

## **Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Christology, Session 2, Patristic Christology, Part 1, Before Nicaea Resources from NotebookLM**

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

### **1. Abstract of Peterson, Christology, Session 2, Patristic Christology, Part 1, Before Nicaea, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL**

**Dr. Robert Peterson's Christology Session 2** explores the development of understanding Jesus Christ in the early church period before the Council of Nicaea (100-325 AD). The lecture highlights the **challenges faced by early Christians** in formulating Christological doctrines, including heresies like Gnosticism, Ebionitism, and Monarchianism, which variously denied or minimized Jesus' deity or humanity. Peterson then examines the contributions of key early church fathers such as **Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian**, noting their efforts to articulate the nature of Christ in response to these theological errors. These early thinkers laid foundational concepts, though sometimes with ambiguities and tensions, that would later be refined and formalized in subsequent church councils.

**2. 17 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Peterson, Christology, Session 2 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Theology, Peterson → Christology).**



**Peterson\_Christology\_Session02.mp3**

### 3. Briefing Document: Peterson, Salvation, Session 2, Patristic Christology, Part 1, Before Nicaea

#### Briefing Document: Patristic Christology Before Nicaea (c. 100-325 AD)

**Overview:** This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented in Dr. Robert A. Peterson's lecture on Patristic Christology before the Council of Nicaea (325 AD). The lecture highlights the diverse theological landscape of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, marked by various challenges to the biblical understanding of Jesus Christ. It explores early heresies arising from Jewish, Monarchian, and Gnostic perspectives, and then examines the initial orthodox Christological formulations developed by key early church fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Tertullian.

#### Main Themes and Important Ideas:

##### 1. The Fluid and Challenging Christological Landscape Before Nicaea:

- The period between 100 and 325 AD was characterized by a multitude of diverse Christological viewpoints. Aloys Grillmeier observed that "no epic of Christology displays such numerous and so different currents of thought as the second century."
- This diversity arose due to several factors:
- The New Testament canon was not yet fully established and widely circulated.
- The expanding church encountered various cultural and philosophical backgrounds, leading to syncretism and the importation of alien worldviews.
- Internal challenges existed, with individuals distorting the gospel for personal gain.
- **Core Issue:** Jeremy Jackson suggests that "what unites all heresies is the denial of Christ and his work." The fundamental question became: "who do you say Jesus is and does?"

##### 2. Early Christological Heresies:

- **Jewish Heresies (e.g., Ebionites):** Denied the deity and virgin conception of Jesus.
- Viewed Jesus as an ordinary man with unusual gifts, who achieved a unique connection with God's Spirit at his baptism due to his strict adherence to the law.

- Believed "Christ... descended on Jesus by the Spirit of God at his baptism" and later withdrew before his death.
- **Monarchian Heresies:** Aimed to preserve the "divine unity or monarchia" but at the expense of the full deity of the Son and Spirit.
- **Adoptionism (Dynamic Monarchianism):** Argued Jesus was wholly human until his baptism, when the Logos (seen as God's power or reason, not a distinct person) came upon him.
- Jesus was "adopted as God's Son and empowered by God" due to his exceptional virtue.
- Denied the pre-existence and full deity of the Son.
- Maintained that "the logos flew back to God before Jesus died on the cross."
- **Modalism (Sabellianism):** Affirmed the full deity of Christ but denied his distinct personhood within the Godhead.
- Conceived of the Father, Son, and Spirit as "modes... in which God manifested himself" successively throughout history (Father as Creator, Son as Redeemer, Spirit as Sanctifier).
- This view has a "disastrous implication... that the events of redemptive history become a charade" as the Son cannot truly represent or atone if not a distinct person.
- Could lead to "patripassionism," the idea that the Father suffered on the cross since the Son was not truly distinct.
- **Gnostic Heresies (and Docetism):** Based on Platonic dualism, viewing the material world as evil and the spirit world as potentially good.
- Offered "detailed secret knowledge (gnosis) of reality."
- Viewed God as "one, yet remote and unknowable," and not the creator of the fallen material universe (attributed to a lesser "demiurge").
- Considered humanity's fall as being trapped in physical bodies, with salvation being "an escape from the bondage of material existence."
- Denied the incarnation of the divine redeemer (Christ).

- **Docetism:** Taught that Christ only appeared to have a physical body, thus denying his true humanity.
- Argued that "Christ... either temporarily associated himself with the man Jesus, adoptionism, or he simply took the appearance of a physical body, docetism."
- Radically departed from biblical teachings on God as Creator, the co-equality of the Father and Son, the reality of the incarnation, and the nature of sin and salvation (focusing on escaping matter, not moral reconciliation).

### 3. Early Orthodox Christological Responses:

- Early church fathers like Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian actively combated these heresies.
- The councils later formalized these responses into creeds and confessions.
- **Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-115 AD):** Strongly opposed Gnosticism, emphasizing the "reality of the incarnation and the full humanity of Christ."
- Affirmed that Jesus "was really born, who both ate and drank, who really was persecuted under Pontius Pilate, who really was crucified and died, who moreover really was raised from the dead."
- Also affirmed the "full deity of the Son," presenting statements about Christ in the flesh alongside those about the pre-existent Son.
- **Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD):** An important apologist who developed "Logos Christology" to connect Christian and Hellenistic thought.
- Identified the Logos (divine reason) with Jesus, affirming that "in Jesus of Nazareth, the Logos was made flesh."
- Taught that the Logos was God's "pre-existent spirit, a second God if you will, who now has become incarnate in Jesus Christ."
- Used the analogy of "fire kindled from fire" to explain the relationship between the Father and the Logos, stressing both oneness and distinctness.
- Introduced the concept of the "Logos spermatikos" (Logos in seed form) present in all people as the source of truth.
- However, his view contained "subordinationism, viewing the Logos as ontologically subordinate to the Father."

- **Irenaeus of Lyon (c. 130-202 AD):** Considered by many as the "first real Christian theologian."
- Strongly opposed Gnosticism, presenting a theology rooted in the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption.
- Affirmed the one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Creator "ex nihilo."
- Famously used the image of the "two hands of God... the Son and the Spirit" to illustrate the unity and harmony of the Trinity in creation and redemption.
- Emphasized the moral nature of humanity's predicament due to the "historic fall" of Adam.
- Clearly affirmed that "Jesus is fully man and fully God."
- Rejected the Logos as merely an emanation, arguing that it "has always existed as the one who reveals the Father and thereby is personally distinct from him."
- Stressed the "unity of Christ's person" against Gnostic distinctions between the heavenly Christ and earthly Jesus ("eis kai ho autos," one and the same).
- Developed the doctrine of "recapitulation," where Christ, as the new Adam, relived each stage of human life successfully, reversing Adam's failure.
- Provided crucial phrases: "Filius Dei, Filius Hominis" (Son of God, Son of Man) and "Iesus Christos, Homai, Homai Deus" (Jesus Christ, true man and true God).
- **Tertullian (c. 160-230 AD):** The first notable Latin-speaking church father, often dubbed the "father of Latin or Western theology."
- Wrote against Gnosticism and modalism.
- "Anticipated the later formulations of Nicaea and Chalcedon," coining terms like "trinitas" (Trinity) and formulating the idea of "una substantia" (one substance) in "tres personae" (three persons).
- Distinguished between substance (fundamental beingness) and person (identity of action providing distinctness).
- Exhibited a "subordinationist strand" in his thinking, suggesting a divine ordering, but his intent was likely to explain relations and origin within the Godhead, not imply inequality of being.

- Affirmed that the "subject of the incarnation is the logos, who has taken on flesh."
- Articulated that "Jesus Christ was of a divine substance and human substance, yet only one person," anticipating the concept of two natures in one person.
- Crucially affirmed that Christ had a "human soul" in addition to a body, important for later arguments against Apollinarianism and understanding Christ's emotions.
- Stressed that Christ's two natures "retained their own properties and were not confused or mingled," a key point against Monophysitism.

**Conclusion:**

The pre-Nicene period was a crucial era in the development of Christian doctrine, particularly Christology. The early church grappled with various interpretations of Jesus' identity and work, leading to numerous heretical views. However, through the diligent efforts of early church fathers, the foundations for orthodox Christology were laid. They emphasized the reality of the incarnation, the full deity and humanity of Christ, and the Trinitarian nature of God, often in direct response to the challenges posed by groups like the Gnostics and Monarchians. While their formulations were not always fully refined and sometimes contained tensions (like Justin's and Tertullian's subordinationism), their work provided the essential building blocks for the later conciliar definitions of the faith, most notably at Nicaea and Chalcedon.

## 4. Study Guide: Peterson, Salvation, Session 2, Patristic Christology, Part 1, Before Nicaea

### Study Guide: Patristic Christology Before Nicaea

#### Key Concepts:

- **Patristic Period:** The era of the Church Fathers, roughly from the late 1st to the 8th centuries AD. This session focuses on the period before the Council of Nicaea (325 AD).
- **Heresy:** A belief or doctrine that contradicts the orthodox teachings of the church.
- **Orthodoxy:** Right belief or doctrine, consistent with the accepted teachings of the church.
- **Deity of Christ:** The belief that Jesus Christ is fully God.
- **Humanity of Christ:** The belief that Jesus Christ is fully human.
- **Incarnation:** The doctrine that the Son of God became human in the person of Jesus Christ.
- **Monotheism:** The belief in one God.
- **Logos Christology:** A theological approach that uses the concept of the Logos (Word) to explain the nature and role of Jesus Christ.
- **Subordinationism:** The belief that the Son and/or Holy Spirit are inferior in being or nature to the Father.
- **Modalism (Sabellianism):** A heresy that taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons, but rather different modes or manifestations of the one God.
- **Adoptionism (Dynamic Monarchianism):** A heresy that taught that Jesus was born a mere man and was later "adopted" as God's Son, often at his baptism, due to his exceptional virtue.
- **Gnosticism:** A diverse religious and philosophical movement that emphasized secret spiritual knowledge (gnosis) and often held a dualistic view of reality, seeing the material world as evil and the spiritual world as good.

- **Docetism:** A heresy associated with Gnosticism that taught that Christ only appeared to be human but did not have a real physical body.
- **Ebionites:** A Jewish Christian group that denied Jesus' deity and the virgin birth, viewing him as a righteous man upon whom the Spirit descended at his baptism.
- **Monarchianism:** A movement that emphasized the oneness (monarchia) of God, sometimes to the detriment of the distinct deity of the Son and Spirit.
- **Patripassianism:** The belief, associated with modalism, that since the Father and Son are not distinct, the Father himself suffered on the cross.
- **Recapitulation:** A concept, particularly associated with Irenaeus, that Christ, as the new Adam, relived human life perfectly, undoing the disobedience of the first Adam.
- **Substance (ousia/substantia):** The fundamental being or essence of something.
- **Person (hypostasis/persona):** The distinct individual existence within the divine being.
- **Two Natures:** The orthodox Christian belief that Jesus Christ possesses both a divine nature and a human nature, united in one person.

#### Short-Answer Quiz:

1. What were the two primary reasons why the emergence of diverse Christological viewpoints in the period before Nicaea (100-325 AD) was not surprising?
2. According to Jeremy Jackson, what is the unifying characteristic of all heresies concerning Jesus Christ? Why is the doctrine of salvation through Christ often considered offensive to some?
3. Describe the core beliefs of the Ebionites regarding Jesus Christ. How did they understand the "Christ" who came upon Jesus?
4. Explain the central aim of monarchianism. What were the two main ways in which monarchian thinkers denied the full deity of the Son?
5. Summarize the key tenets of modalism (Sabellianism). What is one significant negative implication of this view for the understanding of Christ's redemptive work?
6. Describe the fundamental dualistic worldview of Gnosticism. How did this view influence their understanding of creation, humanity, and salvation?

7. Explain the Docetic view of Christ's humanity within Gnosticism. Why did early church fathers like Ignatius argue strongly against this belief?
8. What was Justin Martyr's approach to relating Christian thought with Hellenistic philosophy? How did he utilize the concept of the Logos in his Christology?
9. Describe Irenaeus' understanding of God's "two hands." How did he contrast his view of creation and God's interaction with the world with that of Gnosticism?
10. What were Tertullian's significant contributions to the development of Trinitarian and Christological language? What tension remained in his understanding of the relationship between the Father and the Son?

**Answer Key:**

1. The emergence of diverse Christological viewpoints was not surprising because the New Testament was not yet circulating as a complete canon, and as the church spread, it encountered individuals from non-biblical backgrounds who often imported their own ideas into Christian belief. Furthermore, even within the early church, some individuals distorted the gospel for personal gain.
2. Jeremy Jackson suggests that what unites all heresies is the denial of Christ and his work. The doctrine of salvation by God's sovereign grace through the incarnate Son is often offensive because it removes human ability to contribute to salvation and necessitates receiving God's work in faith.
3. The Ebionites denied Jesus' virgin conception and deity, viewing him as an ordinary man who possessed unusual gifts due to his strict observance of the law. They believed that "Christ" descended upon Jesus at his baptism as the Spirit of God's influence and power, and withdrew before his crucifixion.
4. The central aim of monarchianism was to preserve the oneness (monotheism) of God (the monarchia). They denied the full deity of the Son either through adoptionism, which claimed Jesus was a man adopted as God's Son, or through modalism, which viewed the Son as a temporary mode or manifestation of the one God.
5. Modalism taught that God is one being who manifested himself in different modes or roles throughout history: as Father in creation, Son in redemption, and Spirit in sanctification. A disastrous implication of modalism is that the events of redemptive history become a charade, as the Son is not a distinct person who can truly represent humanity or accomplish substitutionary atonement.

6. Gnosticism held a dualistic view where the material world was evil and the spiritual world was good. They believed the material universe was created by a lesser deity (the demiurge), and humans are spiritual beings trapped in evil physical bodies. Salvation, in this view, is the escape of the soul from the bondage of material existence through secret knowledge.
7. Docetism, a Gnostic heresy, taught that Christ only appeared to be human but did not possess a real physical body due to the inherent evil of matter. Early church fathers like Ignatius argued strongly against this because it denied the reality of the incarnation, Christ's genuine suffering, death, and resurrection, undermining the foundation of the gospel.
8. Justin Martyr, as an apologist, sought to connect Christian thought with Hellenistic philosophy by using the concept of the Logos (Word) as a bridge. He argued that the Logos, as the universal reason, was partially known by philosophers, but was fully revealed and became incarnate in Jesus Christ.
9. Irenaeus described the Son and the Holy Spirit as the "two hands" of God, emphasizing their unity and complementary work with the Father in creation, providence, and redemption. Unlike Gnosticism, Irenaeus affirmed that the one true God directly created the world and interacts with it, without the need for numerous intermediaries.
10. Tertullian significantly contributed to Trinitarian and Christological language by being the first to use the term "trinitas" (Trinity) and formulating the idea of one substance (una substantia) in three persons (tres personae). A remaining tension in his thought was a seemingly ontological subordinationism, where he described a divine ordering among the persons, potentially implying inequality of being.

### **Essay Format Questions:**

1. Analyze the major Christological heresies that emerged before the Council of Nicaea, explaining their core beliefs and how they deviated from what became orthodox Christian doctrine.
2. Compare and contrast the Christological contributions of two key figures before Nicaea, such as Ignatius of Antioch and Justin Martyr, or Irenaeus and Tertullian, highlighting their key affirmations and any potential limitations or ambiguities in their views.

3. Discuss the significance of the early church's response to Gnosticism for the development of orthodox Christology, focusing on the specific aspects of Christ's person and work that were emphasized in opposition to Gnostic teachings.
4. Evaluate the use of "Logos Christology" by early apologists like Justin Martyr. What were the strengths of this approach in engaging with the surrounding culture, and what potential weaknesses or theological challenges did it present?
5. Trace the development of the understanding of Christ's deity and humanity in the period before Nicaea, identifying key milestones and the challenges the early church faced in articulating these fundamental truths.

## Glossary of Key Terms:

- **Apologist:** A Christian writer who seeks to defend and explain the Christian faith to those outside the church.
- **Canon (of Scripture):** The collection of books recognized by the church as authoritative and inspired by God.
- **Christology:** The branch of Christian theology concerned with the person and work of Jesus Christ.
- **Consubstantial:** Of the same substance or essence. This term became crucial in the Nicene Creed to affirm the deity of the Son as being of the same substance as the Father.
- **Demiurge:** In Gnostic thought, a subordinate deity or power responsible for creating the material universe, often seen as flawed or evil.
- **Economic Subordinationism:** The theological view that within the Trinity, the Son and the Holy Spirit voluntarily submit to the Father in their roles in salvation history, without implying any inferiority in their divine nature.
- **Emanation:** The idea that divine beings or powers proceed from the ultimate God, often in a descending hierarchy. This concept was prevalent in Gnosticism.
- **Ex Nihilo:** Latin for "out of nothing," referring to the Christian doctrine that God created the universe without pre-existing materials.
- **Gnosis:** Greek for "knowledge," particularly the secret or mystical knowledge emphasized in Gnosticism as the means of salvation.

- **Hellenistic World:** The Greek-influenced culture that spread throughout the Mediterranean region following the conquests of Alexander the Great.
- **Incarnate:** Embodied in flesh; the doctrine that the Son of God took on a human body and nature in Jesus Christ.
- **Ontological Subordinationism:** The theological view that the Son and/or Holy Spirit are inherently inferior in being or nature to the Father.
- **Presbyter:** An elder or pastor in the early church.
- **Providence:** God's active involvement and guidance in the world.
- **Redemption:** The act by which God saves humanity from sin and its consequences through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- **Soteriology:** The branch of Christian theology concerned with salvation.
- **Syncretism:** The combination or fusion of different religious beliefs or practices.
- **Trinity:** The Christian doctrine that God is one being in three co-equal and co-eternal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

## 5. FAQs on Peterson, Salvation, Salvation, Session 2, Patristic Christology, Part 1, Before Nicaea, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

### Frequently Asked Questions: Early Christological Debates (Before Nicaea)

**1. Why did so many different ideas about Jesus Christ emerge in the early church (100-325 AD)?** The period before the Council of Nicaea (325 AD) witnessed a remarkable diversity of thought regarding Jesus Christ due to several factors. Firstly, the New Testament canon was still in the process of being compiled and circulated as a complete unit. Secondly, as Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, it encountered diverse cultural and philosophical backgrounds. Converts from these backgrounds often brought pre-existing ideas and worldviews, leading to syncretism and interpretations of Christ that diverged from apostolic teaching. Additionally, even within the early church, some individuals sought personal gain or distorted the gospel message.

**2. What were the main categories of early Christological heresies discussed, and what did they generally deny or minimize?** The main categories of early Christological heresies discussed were those associated with Judaism (like the Ebionites), Monarchianism (including Adoptionism and Modalism), and Gnosticism (which often led to Docetism). Generally, these heresies denied or minimized either Jesus' deity, his full humanity, or the distinctness and co-equality of the Father and the Son within the Godhead. Jewish-related heresies tended to deny Jesus' deity, while Gnosticism often denied his genuine humanity. Monarchianism, in its attempt to preserve monotheism, compromised the full deity of the Son.

**3. How did the Ebionites, a Jewish Christian group, view Jesus Christ?** The Ebionites viewed Jesus as an ordinary human being, born naturally (denying the virgin conception). They believed he possessed unusual but not supernatural gifts and distinguished himself through strict adherence to Jewish law. According to their view, the "Christ" (understood as the Spirit of God) descended upon Jesus at his baptism due to his law-keeping, empowering him uniquely. They also believed this "Christ" withdrew from Jesus before his crucifixion, accounting for his cry of abandonment.

**4. What were the two primary forms of Monarchianism, and how did they attempt to preserve monotheism?** Monarchianism sought to preserve the oneness (monarchia) of God but did so at the expense of the full deity of the Son. The two primary forms were: \* **Adoptionism (or dynamic monarchianism):** This view held that Jesus was born fully human, but the Logos (seen as a divine power or reason, not a distinct person) came upon him at his baptism. Due to his exceptional virtue, Jesus was "adopted" as God's

Son and empowered to perform miracles. The Logos was believed to have left him before his death. \* **Modalism (or Sabellianism):** This view affirmed the full deity of Jesus but denied his distinct personhood within the Trinity. It taught that the Father, Son, and Spirit are different "modes" or manifestations of the single divine being, appearing successively in history (Father as Creator, Son as Redeemer, Spirit as Sanctifier) rather than existing simultaneously as distinct persons.

**5. How did Gnosticism and its Christological counterpart, Docetism, understand Jesus Christ and salvation?** Gnosticism, based on a dualism between a good spiritual realm and an evil material realm, viewed the material world as inherently corrupt and separate from a remote, unknowable true God. Salvation was seen as an escape from the material body and a return of the spiritual soul to its divine origin, achieved through secret knowledge (gnosis). Consequently, Gnostics generally denied the true incarnation of Christ, the divine redeemer. Docetism, a Christological expression of Gnosticism, taught that Christ only *appeared* to be human, as a divine being could not truly take on a material (evil) body. They often believed a divine messenger, "Christ," temporarily inhabited the human Jesus, usually from his baptism until shortly before his crucifixion.

**6. What were some key affirmations about Jesus Christ made by early orthodox figures like Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus of Lyon?** Early orthodox figures strongly countered these heresies by affirming key truths about Jesus: \* **Ignatius of Antioch:** Emphasized the reality of the incarnation, stressing that Jesus was truly born, ate, drank, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was raised from the dead. He also affirmed Jesus' full deity, recognizing him as the Son of God. \* **Justin Martyr:** Developed Logos Christology, using the concept of the Logos (the divine Word or Reason) to connect Christian thought with Hellenistic philosophy. He affirmed the pre-existence and deity of the Logos, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, viewing the Logos as a "second God" distinct from the Father but without denying monotheism. \* **Irenaeus of Lyon:** Systematically refuted Gnosticism, emphasizing the unity of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Creator of all. He affirmed that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, one and the same person. He introduced the concept of "recapitulation," arguing that Christ, as the second Adam, lived a fully human life, overcoming the failures of the first Adam and restoring humanity.

**7. What contributions did Tertullian make to the development of Christological and Trinitarian understanding in the early church?**

Tertullian, a prominent figure in the Latin-speaking church, made significant contributions by:

- \* Being the first to use the term "Trinitas" (Trinity) to refer to God.
- \* Formulating the concept of God as "one substance" (una substantia) in "three persons" (tres personae), distinguishing between God's fundamental being and the distinct identities of the Father, Son, and Spirit.
- \* Affirming that Jesus Christ was of both divine and human substance (natures) yet was one person.
- \* Explicitly arguing against modalism by emphasizing the real and eternal distinctions between the Father, Son, and Spirit.
- \* Asserting that Christ possessed a human soul in addition to a human body, crucial for understanding his full humanity and his ability to experience emotions.

**8. What theological tensions or unresolved issues remained in the Christological understanding of the pre-Nicene church, and how did they lay the groundwork for later debates?**

Despite the significant progress made by early church fathers, some theological tensions remained. One key issue was subordinationism, the idea of a hierarchical ordering within the Trinity, particularly concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son (as seen in the writings of Justin Martyr and Tertullian). While these figures affirmed the Son's deity in many ways, their language sometimes suggested a subordination of being or origin. This unresolved tension, particularly the question of the Son's eternal generation and co-equality with the Father, directly contributed to the Arian controversy in the fourth century, which ultimately led to the Council of Nicaea's definitive affirmation of the Son's full deity.