5; Colossians 1:15–17; Micah 5:2; Hebrews 1:3; Philippians 2:5–8*

THEOLOGICAL TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Term	Definition
Pre-Existence	The theological affirmation that the Son of God existed eternally before His incarnation, indeed, before the creation of the world and before all temporal existence. Pre-existence is not merely the claim that the Son existed for a very long time before Bethlehem; it is the claim that His existence is eternal, uncreated, and of a categorically different order from the temporal existence of creatures. Grounded in John 1:1 (“in the beginning was the Word”), John 8:58 (“before Abraham was born, I am”), John 17:5 (“the glory which I had with You before the world was”), and Colossians 1:17 (“He is before all things”).
The Logos	Greek: ‘word,’ ‘reason,’ ‘discourse.’ The title used by John in the prologue of his Gospel (John 1:1–18) for the pre-incarnate Son of God. The term had a rich background both in Jewish thought (the Word of God as the agent of creation and revelation in the Old Testament and in Philo of Alexandria) and in Greek philosophy (the Logos as the rational principle governing the cosmos in Stoic philosophy). John adopts and transforms both traditions: the Logos is not an impersonal rational principle or a divine attribute but a personal, eternal being who is both distinct from God (the Word was ‘with’ God) and fully divine (the Word ‘was’ God), and who became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.
Eternal Being (en vs. egeneto)	The grammatical distinction in John’s prologue between the imperfect ἦν (en, ‘was’) used for the pre-incarnate Word and the aorist ἐγένετο (egeneto, ‘became’) used for the incarnation (‘the Word became flesh,’ v. 14). The en of verses 1–2 carries no sense of beginning or origination; it is the continuous, unoriginated existence of eternal being. The egeneto of verse 14 marks the incarnation as a historical event, a ‘becoming’ that had a moment of occurrence. The distinction is foundational to the orthodox insistence that the incarnation is an addition to the Son’s existence, not its beginning.
Ego Eimi	Greek: ‘I am.’ The absolute self-designation used by Jesus in John 8:58 (“before Abraham was born, I am”) and in several other Johannine sayings (John 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5–6). In John 8:58, the ego eimi is contrasted with the aorist genesthai used for Abraham’s coming into existence, marking Jesus’ self-identification not with creaturely temporal existence but with the absolute, underivative being of God. The phrase deliberately echoes the divine self-disclosure of Exodus 3:14 (LXX: Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, ‘I am the One who is’), the divine name that announces the eternal, self-existent being of the God of Israel.
Arianism	The christological position associated with Arius of Alexandria (c. 256–336 AD) and condemned at the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD). Arianism holds that the Son of God is the first and greatest of all created beings, brought into existence by the Father before the creation of the world, but nonetheless a creature rather than co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father. The Arian

Term	Definition
	slogan ‘there was a time when He was not’ (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν) captures the essential denial: the Son had a beginning. Arianism recurs in contemporary forms including Jehovah’s Witnesses theology, Unitarianism, and certain strands of open theism.
Homoousios	Greek: ‘of the same substance/essence.’ The key term of the Nicene Creed (325 AD), affirming that the Son is of the same divine essence (οὐσία, ousia) as the Father, not a similar essence (ὁμοιούσιος, homoiousios, the Arian compromise position) but the identical, numerically same divine substance. The term was controversial at Nicaea because it does not appear in Scripture, but Athanasius and the Nicene party rightly insisted that it captured the meaning of the scriptural testimony more precisely than any biblical language alone could do in the face of the Arian evasions. Homoousios became the ecumenical standard of Trinitarian orthodoxy.
Prōtotokos	Greek: ‘firstborn.’ Used in Colossians 1:15 (‘the firstborn of all creation’) and 1:18 (‘the firstborn from the dead’). In biblical usage, the term does not primarily denote temporal priority (the first one born chronologically) but relational preeminence, sovereign dignity, and inheritor status. Psalm 89:27 uses the same term of David (‘I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth’) without implying that David was the first human being ever born. In Colossians 1:15, ‘firstborn of all creation’ declares the Son’s supreme lordship over all creation, not His membership within it, as the immediately following verse (1:16) makes explicit: He is the Creator of all things.
Aseity	From the Latin a se, ‘from oneself.’ The divine attribute of absolute self-existence: God exists from Himself, without dependence on any external cause, without derivation from any prior being, without need of any sustaining power outside Himself. Aseity is traditionally predicated of the Father, but orthodox Trinitarian theology, following Athanasius and the Nicene tradition, affirms the aseity of the Son as well: the Son does not derive His being from the Father in the sense that creatures derive their being from the Creator, but in the sense of eternal, personal, intra-Trinitarian generation. The Son has life in Himself: ‘For just as the Father has life in Himself, even so He gave to the Son also to have life in Himself’ (John 5:26, NASB 1995).
Kenosis	From the Greek κενώω (kenoō), ‘to empty.’ The theological term for the self-limitation described in Philippians 2:7: Christ ‘emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant.’ The kenosis is not the abandonment of the divine nature or the temporary surrender of divine attributes; it is the voluntary veiling of the divine glory and the voluntary restriction of the independent exercise of certain divine prerogatives in the service of the incarnational mission. The Son did not cease to be omniscient, omnipotent, or omnipresent

Term	Definition
	<p>at the incarnation; He chose to exercise these attributes in ways consistent with genuine human experience and the redemptive purpose of the Father.</p>
<p>Incarnation vs. Pre-Existence</p>	<p>The critical distinction between the eternal existence of the Son (pre-existence) and the historical event of His assumption of a human nature (incarnation). The Son was before He became: His divine nature is eternal and uncreated; His human nature was assumed at a specific point in history (Luke 1:35; Galatians 4:4). Bethlehem marks the beginning of the incarnation, not the beginning of the Son. The incarnation is an addition to the Son’s existence, the taking on of a new mode of being, not a replacement of His divine being or a transformation of His divine nature. This distinction is foundational to the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures in one Person.</p>

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the eternal pre-existence of the Son is not a speculative metaphysical elaboration imposed on a simpler biblical faith but the straightforward and non-negotiable teaching of the New Testament itself. The texts examined in this lesson, John 1:1, John 8:58, John 17:5, Colossians 1:15–17, Micah 5:2, do not require theological sophistication to be understood; they require theological honesty to be accepted. The eternal Son who was in the beginning with God, who was before Abraham, who had glory with the Father before the world was, and whose goings forth are from the days of eternity is not a later theological construction; He is the Jesus of the New Testament, the Christ of the apostolic proclamation, the Lord whom the church has worshipped from its earliest days.

We must also believe that the distinction between the Son's eternal pre-existence and the temporal event of the incarnation is not a theological subtlety but a pastoral necessity. The congregation that confuses these two realities, that thinks of the Son as beginning to exist at Bethlehem, or that imagines the incarnation as the beginning of God's involvement with humanity, will have a diminished and distorted understanding of both the person of Christ and the nature of salvation. The eternal Son who became incarnate is the one who upholds all things by the word of His power; the love with which the Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world (John 17:24) is the love that has been poured out in the gift of the incarnate Son for the redemption of the world.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

Let the doctrine of the Son's eternal pre-existence press upon the heart with the full weight of its wonder. The one who was born of Mary in the fullness of time is the one who was already with God in the beginning, the one through whom the universe was called into being, through whom the light first pierced the primordial darkness, through whom every creature that has ever lived has drawn its breath. When the shepherds of Bethlehem knelt before the infant in the manger, they were kneeling before the one who had been present at the creation of the stars they had spent the night watching. When the wise men offered their gifts, they were offering them to the one before whom the very concept of "before" is inapplicable.

Desire a worship that is commensurate with the eternal dignity of the one being worshipped. The tendency of popular Christianity is to domesticate Christ, to make Him manageable, accessible, warm, and familiar in ways that subtly obscure the infinite distance between the Creator and the creature. The doctrine of the eternal pre-existence of the Son does not deny the genuine humanity and accessibility of Jesus; it provides the theological context within which that humanity is properly astonishing. God did not merely send a great man; He sent His eternal Son. The love of the Father that is revealed in the gift of Christ is not the affection of a generous benefactor; it is the self-giving

of the eternal God who loved the world with a love that reaches back before the foundation of the world.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Memorize and meditate on John 1:1–18. This is the christological summit of the New Testament, and the pastor who has it in his mind and heart will find it illuminating every subsequent christological question. Read it in Greek if you are able; the grammatical distinctions between *en* and *egeneto* that are foundational to the doctrine of pre-existence are visible only in the original.
- Read Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*. This short treatise, written when Athanasius was probably in his twenties, is the greatest patristic treatment of the doctrine of the eternal Son and the reasons for the incarnation. C.S. Lewis's introduction to the modern edition is itself a model of how to read the old books with fresh eyes. Athanasius's central argument, that only the Creator can redeem the creation, is the most powerful soteriological argument for the deity of Christ ever formulated.
- Engage Jehovah's Witness theology directly and charitably. The Jehovah's Witnesses represent the largest contemporary Arian movement in the world, and the pastor who has worked through the exegesis of John 1:1–3, Colossians 1:15–17, and John 8:58 has the tools to engage their arguments with both intellectual rigor and pastoral compassion. Know their translation of John 1:1 and know why it fails. Know their use of 'firstborn' in Colossians 1:15 and know why the context refutes their reading.
- Preach the pre-existence of the Son as the foundation of the incarnation. When you preach the nativity, do not begin with Bethlehem; begin with eternity. Let your congregation feel the full weight of what the incarnation means by first setting before them the full weight of who it is who becomes incarnate. The one who lay in the manger had been creating galaxies before the earth existed; the one who cried at birth had been upholding all things by the word of His power since the first moment of creation. The manger is more astonishing when you know who is in it.
- Pray the eternal love of the Father and the Son into your devotional life. The prayer of John 17, particularly the phrase 'You loved Me before the foundation of the world' (v. 24), opens a window into the eternal relationship of the triune God that should transform the way you approach the Father in prayer. You approach the Father through the eternal Son, in the name of the one who was loved before the world began. Let that reality deepen both your confidence and your reverence at the throne of grace.

STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

OPENING QUESTION

1. Before working through this lesson, how did you typically think about the ‘beginning’ of Jesus? Did you naturally think of His birth in Bethlehem as His beginning, or did you have a clear sense of His eternal pre-existence? How has the study of this lesson clarified, deepened, or challenged your prior understanding?

OBSERVATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DO THE TEXTS SAY?)

2. Read John 1:1–3 carefully. Identify the three distinct affirmations made about the Word in verse 1. What is the significance of the verb “was” (ἦν) in contrast to “became” (ἐγένετο) in verse 14? How does verse 3 (“all things came into being through Him”) function in relation to the Arian claim that the Son is among the things that were created?

3. Read John 8:48–59. Trace the development of the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees. What specific claim does Jesus make in verse 56 about Abraham, and why does it provoke such a strong response? How does the grammatical structure of verse 58, the contrast between ‘before Abraham was born’ (aorist infinitive) and ‘I am’ (present indicative), express the distinction between creaturely temporal existence and eternal divine being? Why do the Pharisees respond by attempting to stone Him?

4. Read John 17:1–5, 24. What does Jesus request in verse 5, and on what basis does He make the request? What does the phrase ‘the glory which I had with You before the world was’ imply about the nature of the Son’s pre-incarnate existence? How does verse 24 (‘You loved Me before the foundation of the world’) extend the affirmation of pre-existence into the realm of the eternal, intra-Trinitarian relationship?

5. Read Colossians 1:15–17. What does Paul mean by ‘firstborn of all creation’ in verse 15? How does verse 16 (‘by Him all things were created... all things have been created through Him and for Him’) refute the Arian reading of ‘firstborn’ as evidence that the Son is a creature? What does verse 17 (‘He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together’) add to the picture of the Son’s relationship to creation?

INTERPRETATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT MEAN?)

6. The lesson distinguishes between the Son’s eternal pre-existence (described with the imperfect ἦν in John 1:1–2) and the event of the incarnation (described with the aorist ἐγένετο in John 1:14). Why is this grammatical distinction theologically significant? What would be lost doctrinally if we

collapsed the distinction between the Son's eternal being and the temporal event of His becoming flesh?

- 7.** Arius argued that the Son is the 'firstborn of all creation' (Colossians 1:15) and therefore a creature, the first and greatest created being. The lesson offers three arguments against this reading: (a) the argument from John 1:3, (b) the argument from worship, and (c) the soteriological argument. Evaluate each of these arguments. Which do you find most persuasive, and why? Are there other arguments from Scripture that could be added?
- 8.** The lesson argues that Micah 5:2 ('His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity') is a prophetic anticipation of the Son's eternal pre-existence. How does the New Testament's use of this text in Matthew 2:5-6 illuminate its depth? What does this example teach us about the way in which Old Testament prophecy can point beyond what the prophet himself fully understood?
- 9.** The lesson distinguishes the Son's eternal pre-existence from His incarnation, insisting that the incarnation is an addition to His existence rather than its beginning. How does Philippians 2:5-8 illuminate this distinction? What does Paul mean by the Son 'emptying Himself,' and what does it NOT mean? How does the kenosis relate to the affirmation that the Son remained fully divine throughout the incarnation?
- 10.** The lesson argues that Arianism recurs in contemporary forms, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarianism, and certain strands of open theism. What is the pastoral danger of each of these contemporary recurrences? Why is it important for the ordinary believer, not just the academic theologian, to understand and be able to respond to Arian arguments?

APPLICATION QUESTIONS (WHAT DOES IT DEMAND OF US?)

- 11.** The lesson suggests that preaching the nativity should begin with eternity rather than Bethlehem, so that the congregation feels the full weight of who it is who becomes incarnate. How would you structure a Christmas sermon or Advent series that takes the eternal pre-existence of the Son seriously as the theological foundation for the incarnation? What difference would it make to the emotional and theological impact of the nativity narrative?
- 12.** The lesson recommends direct and charitable engagement with Jehovah's Witness theology as a form of contemporary Arianism. Are you currently equipped to engage a Jehovah's Witness on the exegesis of John 1:1, Colossians 1:15-17, and John 8:58? What specific gaps in your knowledge or preparation does this lesson expose, and how do you intend to address them?
- 13.** The prayer of John 17, particularly the phrase 'You loved Me before the foundation of the world', is described in the lesson as opening a window into the eternal relationship of the triune God that should transform the way the believer approaches the Father in prayer. How does the eternal pre-

existence of the Son, the fact that you approach the Father through the one who was loved before the world began, change the way you understand your own access to God in prayer?

14. This lesson has established the eternal pre-existence of the Son as the necessary foundation of all subsequent Christology. As you look ahead to the remaining lessons in this series, on the eternal generation of the Son, the Christophanies, the incarnation, the hypostatic union, and the atonement, how does the doctrine of pre-existence function as the foundation on which each of those subsequent doctrines rests? Why is it impossible to have an adequate Christology without first establishing who the Son is before Bethlehem?

PRAYER FOCUS

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, meditative reading of John 1:1–18, the text that has stood as the church's supreme christological confession from the moment it was written. Read it not as a theological document to be analyzed but as a window into the eternal life of the triune God, through which the reader is permitted to glimpse something of the glory that existed before the first moment of creation. Let verse 14, "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (NASB 1995), fall on the group with its full weight of wonder: the eternal Word, through whom all things were made, who was in the beginning with God, who was God, this One became flesh. Became. Past the threshold of time and into the vulnerability of creatureliness. For us.

Spend time in adoration of the eternal Son, not merely the incarnate Christ, though He is the one we know most fully, but the pre-incarnate Word who was with the Father before the world was. Adore Him for the depth of the condescension: the one who held all things together in Himself became a creature who needed to be held; the one before whom time began allowed Himself to be subject to time; the one who was the light of the world permitted Himself to be surrounded by the darkness of human sinfulness and suffering. Let the contrast between the eternal glory of the Son and the humility of the incarnation deepen your sense of the love that drove it: "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16, NASB 1995).

Pray together using the language of the high-priestly prayer of John 17, particularly the phrases that open windows into the eternal relationship of the Father and the Son. Pray verse 5, "Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was", as a meditation on the eternal glory to which the risen and ascended Christ has returned, and into which the redeemed will one day be admitted. Pray verse 24, "You loved Me before the foundation of the world", as the foundation of your own confidence in the Father's love: the love that sent the Son into

the world is the same love that has loved you in the Son from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4).

Close with a time of silent adoration, inviting the group to contemplate the simple and staggering declaration of John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word.” Not ‘in the beginning, the Word came to be.’ Not ‘in the beginning, God created the Word.’ But ‘in the beginning was the Word’, already there, already existing, already in the face-to-face relationship of eternal love with the Father, already the one through whom the act of creation was about to proceed. Let the silence be a form of theological humility before a mystery that no human language can exhaust: the eternal Son, who has always been, who became for us and for our salvation, and who is, now and forever, the same.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”

JOHN 1:1–2, NASB 1995

Soli Deo Gloria

To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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