

True God and True Man

But who do you say that I am? ~ Matthew 16:15

THE FOUR Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and the remaining books of the New Testament, give us a wealth of information about Jesus Christ, a man born into history at a specific place and specific time, as the one promised from the beginning (see Gn 3:15) to be our savior, and yet who was also truly God, one in being with the Father.

The Witness of Scripture

It is not difficult to find Scripture passages attesting either to Jesus' identity as God or to his true humanity. The Gospel of John states unambiguously, from the very beginning, that Jesus was God: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"* (Jn 1:1). Several verses later, John writes that God has visited his people in human form: *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (Jn 1:14; see also 1 Jn 4:2). "Lord," the normal substitute for the unspoken and unpronounced Name of God in the Old Testament — YHWH in the Hebrew script (which used only consonants) — was used in the Gospels and other books of the New Testament for both the Father and for Jesus, both by Jesus himself (see Mt 7:21-22; Mk 5:19; Jn 13:14) and by his followers (see Mt 8:25; Mt 9:28; Mt 14:28-30; Mk 16:19-20; Lk 5:8; Lk 7:19; Lk 10:1; Jn 9:38; Jn 11:27; Jn 20:28; 1 Cor 1:3; 1 Cor 8:6; Phil 2:11; Jude v 4; Rv 17:14).



The palsied man let down through the roof, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

"He was God, and he died, as a human dies!"

invited Thomas to see and touch the wounds from his crucifixion: *"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing"* (Jn 20:27). Thomas' response was worship: *"My Lord and my God!"* (Jn 20:28). Scribes — professional scholars — indirectly also acknowledged Jesus' divinity, when they witnessed a miracle of healing. Before he healed a paralytic, Jesus forgave his sins, and the scribes said, in their hearts, *"Who can forgive sins but God alone?"* (Mk 2:7). Jesus rarely made an outright claim to his divinity in public, but during a long dialogue that probably occurred in the Temple in Jerusalem, he eventually told his hearers, *"before Abraham was, I am"* (Jn 8:58), claiming for himself the

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews states that Jesus was truly human: *"For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb 4:15).

The apostles Peter and Thomas explicitly recognized Jesus' divinity while he was on earth. When Jesus asked the apostles who they thought he was, Peter, replying for the group, exclaimed: *"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"* (Mt 16:16). Following Jesus' Resurrection from the dead, Thomas would not believe his fellow apostles' testimony but had to see for himself. When Jesus appeared to the company of the apostles, including Thomas, he

very name that God had told Moses was his (see Ex 3:14-15). On another occasion, when he was teaching in the Temple, he told them: *“I and the Father are one”* (Jn 10:30). The reaction of his hearers was the same in both instances: they tried to stone him, the prescribed punishment for blasphemy.

And yet he died! He was God, and he died, as a human dies (see Mt 15:37)! The Gospels describe in detail the preparations for burial. The Gospel of Matthew describes the efforts of the chief priests and Pharisees to ensure that no claim of resurrection could be made, by having the Roman governor set a guard on Jesus’ tomb (see Mt 27:62-66). And all four Gospels describe the fact of Jesus’ Resurrection from the dead, although the event itself was not witnessed, since even the Roman guards

were so frightened by the accompanying earthquake and terrifying appearance of an angel that they *“became like dead men”* (Mt 28:4). The fact that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead was, however, attested to by hundreds of witnesses, including those who touched him, such as Thomas, those who walked and talked with him (see Lk 24:13-35), those who ate with him (see Lk 24:41-43), and those for whom he cooked a breakfast of grilled fish and bread at the shore of the Sea of Galilee (see Jn 21:4-14).

Catholic Doctrines about Jesus’ Identity

During the first few centuries of Christianity, a great deal of effort was put into how to understand Jesus as God and as man. Inevitably, some thinkers got it wrong and began teaching heresy (wrong doctrine). The Church authoritatively taught correct doctrine, in the process developing the theological vocabulary and creed that we still use today. This doctrine is completely based on Scripture, as interpret-



Jesus is taken down from the Cross; 15th Station of the Cross in St. Teresa of Avila Church in Washington, DC

ed by the Church in light of its Apostolic Tradition — that is, the understanding of the Scriptures that has been handed down from the apostles themselves to every succeeding generation of popes and bishops. In this way, the constant teaching of the Church from the beginning was precisely defined. Although heresies never entirely disappear — there are contemporary versions of nearly all of them — the doctrine that Jesus is true God and true man is the common bedrock of Christian belief today.

The doctrines about Jesus’ identity are as follows:

❖ **Jesus has two complete natures, divine and human, each with an intellect and a will. His human soul and mind could grow and learn as could any human soul and mind (see Lk 2:52),**

yet he always knew he was God, united with his Father (see Lk 2:49). He could penetrate the secret thoughts of human hearts (see Mk 2:8; Jn 2:25; Jn 6:61). At times, when he appeared not to know something, we learn elsewhere that he was not sent to reveal it (see Mk 13:32 and Acts 1:7).

❖ **Jesus is only one person, the divine Person, the Son of God, who is coequal with God the Father and has exactly the same nature as God the Father (and God the Holy Spirit).**

❖ **The second person of the Trinity is begotten, not created, and is therefore not a creature or a “lesser God.”**

❖ **The human and divine natures of Jesus are inseparably joined in the one divine Person.**

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was not divine, or he was not fully divine. What follows is a fuller discussion of these heresies and how they were resolved.

First Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Human

This heresy arose very early, before the end of the 1st century (Gnosticism), and again in different forms in the 2nd and 3rd centuries (Docetism and Manichaeism) (The name of a heresy generally derives from a major characteristic of the heresy or the name of the person who originated it). With both Gnosticism and Manichaeism, the belief about Jesus' true nature was linked to a notion that there was "secret knowledge" and that the material world was, essentially, evil. Thus these heresies taught that Jesus' body was merely an illusion, since his having a material body would seem to make him part of the evil, material world. Similar to this notion was the idea that Jesus did not really suffer in the flesh, but only seemed to suffer, which was the claim of Docetism in the 2nd century. In the 5th century, this heresy arose in a new form: that Jesus had only one nature. This heresy asserted that when the divine Person assumed a human nature, it was absorbed and ceased to exist, so that only the divine one remained (Monophysitism).

Second Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Fully Human

There were two varieties of this heresy. The first was the 4th-century claim that Jesus had no human mind, because the divine mind replaced it (Apollinarianism). The second was a 7th-century belief that Jesus had no human will, only the divine will (Monothelitism).

Third Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Divine

This type of heresy, like the heresies that denied Jesus' humanity, arose by the end of the 1st century. The first was the assertion that he was only a man on whom the Holy Spirit came to rest at his baptism (Ebionism). In the 2nd and 3rd centuries, a variation



Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane

on this heresy claimed that Jesus became Christ (that is, the Messiah or "anointed one of God") only at his baptism and was adopted by the Father after his death on the cross (Monarchianism).

A very different way of expressing the same heresy, which also arose in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, was that God is not one in three Persons at all, but merely adopted, successively, the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Modalism or Sabellianism). Finally, a heresy that nearly overwhelmed orthodoxy in the 4th century was the belief that Jesus was the first created being, and therefore not of the same substance as the Father and not eternal (Arianism).

Fourth Type of Heresy: Jesus is Not Fully Divine

Those who could not accept full Arianism nor the orthodox belief that Jesus was truly God as well as truly human developed in the 4th century a belief that he was of a similar essence as the Father, but was subordinate to him (Semi-Arianism). Others formulated the idea that Jesus was some kind of mixture of the divine and the human. Adherents of this 5th-century heresy believed that the second person of the Trinity "indwelt" the person of Jesus, making him a God-bearing man united only because both divine and human wills were morally united, so that Jesus was two persons with two natures (Nestorianism).

Triumph of the True Doctrine: Church Councils

Some heresies regarding Jesus that had developed early, such as Gnosticism and Docetism, faded as significant factors without extraordinary effort. However, the threat of Arianism in the 4th century, as well as other heresies in this and the next three centuries, required the efforts of six universal Church councils of bishops, with the pope's approval of their results, to hammer out exactly how the true doctrine should be expressed and to condemn various heresies. These councils, their dates, and the principal results of each are as follows:

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“Denial of Jesus’ humanity makes it impossible for us to see him as our model of holiness.”

1. Nicaea, 325

- * declared that *Jesus is fully divine, coequal and of the identical substance with the Father* (*homoousios* in Greek and *consubstantialis*, that is, “consubstantial,” in Latin) and *coeternal* (that is, not created) *with the Father*
- * formulated most of the Nicene Creed
- * condemned Arianism

2. Constantinople I, 381

- * affirmed that *Jesus is fully human and has a human spirit*
- * refined the Nicene Creed
- * condemned Apollinarianism

3. Ephesus, 431

- * affirmed that *Jesus has two natures, divine and human, united “hypostatically” in one divine Person* — that is, he is not *two* persons, but *one*
- * affirmed *Mary as the Mother of God* so as to affirm the fullness of Jesus’ divinity *and humanity* — *Mary gave birth not to the body alone, but to the whole Person, just as in any other human birth*
- * condemned Nestorianism

4. Chalcedon, 451

- * affirmed that *Jesus has two natures, human and divine, united in one Person*
- * affirmed that *Jesus’ two natures are unmixed, unchanged, undivided, and inseparable*
- * condemned Monophysitism

5. Constantinople II, 553

- * affirmed that *Jesus is only one Person, and that Person is one of the Trinity*
- * affirmed that it is proper, therefore, to say that *“God was crucified and died”*

6. Constantinople III, 680-681

- * affirmed that *Jesus has two wills, divine and human*
- * condemned Monothelitism.

Modern Manifestations of these Heresies

Many of these ancient heresies are still current in some form today, even (and perhaps especially) when those who believe them are unaware that they do not truly affirm correct doctrine. Among the more frequently encountered are:

❖ **“Jesus is not human”**: Both Gnosticism — “secret knowledge given to only a chosen few” — and various kinds of Manichaeism — “only the spiritual is good while the material world is evil” — are common in New Age circles. These kinds of heresies lead to a denial of Jesus’ humanity and, therefore, of the reality of his crucifixion and bodily Resurrection, and its adherents are (perhaps unconsciously) Monophysites. Some fundamentalist Protestant Christians have moved — again, perhaps without realizing it — in the direction of Gnosticism or Docetism. Finally, communions that directly descend from the original Monophysite Christian communities exist in Syria as Jacobites, as Coptic Orthodox communities in Egypt and Ethiopia, and in Armenia.

❖ **“Jesus is not divine”**: Jehovah’s Witnesses are modern Arians, teaching that Jesus is not God but rather a created angelic being. Christian Scientists teach a form of Ebionism, while Unitarians, who entirely deny the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, are modern Modalists. “Oneness” Pentecostal Christians, depending on their teaching, are either Modalists or Monarchianists. Liberal and nominal Christians often fall into Monarchianism, although they may believe that Jesus’ adoption by the Father raised him to divinity.

❖ **“Jesus is not fully divine”**: Nestorian Christian communities that directly descend from the first Nestorian Christian communities exist in the Middle East, India, and the United States.



The Virgin Mary and child Jesus with St. Catherine of Alexandria, by Bartolomé Murillo, 1617-1682

*“Denial of Jesus’ divinity
undermines his entire
life and message.”*

There are many other variations of these heresies, some in unusual combinations that defy classification. The Unification Church of Sun Myung Moon is partly Gnostic and partly Nestorian. Mormonism, in addition to its Arian, Monarchianist, and dualistic elements, also teaches that even God the Father was once not divine, and that we humans can ourselves aspire to the same kind of divinity “achieved” by God the Father and Jesus. There are no notable modern versions of the heresy “Jesus is not fully human.”

Why Does a Correct Understanding of Jesus Matter?

Denial of Jesus’ humanity makes it impossible for us to see him as our model of holiness. We do not see a man who, like us, struggled with temptation (see Lk 4:1-13), agonizingly fought to submit his will to that of his Father (see Lk 22:39-46), suffered grievously from the rejection, ridicule, and persecution that were part of his public life and his death, and whose physical suffering during his passion and death were equally grievous. If Jesus is not human, we also have no one who can understand, sympathize with, and console us when we are bereaved, suffer pain, or experience any kind of injustice from others.

On the other hand, *denial of Jesus’ divinity* undermines his entire life and message. He claimed to be God; if this is not true, he cannot be Truth itself, and nothing he teaches need be taken seriously. He is just one more “great moral teacher” — and, since he is a liar, not one to be relied upon. Furthermore, if Jesus is not divine, God did not really visit his people, and the entire understanding of why we need a divine, not merely human, Savior collapses. This in turn undermines the doctrine of original sin and even our very concept of the seriousness of sin.



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Last, if Jesus is not divine, then there is no Trinity — no community of Persons who live eternally giving themselves to each Other. Nor, then, are our families modeled on Trinitarian life. Lacking this understanding of the way human love, marriage, sexuality, fatherhood, and motherhood are reflections of God’s own inner life, we find our basic social structures returning to a pagan anarchy that daily inflicts tremendous sorrow in our modern culture.

(CCC 422-424, 446-449, 461-476)