

CHRISTOLOGY WEEK 2 | THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF CHRIST

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. . . begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead. . .

CREED OF CHALCEDONIAN

We believe. . . in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made. . .

CREED OF NICEA

I. A DISTINCTION: PRE-EXISTENCE & ETERNALITY

When we speak of Christ's pre-existence, we are typically referring to his preincarnate existence. However, it is necessary that we go further than this when discussing Jesus Christ. There are three "levels" of pre-existence:

- 1) Existing before the incarnation
- 2) Existing before creation
- 3) Existing eternally

Level 1 does not necessitate level 3, but level 3 *does* necessitate level 1. Christ's existence before the incarnation does not necessitate His eternity; however, if Christ is eternal then he is necessarily pre-existent. To remain orthodox, we must affirm all three. In fact, many heresies will affirm Christ's pre-existence but deny his eternity—Arianism in the 2nd century did this and Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses do so today.

Why is this important? One of God's incommunicable attributes is His eternity—He has always existed and always will. He is without beginning or end. If Jesus is fully God, Jesus must possess all the divine attributes, including eternity. To deny Jesus' eternity is to deny his divinity. As we go through the Scriptural evidence for Christ's pre-existence, you will see affirmations of each level, showing Christ not only existed before the incarnation but has always existed as the eternal Son of God.

II. PRE-EXISTENCE

Christ's preexistence speaks of His existence before the incarnation. Scripture says the following about His preexistence:

A. He Came from Heaven

God the Son resided in heaven before He came to earth at the moment of the miraculous conception:

1. John 3:17 – For God did not send his Son into the world. . .
2. John 3:31 – He who comes from above is above all. He who is of the earth belongs to the earth and speaks in an earthly way. He who comes from heaven is above all.
3. John 6:38 – For I have come down from heaven, not to do my will but the will of him who sent me.
4. John 17:3 – And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.
5. 1 John 4:9 – In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.

B. He Existed Before Creation

Scripture clearly states that the Christ existed before creation:

1. John 1:3 – All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.
2. John 1:10 – He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him,
3. John 17:5, 24 – And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed. . . Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.
4. Colossians 1:16-17 – For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.
5. Hebrews 1:2, 10 – . . . but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. . . And, “You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands”

C. He Is Eternal

1. Scripture affirms that the second member of the Trinity has existed for all eternity. When John writes that in the beginning (i.e. in eternity past, before creation) the Word was not only “with God” but also “was God” (Jn 1:1), he is implying that the second member of the Trinity is coequal with the Father, having the same divine essence and, thus, the divine attributes—including eternity.

2. This is affirmed in texts in which the second member of the Trinity is identified as the Creator (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16-17; Heb 1:2). Not only must the Creator exist *prior to* the creative act, but the role of Creator indicates divinity (Gen 1:1) which itself implies eternity.
3. Micah 5:2 – But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming [alt. “Whose goings”] forth is from of old, from ancient of days.
4. Isaiah 9:6 – For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
5. John 8:58 – Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” [A reference to Yahweh’s name in Exodus 3:14]
6. Revelation 1:8//22:13 – “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” // “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

D. He Is the Son of God

Not only has the second member of the Trinity existed for all eternity, but he has eternally existed as the Son of the Father. This eternal Sonship defines the relationship between the first two members of the Trinity—the Father eternally generates the Son. This will be discussed more fully below under “Eternal Generation.”

III. PREINCARNATE LIFE

How would we describe the preincarnate life of the Son? Scripture gives us several hints as to what his life was like prior to coming in the flesh:

A. He Was Divine in Nature

1. He was Deity – John 1:1 reads that the Word was “with God” and “was God,” indicating He was coeternal and coequal with the Father.
2. He was in the “form” of God – Philippians 2:6 reads that Jesus was in the “form” of God. “Form,” from the Greek *morphe*, describes the external manifestation of one’s internal essence. It describes the visible manifestation of God’s glory.
3. He Shared the Divine Glory – In his high priestly prayer Jesus asks the Father to glorify him with the glory he had “with you before the world existed” (John 17:5). This is God’s glory that He “will not give to another” (Isaiah 42:8). Thus, for Jesus to have shared in that glory would necessitate he was (and is) divine.

4. He was the exact representation of God's essence – Hebrews 1:3 and Colossians 1:15 tell us that Jesus is the image of God *inherently* (whereas we are made in God's image *derivatively*).

B. He Was Distinct from Yet Intimate with the Father

John 1:1-2 tell us that Jesus is divine (“was God”) yet he remains distinct from the Father (“was with God”). He possessed the divine glory with the Father (John 17:5) and was loved by the Father from eternity past (John 17:24). (John 1:18 reads literally that the Word is “in the bosom of the Father.”)

C. He Was Divinely Wealthy

Paul teaches that Jesus set aside His divine prerogatives in the incarnation for us:

1. 2 Corinthians 8:9 – For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.
2. Philippians 2:6-7 – Jesus. . . did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant. . .

IV. PREINCARNATE APPEARANCES

God cannot be seen (Ex 33:20). However, there are several instances in the Old Testament in which He seems to manifest Himself visibly. Since Christ is the revealer of the Father, these manifestations are likely preincarnate appearances of Christ:

A. To Abraham

The preincarnate Christ appeared to Abraham (Gen 18:1-33)

B. To Jacob

The preincarnate Christ wrestled with Jacob (Gen 32:24-32)

C. “Son of God” and “Son of Man”

One like “a Son of God” is seen in the fire with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Dan 3:25), and in one of Daniel's later visions he sees “one like a son of man” (7:13-14). Both are portrayed as a divine and are presumably the same person.

D. To Isaiah

In John 12:41 we learn that the figure Isaiah sees in Isaiah 6 “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up” is the preincarnate Christ.

E. The “Angel of YHWH”

1. Identified as YHWH (Gen 16:7-14; 18:1, 13, 33 + c.f. 19:1; 31:11-13)
2. Distinct from YHWH (Ex 23:20-23; 32:34; Num 20:16)
3. Speaks to YHWH (Zech 1:12-13)

F. The “Commander of the army of YHWH”

Joshua encountered this divine figure on the morning of battle with Jericho (Josh 5:13-15)

V. PREINCARNATE WORKS

A. Creation & Preservation

Christ is portrayed as the one through whom the universe was created (John 1:3, 10; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2, 10) and the one who sustains and preserves it, “upholding the universe by the word of his power” (Heb 1:3; cf. 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:17)

B. Caring for Israel

Paul tells us that it was the Preincarnate Christ who sustained Israel in the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4) and, as the Angel of YHWH (see above) guided and preserved them throughout their history

C. Communing with the Father

In Christ’s high priestly prayer we see glimpses of his preincarnate intimacy with the Father. He was eternally loved by the Father (Jn 17:24) and shared in the Father’s glory (Jn 17:5), realities John also refers to in his prologue when he writes that the Word was “with God” (John 1:1-2)

D. Judging the World

Jehovah is identified in the Old Testament as the Judge of all men (Psalm 9:7-8). In the New Testament we learn that Jesus as God’s Son has been given “all judgment” by the Father (John 5:22)

VI. ETERNAL GENERATION

Earlier we noted that Christ is and has always been the Son of God; Sonship is not a consequence of the incarnation but describes the pre-existent relationship between the first two persons of the Trinity.

The doctrine of eternal generation describes the eternal, relationship-establishing act of the Father begetting, or generating, the Son. It speaks of the establishment from all eternity of the filial relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity, so that the Father is the Father and the Son is the Son of the Father. It is an eternal and necessary self-differentiating act of the Father by which He generates the personal subsistence of the Son and communicates to the Son the entire divine essence (cf. John 5:26).

Several lines of evidence support this:

- 1) In John 5:26 Jesus says, “For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.” This “life in himself” is that life that is unique to God, His self-existence and independence. That same life is “granted” to the Son, so that the Son is also self-existent and independent. How can the Son be independent if that “life in himself” has been granted to him? Only if this is an eternal act. This generation does not imply ontological inferiority. In fact, the context of 5:26 shows that “whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (5:19). The works of Father and Son are coextensive: The Father creates, as does the Son (1:1-5); the Father gives resurrection life and judges, as does the Son (5:24-30). Even Jesus’ enemies recognize that in calling God His Father, Jesus was in fact claiming equality with—not inferiority to—God (5:18).
- 2) The idea of eternal generation is implied in Heb 1:2 where the author writes that the Son “is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of His nature” (c.f. Col 1:15). The Son is, literally, the “shining of the Father’s shining;” they share the same essence, yet somehow the Son’s is derived from the Father’s.
- 3) The above points to a larger pattern that always moves from the Father to the Son. The Father sends, the Son goes (Jn 4:34; 5:23-24; 7:29, 33; 8:42; 13:20; 17:3, 8); the Father commands, the Son obeys (Jn 5:36; 6:38); the Father shows, the Son does (Jn 5:19); the Father gives, the Son receives (Jn 5:26; 10:18). This pattern is never reversed. Notably, the Father did not send the One-who-would-be-His-Son; He sent His Son
- 4) The relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son also argues for an eternal generation of the Son by the Father. Sending and begetting language could be construed as a consequence of the incarnation; however, this argument cannot be

made of the Holy Spirit, who is also sent (Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:7), speaks as commanded (Jn 16:13), and bears witness to the One who sends Him (Jn 15:26). This relationship between the Spirit and the Father and Son points to the reality that these relationships exist eternally within the immanent Trinity.