

Jesus Christ, God and Man: How Can a Man Be God?

REFORMED theology has consistently affirmed both the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus. Traditionally, this has been called the doctrine of the *hypostatic union*, a doctrine that expresses the perfect union between Jesus' divine and human natures in his one person. In this union, the second person of the Trinity (see theological article "[The Trinity](#)"), namely God the Son, became fully human (see theological article "[The Full Humanity of Christ](#)") without losing any of his divine attributes.

That the Jewish followers of Jesus believed that Jesus was both God and man is amazing. Jesus' apostles and most of the New Testament writers were Jews who strongly believed that there is only one God and that no human is divine. Nevertheless, they all taught that Jesus the Messiah should be worshiped and trusted as God. This idea is especially observable in the writings of John, Paul, Peter and the author of Hebrews.

John revealed Jesus as the eternal, divine Word, agent of creation and source of all life and light (Jn 1:1-5,9), who, in becoming "flesh," was revealed as the Son of God, the source of grace and truth—and, indeed, as "God the One and Only" (Jn 1:14,18).

John's Gospel is punctuated with Jesus' "I am" statements—these are especially significant because "I am" (see notes on Jn 8:24,28,58) was used to render God's name in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Exodus 3:14. Examples also appear in the seven declarations of Jesus' grace as (1) the bread of life, giving spiritual food (Jn 6:35,48,51); (2) the light of the world, banishing darkness (Jn 8:12; 9:5); (3) the gate for the sheep, giving access to God (Jn 10:7,9); (4) the good shepherd, protecting from peril (Jn 10:11,14); (5) the resurrection and life, overcoming our death (Jn 11:25); (6) the way, truth and life, guiding to fellowship with the Father (Jn 14:6); and (7) the true vine, nurturing for fruitfulness (Jn 15:1,5). Climactically, Thomas worshiped Jesus, declaring, "My Lord and my God" (Jn 20:28). Jesus then pronounced a blessing on all those who shared Thomas's faith, and John urged his readers to join their number (Jn

20:29-31).

Paul quoted from an apparent hymn that declares Jesus' personal deity (Php 2:6-11). He stated that "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col 2:9; cf. Col 1:19). He hailed Jesus as the Son, as the Father's image and as his agent in creating and upholding everything (Col 1:15-17). He declared him to be "Lord" (a title with divine overtones), to whom one must pray for salvation according to the exhortation in Joel 2:32 to call on God (Ro 10:9-13). He called him "God over all" (Ro 9:5) and "God and Savior" (Tit 2:13), and he prayed to him personally (2Co 12:8-9), looking to him as a source of divine grace (2Co 13:14). The testimony is explicit: Faith in Jesus' deity is central to Paul's theology.

In explaining Christ's perfect high priesthood, the author of Hebrews declared the full deity and resulting unique dignity of the Son of God (Heb 1:3,6, 8-12), whose full humanity is then celebrated in chapter 2. The perfection, and indeed the very possibility, of the high priesthood he ascribed to Christ depends on an endless, unfailing divine life in combination with a full human experience of temptation, pressure and pain (Heb 2:14-18; 4:14-5:2; 7:13-28; 12:2-3).

No less significant is Peter's use of Isaiah 8:12-13 (1Pe 3:14). He cited the Greek (Septuagint) version of the Old Testament, urging the churches not to fear what others fear, but to set apart the Lord as holy. But where the Septuagint text of Isaiah says "Set apart the Lord himself," Peter wrote, "set apart Christ as Lord" (1 Pe 3:15). Peter offered the adoring fear due to the Almighty to Jesus of Nazareth, his Master and Lord.

A crucial time for the church's affirmation of the hypostatic union came at the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451). At that time, the church countered two errors: (1) the Nestorian idea that Jesus had two "persons" (divine and human), as well as two natures, as if he were two people bound together in one body; and (2) the Eutychian idea that Jesus had only one nature, his divinity having absorbed his humanity. Rejecting both, the Council affirmed that Jesus is one divine-human person with two natures (i.e., two sets of capacities for experience, expression, reaction and action) and that the two natures are united in his personal being without mixture, confusion,

separation or division, such that each nature retains its own attributes.

The New Testament reveals the great mystery that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. All that God made us to be, as well as all that is in God himself, was, is and forever will be really and distinguishably present in the one person of Jesus. The New Testament commands the worship of Jesus and focuses consistently on the divine-human Savior and Lord as the proper object of faith, hope and love.

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