

# BIBLICAL DOCTRINE: THE PERSON OF CHRIST



Four statements must be understood and affirmed in order to attain a complete biblical picture of the person of Jesus Christ:

1. Jesus Christ is fully and completely *divine*.
2. Jesus Christ is fully and completely *human*.
3. The divine and human natures of Christ are *distinct*.
4. The divine and human natures of Christ are completely *united* in one person.

## The Deity of Christ

Many passages of Scripture demonstrate that Jesus is fully and completely God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God*. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1, 14).

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (John 1:18).

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28).

To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the *Christ who is God over all*, blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:5).

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was *in the form of God*, did not count *equality with God* a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:5–7).

. . . waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of *our great God* and Savior Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13).

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power (Heb. 1:3).

But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever." . . . And, "You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands" (Heb. 1:8, 10).

Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of *our God and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Pet. 1:1).

## Jesus' Understanding of His Own Deity

Even though the passages cited above clearly teach the deity of Christ, this truth is often challenged. Some say that Jesus never claimed to be God and that these verses were written by his disciples who deified him because of the impact he had on their lives. Jesus, it is claimed, only

saw himself as a great moral teacher on a par with other religious leaders. However, Jesus' understanding of his own deity in the Gospels does not support this perspective. He clearly saw himself as God. This can be seen primarily in six ways.

1. Jesus taught with *divine authority*. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was *teaching them as one who had authority*, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:28–29). The teachers of the law in Jesus' day had no authority of their own. Their authority came from their use of earlier authorities. Even Moses and the other OT prophets and authors did not speak in their own authority, but would say, "This is what the Lord says." Jesus, on the other hand, interprets the law by saying, "You have heard that it was said. . . . But *I say to you*" (see Matt. 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44). This divine authority is shown with staggering clarity when he speaks of himself as the Lord who will judge the whole earth and will say to the wicked, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). No wonder the crowd was amazed at the authority with which Jesus spoke. Jesus recognized that his words carried divine weight. He acknowledged the permanent authority of the law (Matt. 5:18) and put his words on an equal plane with it: "For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from *the Law* until all is accomplished" (Matt. 5:18); "Heaven and earth will pass away, but *my words* will not pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

2. Jesus had a *unique relationship with God the Father*. When he was a young boy, Jesus sat with the religious leaders in the temple, amazing people with the answers he gave. When his distraught parents finally found their "lost" adolescent, he replied by saying, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in *my Father's house*?" (Luke 2:49). Jesus' reference to God as "my Father" is a radical statement of a unique, intimate relationship with God, of which he was already fully conscious. Such a reference by an individual was unprecedented in Jewish literature. Jesus took this unique personal address to another level by referring to God the Father using the affectionate Aramaic expression 'Abba'.

3. Jesus' favorite self-designation was the title *Son of Man*. The phrase "a son of man" could mean merely "a human being." But Jesus refers to himself as *the Son of Man* (implying the unique, well-known Son of Man), which indicates that he sees himself as the Messianic Son of Man in Daniel 7 who is to rule over the whole world for all eternity:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came *one like a son of man*, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given *dominion*

and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan. 7:13–14).

Jesus establishes his divine authority as the glorious Messianic Son of Man by declaring that he has the power to forgive sin and is lord of the Sabbath: “But that you may know that the *Son of Man* has authority on earth to forgive sins—he said to the paralytic—‘I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home’” (Mark 2:10–11); “And he said to them, ‘The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the *Son of Man* is lord even of the Sabbath’” (Mark 2:27–28).

4. Jesus’ teaching emphasized *his own identity*. Jesus came teaching the kingdom of God, and in it he was the King. His teaching dealt with many topics but was centrally about himself. His question to his disciples, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15), is the ultimate question of his ministry.

5. Jesus *received worship*. Perhaps the most radical demonstration of Jesus’ belief that he was God is the fact that when he was worshiped, as he sometimes was, he accepted that worship (Matt. 14:33; 28:9, 17; John 9:38; 20:28). If Jesus did not believe he was God, he should have vehemently rejected being worshiped, as Paul and Barnabas did in Lystra (Acts 14:14–15). That a monotheistic Jew like Jesus accepted worship from other monotheistic Jews shows that Jesus realized that he possessed a divine identity.

6. Jesus *equated himself with the Father*, and as a result the Jewish leaders accused him of blasphemy:

But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.” This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:17–18).

Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” [a clear allusion to the sacred divine name of Yahweh; cf. Ex. 3:14]. So they picked up stones to throw at him (John 8:58–59).

“I and the Father are one.” The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. . . . The Jews answered him, “It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, *make yourself God*” (John 10:30–33).

Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the *Son of Man* seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” [a reference to Daniel 7; see point 3]. And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his *blasphemy*. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death (Mark 14:61–64).

### Implications of Christ’s Deity

Because Jesus is God, the following things are true:

1. God can be known definitively and personally in Christ: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18); “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

2. Redemption is possible and has been accomplished in Christ: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

3. In Christ risen, ascended, and enthroned we have a sympathetic high priest who has omnipotent power to meet our needs: “For we do not have 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. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15).

4. Worship of and obedience to Christ is appropriate and necessary.

### Historical Misunderstandings of Christ’s Deity

The earliest and most radical denial of the deity of Christ is called *Ebionism* or *Adoptionism*, which was taught by a small Jewish-Christian sect in the first century. They believed that the power of God came on a man named Jesus to enable him to fulfill the Messianic role, but that Christ was not God. A later and more influential Christological heresy was *Arianism* (early 4th century), which denied the eternal, fully divine nature of Christ. Arius (c. 256–336) believed Jesus was the “first and greatest of created beings.” Arius’s denial of Jesus’ full deity was rejected at the Council of Nicea in 325. At this council, Athanasius showed that according to Scripture Jesus is fully God, being of the *same essence* as the Father.

### The Humanity of Christ

From the moment of Mary’s virginal conception of Jesus, his divine nature became permanently united to his human nature in one and the same person, the now incarnate Son of God. The biblical evidence for Jesus’ humanity is strong, showing that he had a human body, and a human mind, and experienced human temptation.

Jesus had a *human birth* and a *human genealogy*: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5).

Jesus had a *human body* that experienced growth (Luke 2:40, 52) as well as physical susceptibilities like hunger (Matt. 4:2), thirst (John 19:28), tiredness (John 4:6), and death (Luke 23:46).

As an old man, the apostle John was still in awe of the fact that he had been able to experience God the Son in the flesh. Like an excited child, he keeps repeating himself as he describes the incarnation:

That which was from the beginning, which we have *heard*, which we have *seen with our eyes*, which we *looked upon* and have *touched with our hands*, concerning the word of life—the life was *made manifest*, and we have *seen it*, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which *we have seen and heard* we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1:1–3).

John has known about the incarnation for over 50 years when he writes this letter, yet he still writes with wide-eyed wonder as he reflects on walking the shores of Galilee,

fishing, eating, and laughing with, and having his feet washed by, a carpenter who was God in flesh!

Jesus continues to have a physical body in his resurrected state, and he went to great lengths to make sure his disciples realized this: “See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (Luke 24:39; cf. Luke 24:42–43; John 20:17, 25–27). After his resurrection, Jesus returned to the Father by ascending in his divinely reanimated body before his disciples’ wondering eyes, thus affirming his ongoing full physical humanity (Luke 24:50–51; Acts 1:9–11). The ascension has been included in every important creed of the church because it teaches the enduring complete humanity of Jesus as the only mediator between God and man.

Jesus had a *human mind* that, according to the will of the Father, had limitations in knowledge: “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32). His human mind grew and increased in wisdom (Luke 2:52), and he even “learned obedience” (Heb. 5:8–9). To say Jesus “learned obedience” does not mean he moved from disobedience to obedience, but that he grew in his capacity to obey as he endured suffering.

Jesus experienced *human temptation*: “For we do not have 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; cf. Luke 4:1–2). While Jesus experienced every kind of human temptation, he never succumbed to sin (John 8:29, 46; 15:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26; 1 Pet. 2:22; 1 John 3:5).

Jesus practiced spiritual disciplines. He regularly prayed with passion (Mark 14:36; Luke 10:21; Heb. 5:7), worshiped at services in the synagogue (Luke 4:16), read and memorized Scripture (Matt. 4:4–10), practiced the discipline of solitude (Mark 1:35; 6:46), observed the Sabbath (Luke 4:16), obeyed OT ceremonial laws (John 8:29, 46; 15:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15), and received the fullness of the Spirit (Luke 3:22; 4:1). These religious activities were done earnestly (Heb. 5:7) and habitually (Luke 4:16) as the means of a truly human spiritual growth process.

Given Jesus’ divine nature, the normality of most of his earthly life is staggering. It seems that Jesus spent the first 30 years of his life in relative obscurity, doing manual labor, taking care of his family, and being faithful to whatever his Father called him to do. In his public ministry Jesus performed miraculous signs and delivered authoritative teaching that could only come from God, and this was shockingly offensive for the people of his hometown, who saw Jesus’ simplicity and humility as incompatible with messianic wisdom and power:

Coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, “Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?” And they took offense at him. But Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his own household” (Matt. 13:54–57).

Jesus did not cease to be fully human after the resurrection. He will be a man forever as he represents redeemed humanity for all of eternity (Acts 1:11; 9:5; 1 Cor. 9:1; 15:8; 1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:25; Rev. 1:13).

### *Implications of the Humanity of Christ*

Humans have obviously been sinful ever since the fall. Therefore, it is easy to assume that being sinful is an essential, necessary part of being a “human being.” But this is not true. Jesus was human and yet did not sin. The fact that he became man *reveals the nature of true humanity*. His humanity gives a glimpse of what our humanity would be, were it not tainted with sin. He shows that the problem with humanity is not that we are humans, but rather that we are *fallen*. Jesus’ human nature shows the potential of humanity as God intended. This display of sinless humanity reaffirms God’s declaration that creation in all its original dimensions (material and spiritual), including humanity, is by divine definition very good (Gen. 1:31).

Jesus’ humanity enables *his representative obedience* for us. “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:18–19). Because Jesus is truly human, his perfect life of obedience and overcoming all temptations—culminating in his perfect substitutionary death—can take the place of human rebellion and failure.

Because of Jesus’ humanity, he can truly be a *substitutionary sacrifice* for mankind. “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:17). A man died on the cross when Jesus died, and his death truly atones for the sin of human beings, whose nature he shared.

Jesus’ humanity makes him the only *effective mediator* between God and man: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). Jesus’ divine and human natures enable him to stand in the gap between fallen humans and a holy God.

Jesus’ humanity enabled him to become a *sympathetic high priest* who experientially understands the difficult plight of humanity in a fallen world: “For we do not have 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. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15–16; cf. Heb. 2:18).

Jesus’ humanity means he is a *true example* and pattern for human character and conduct. “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21; cf. 1 John 2:6).

### *Historical Misunderstandings of the Humanity of Christ*

A second-century heresy called *Docetism* denied the true humanity of Christ. Docetism (from the Gk. verb *dokēō*, “to seem, to appear to be”) was based on the presuppositions of Gnosticism, which held to a radical di-

chotomy between the physical and spiritual realms, and a very negative view of the physical order as worthless. These beliefs led to denying any real physical substance to Jesus' humanity. Docetic Christology taught that Jesus' physical humanity was just an illusion; one of their statements was that "when Jesus walked on the beach, he left no footprints." Docetism has devastating effects on the correct view of Christ, salvation, revelation, and creation. In this view, Christ does not represent humanity in his atoning work, nor does he show us God in human form. It also erodes a biblically positive view of creation which leads to either a negative or an indifferent perspective on life in the body. The NT refutes the seeds of what later became Gnosticism, with its Docetic view of Christ. John strongly condemns any view that denies Christ's full, physical humanity: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that *Jesus Christ has come in the flesh* is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already" (1 John 4:2).

*Apollinarianism* was another early heresy that denied Christ's full humanity. Apollinarius (4th century A.D.) believed humans had bodies, animal souls, and rational spirits. He thought the divine *logos* in Christ took the place of the rational spirit of a human. This view was successfully opposed in the fourth century by Gregory of Nazianzen and Athanasius, and rejected at the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381. The council showed that if Jesus is only, as it were, two-thirds human, full redemption of fully human people is lost. Gregory's famous quotation was "that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved." Jesus had to assume every element in a human nature in order to fully redeem humanity.

These two heresies teach believers to appreciate the importance of the humanity of Christ as well as provide a lesson on theological method. Both of these views bring presuppositions about humanity to the Bible and conform biblical teaching to them, rather than allowing Scripture to dictate everything, including the presuppositions. Evangelical theological method must always allow the teaching of Scripture to shape theological conclusions rather than transform its teaching on the basis of alien assumptions. Countless theological errors have occurred by imposing human ideas on the Bible.

**The Distinction and Unity of Christ's Two Natures**

Along with Jesus' full deity and humanity, the third and fourth necessary affirmations of biblical Christology are that in the incarnation, the divine and human natures remain *distinct*, and the natures are completely *united* in one person. The best evidence of these two realities are passages of Scripture where Jesus' divine glory and human humility are brought together:

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 (Isa. 9:6).

"For unto you is *born* this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the *Lord*" (Luke 2:11).

And the Word became *flesh* and dwelt among us, and we have seen his *glory*, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14).

... concerning his Son, who was *descended from David according to the flesh* and was declared to be the *Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness* by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 1:3-4).

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have *crucified the Lord of glory* (1 Cor. 2:8).

But when the fullness of time had come, *God sent forth his Son, born of woman*, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal. 4:4-5).

These verses present the profound mystery of the eternal, infinite Son of God stepping into time and space and taking on a human nature. There is no greater thought that could ever be pondered than this.

**Implications of the Two Natures of Christ**

The belief that Jesus is one person with both divine and human natures has great significance for the possibility of fallen people entering into a relationship with God. Christ must *be* both God and man if he is to mediate *between* God and man, make atonement for sin, and be a sympathetic high priest:

For in him *all the fullness of God* was pleased to dwell, and through him to *reconcile* to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, *making peace by the blood of his cross* (Col. 1:19-20).

For there is one God, and there is *one mediator between God and men*, the man Christ Jesus (1 Tim. 2:5).

Therefore he *had to be made like his brothers in every respect*, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to *make propitiation* for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17).

In his seminal work *Why God Became Man*, Anselm of Canterbury (c.A.D. 1033-1109) summarized the importance of the two natures of Christ for his atoning work by saying, "It is necessary that the self-same Person who is to make this satisfaction [for humanity's sins] be perfect God and perfect man, since He *cannot* make it unless He be really God, and He *ought not* to make it unless He be really man" (Book II, ch. 7).

**Historical Misunderstandings of the Unity of Christ's Natures**

There are six historical heresies related to the person of Christ listed in the chart below. The first four heresies are explained above. *Nestorianism* emphasized the distinction between the natures of Christ so much that Christ was made to appear as two persons in one body. *Eutychianism* stressed the unity of the natures to the point where any

Heresies Concerning the Person of Christ

<b>Ebionism</b>	denies the deity of Christ
<b>Arianism</b>	denies the fullness of the deity of Christ
<b>Docetism</b>	denies the humanity of Christ
<b>Apollinarianism</b>	denies the fullness of the humanity of Christ
<b>Nestorianism</b>	denies the unity of the natures in one person
<b>Eutychianism</b>	denies the distinction of the natures

distinction between them was lost, and Christ was thought to be some new entity, with only one nature, greater than mere man while being fully God in a novel way.

In A.D. 451, leaders of the church assembled at Chalcedon (outside of ancient Constantinople) and wrote a creed affirming both Jesus' full humanity and his full deity, with his two natures united in one person. Hereby all six Christological heresies were rejected. This creed, formulated at Chalcedon, became the church's foundational statement on Christ. The Chalcedonian Creed reads as follows:

We, then, following the holy Fathers, all with one consent, teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly God and truly man, of a reasonable soul and body; consubstantial with the Father according to the Godhead, and consubstantial with us according to the Manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin; begotten before all ages of the Father according to the Godhead, and in these latter days, for us and for our salvation, born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, according to the Manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, *to be acknowledged in two natures, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one Person and one Subsistence*, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets from the beginning have declared concerning him, and

the Lord Jesus Christ himself has taught us, and the Creed of the holy Fathers has handed down to us (emphasis added).

### ***Implications of Chalcedonian Christology***

The Chalcedonian Creed teaches the church how to talk about the two natures of Christ without falling into error. In particular, Chalcedon teaches the church to affirm that:

1. One nature of Christ is sometimes seen doing things in which his other nature does not share.
2. Anything that either nature does, the person of Christ does. He, God incarnate, is the active agent every time.
3. The incarnation is a matter of Christ's *gaining* human attributes, not of his *giving up* divine attributes. He gave up the glory of divine life (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6), but not the possession of divine powers.
4. We must look first to the Gospel accounts of Jesus Christ's ministry in order to see the incarnation actualized, rather than follow fanciful speculations shaped by erroneous human assumptions.
5. The initiative for the incarnation came from God, not from man.

While this creed does not solve all questions about the mystery of the incarnation, it has been accepted by Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches throughout history, and it has never needed any major alteration because it effectively articulates the biblical tension of Christ's two natures, completely united in one person. ◀