Handout for Apostles Creed “And in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord”

What do we know about Jesus as Son through what the New Testament says about Him?

Let’s start by thinking about that first verse in the Gospel of John: ***“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was in company with God, and the Word was GOD!”*** (John 1:1 Pastor Johnny’s Translation)
We’ll get back to the idea of “Word,” but right now, let’s focus on two “impossible” ideas. How can a being be in the company of another and still be said to be equivalent to another? Even more so, how can the emphasis in the Greek be so emphatic? [Note: When the normal word order in the Greek is reversed, it emphasizes the word that seems out of place.]

Christopher Watkin quotes D. A. Carson as saying that the first verse of John shows us both “God’s own fellow” and “God’s own self.” [Watkin, Christopher, *Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022), pp. 342-343.] “God’s own fellow” or, as I translated it, “was in company with God” reminds us of a lesson we learned in “Maker of Heaven and Earth.” In that study, we said that God didn’t need creation or anyone else. God is His own self-contained companion. There is a social element to the Trinity as Father, Son and Spirit act in agreement. But, lest anyone think that the Son was created and is less than the Father, the verse emphasizes that the Word was totally God. There is no room for the subordinationism we’ll see later in the session.

Referring to John 1:1, Udo Schnelle writes: “Jesus’ own proclamation of himself, the most striking nature of Johannine Christology, grows out of this perfect unity with God and its expression [Schnelle, Udo, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009—original, 2007), p. 669. Indeed, Schnelle observes that the exact center of John’s gospel is John 10:30. ***“I and the Father, We are one.”*** (John 10:30 PJT)

Frank Stagg goes even deeper into John’s gospel to affirm the unity of Son and Father. Despite the use of Word in the prologue which could have been merely speculative or metaphysical, he writes: “But for all this, there was no real metaphysical speculation about his nature. The earliest believers began with an event which broke around them. In it they saw God acting and present in self-disclosure and in redemption.” [Stagg, Frank, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1962), p. 37.] He sees this unity expressed in Thomas’ confession in John 20:28. ***“Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”*** (John 20:28 PJT)

Write in your own words what the verse says about Jesus in the blanks. Then, when you
finish, check the box with a check mark or an “x” if you think it points to the pre-existence of
our Lord.

Scripture References Role Assigned to Jesus in This Verse

* 1 Corinthians 8:6 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Colossians 1:16 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Hebrews 1:2 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* 1 Corinthians 10:4 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* John 3:17 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Galatians 4:4 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Romans 8:3 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* 1 John 4:10 \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Okay, so we see Jesus’ role as active before the Bethlehem birth. What does that mean? For one thing, it means that Jesus was not a good man who was “adopted” by God. This was an early heresy called “adoptionism.” When we looked at theology in an earlier series, I gave you a diagram explaining what adoption was. But it certainly doesn’t fit the verses we just read, does it? Adoptionism doesn’t take seriously either the fact that the Son existed prior to creation, much less the incarnation, as well as the Son’s reality as being one with God in a way that we can’t totally understand.

Think of adoptionism as being more pagan than Christian. Can you think of pagan myths where human beings became at least demigods if not gods? Herakles/Hercules comes to mind, reaching his divine stature after completing his tasks. How about Leda? After Zeus became a swan and raped her, he granted her immortality as the goddess, Nemesis. Ino who hid Dionysius from Hera’s wrath, but went mad and drowned herself was granted immortality as the sea goddess, Leucothea. At the same time, her mortal son Melicertes drowned and became the sea god who protected sailors, Palaemon.

Another group of heretics among the Arians chose the route of subordinationism. This builds on the idea that there was a time when Jesus “was not.” The logic therein would be that the Son was created by the Father. This then leads to the idea of the Father as Supreme over the Son and the Spirit. In fact, since Jesus told the disciples that He was “sending” the Paraclete, the Comforter, the Coach, the Holy Spirit (John 15:26), it would give us a three-tiered Trinity. And that’s a problem!

Why is it a problem? First, because Jesus said that the one who had seen Him had seen the Father (John 14:9) and that there was an interpenetration of personality between Father and Son (John 14:10). Some believe that Mark’s account of Jesus’ words in preparation for the triumphal entry in Mark 11:3 (“The Lord has need…”) demonstrates Jesus understanding of unity with the Father. “Jesus’ ‘qualitative difference’ from others is underscored by his self-designation as ‘the Lord’ (11:3). Lord (*kyrios*) is the surrogate for the Tetragrammaton that the crowds will use citing Psalm 110, in which context it serves unambiguously not to Jesus but to the one in whose name he comes, the Lord, the first person of the Trinity.” [Soulen, R. Kendall, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity: Distinguishing the Voices: Volume One* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), p. 170.]

I’ve always liked John Knox’s explanation of Jesus’ pre-existence and unity with the Father. **“The heavenly Son of God in becoming man did not become someone else. In some deep core of personal existence he must have been as a man what he had been before. And since what he had been before was absolutely unique, there must have been something absolutely unique in the nature of his manhood.”** [Knox, John, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ: A Study of Pattern in Christology* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 43.]

Did you ever notice that Jesus taught the disciples to pray “Our Father,” but He referred to “the” Father or “My” Father? Some of his prayers even use the very familiar Aramaic name, “Abba,” much like “Apba” in Chinese and Korean. And not only did He declare that He and the Father were ONE, but He referred to Himself as the “Amen” in Revelation 3:14, that which is foundational, a building block for reality.

Second, it is a problem because Jesus tells us specifically that He was sent to reveal God. Emil Brunner puts it simply: “Since God Himself alone can reveal God, the Revealer must be God.” [Brunner, Emil, *The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption: Dogmatics Volume II* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1952), p. 348.] Whether the understand this idea satisfactorily or not, we can pay attention to the Nicene Creed which refused to see Jesus, the Son, as a creature (like the Subordinationists) and declared Him “begotten, not made.”

Catholic theologian Karl Rahner grasps this point when he writes: “Here is the absolute mystery revealed to us only by Christ; God’s self-communication is truly a *self*-communication. He does not merely indirectly give his creature some share of himself…” [Rahner, Karl, *The Trinity: Milestones in Catholic Theology* (New York: NY: Herder & Herder (Crossroad Publishing Company), 2010—original, 1967), p. 36.]. Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, emphasized this even more when he describes the Father as the Revealer, the Son as the Revealed, and the Spirit as the Revealing [Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God: 1.1: 8-12* (London, UK: T & T Clark, 2010—original, 1938), p. 68.].

Pauline theology particularly expresses this idea when Philippians 2 quotes from an early Christian hymn. Here is where we clearly blend the idea of Jesus and the Christ in our scriptural understanding. I follow the idea that Philippians 2:5-11 is a hymn with six stanzas of three lines each with one awkward line that Paul seems to have asserted in the middle, “even death on a cross.” [Lohmeyer, Ernest, *Kyrios Jesus: Eine Untersuchung zu Phil. 2:5-11* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1928), p. 4.]

But why does it say that Jesus was only in the “form” of God? Doesn’t that contradict the verses that say that He is ONE with God? “Yet, there is a potential solution that seems grounded in a combination of Greek philosophy, scriptural references, and modern theology. Form did not merely refer to appearance in the ancient world, but to both the essence and specific character of the idea. For example, Socrates is remembered in Phaedo as suggesting that both an overarching idea and a specific form of the idea can exist.” [Wilson, Johnny Lee, *Wytte Media Bible: Philippians* (Bellevue, WA: Wytte Media, LLC., 2004), p. 91.] J. B. Lightfoot went so far as to identify this “form” as meaning the attributes of the Godhead [Lightfoot, J. B., *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1953—original, 1913), p. 132.]

Most importantly, the verse tells us that Jesus didn’t “hang onto,” “grasp” or “hoard” the oneness with God. P. T. Forsyth wrote that this part of the passage demonstrates that Christ was the REVEALER not the RIVAL of God [Forsyth, P. T., *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980—original, 1907), p. 253.] Instead of being a rival to God and creating a rift in heaven, Christ removes the trappings of majesty and assumes the reality of a servant/slave.

In fact, “The pre-existent Christ did something radically different from holding onto His equality with God. He emptied Himself. The Greek word is ἐκένωσεν and the literal meaning is ‘he emptied.’ In fact, the pronoun for Himself is emphasized by its placement here. As a result, it made perfect sense for some interpreters to suggest that the pre-existent Christ emptied Himself of His divine attributes while maintaining the holiness, love and righteousness which would be more descriptive of God’s person than God’s power…” [Wilson, p. 96.].

Third, how could Jesus have really affected the forgiveness of our sins if He were not sinless God become human for our benefit? Athanasius helped pave the way for the Council of Nicea when he wrote: “There were thus two things which the Saviour did for us by becoming man. He banished death from us and made us anew; and invisible and imperceptible as in Himself He is, He became visible through His works and revealed Himself as the Word of the Father, the Ruler, and King of the whole creation.” [cited in Humphreys, Fisher, *Thinking About God* (New Orleans, LA: Insight Press, 1977—original, 1974), p. 92.]

A more modern theologian puts it as follows: “In Christ, in the incarnate Logos of God, we have to do with God himself. He himself is our Redeemer in Christ. If this were not so, and Christ were only a creature, then Christ would not have the saving authority which is mighty over death and sin.” [Thielicke, Helmut, *The Evangelical Faith: Volume II: The Doctrine of God and of Christ* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1997—original, 1973), p. 159.].

There is a marvelous caveat in a recent book from Australian theologian, Michael F. Bird: “I hope it’s clear as well that the sending of Jesus was not Plan B, not an emergency measure to be activated when Adam tripped up or when things with Israel seemed to go awry. God had always intended to unite himself with creation through his Son. That is why Paul says in his panoply of poetic praise in Ephesians that God’s intention was “to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ” (Eph 1:10). God from all eternity intended to put all things in subjection to his Son so that the Son will reign over God’s new world with God’s redeemed people.” [Bird, Michael F.. *What Christians Ought to Believe: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine Through the Apostles’ Creed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), p. 76.].

Let’s close up this preparation time with a list of ways the Incarnation revealed God.

1. The Incarnation showed what God is like.
2. The Incarnation demonstrated the revealing love of God.
3. The Incarnation showed God reaching out to humanity, seeking them/us.
4. The Incarnation epitomized God’s purpose for all of us as demonstrated in Jesus.

What could you add to the list?