

be resolved by agreement of all the bishops at a General Council. The first 7 General Councils of the Church clarified several contentious issues and led to the formulation of the main dogmas about Christianity contained in the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. The decisions of the particular Councils concerning Jesus Christ (Christology) are as follows:



Nicaea 325AD - met to condemn the view of Arius, a priest from Alexandria. He taught that although the Word **was** Jesus it replaced his human soul, and because Jesus suffered then the Word can not be God. His conclusion was that Jesus was just a created being, albeit of the highest level because he contains the Word. The Council defined that Jesus **is God** in the full sense that the Father is, because he is of the **same** substance (Homousios) as the Father, not just a **similar** substance. However, the Council did not explain **how** Jesus' full divinity existed alongside his humanity.

Constantinople I 381AD - met to condemn the teaching of Apollinarius, Bishop of Laodicea. Apollinarius was concerned to protect Jesus full divinity against the Arians who, despite Nicaea, remained a real danger within Christianity. However, to do this he also emphasised that the Word replaced the human soul, but because the Word was God then Jesus was not truly a man. The Council defined that Jesus was **fully a man** with a **human soul and body**, as well as being **God** (Nicaea).

Ephesus 431AD - met to clarify **how** Jesus could be both God (Nicaea) and Man (Constantinople). Did this mean that there are two persons in Jesus or one? At issue was the way that Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, sought to express the distinction in natures within Jesus, and his reluctance to call Mary the Mother of God (as opposed to mother of Christ). He was actually condemned by one group led by St. Cyril of Alexandria, before the Council came to full session, and it is unlikely his opinion actually reflected what came to be known as the **Nestorian heresy**, the belief that within Jesus there were two persons, one divine and one human. Ephesus defined that Jesus was but **one person** who had **two natures**.

Chalcedon 451AD - Ephesus' declaration that Jesus had two natures was rejected by many Alexandrians, whose views were echoed by Eutyches, a monk from Constantinople. He taught that although there were, indeed, two natures this was only before the Incarnation and after it there was only one. Those who accepted this were called Monophysites. The Council defined that there were **two natures** in the **one person** of the Jesus - unconfused, unchanged, unseparated (i.e. united).

Constantinople III 681AD - defined that Jesus has **two wills** and two active principles, one divine and one human. It also clarifies that by **'Person'** is meant the one who **has** characteristics and who **undergoes** experiences, and by **'Nature'** is meant **what** characteristics the person **has** and **what** experiences he **can have**.

Our Catholic Faith

15. Jesus Christ True God and True Man

- *Outlining the Development of this Truth of Faith*



Questions for Reflection

1. What does scripture teach us about Jesus' divinity?
2. Is it surprising that there were so many controversies in the early Church about Jesus' divinity and humanity?
3. Which Council decision is most important for you and which do you think is most important for the Faith in general?

The Scriptural Evidence

Jesus as Man

It is just as necessary to show Jesus was truly a man as it is to show his divinity, because this truth was, in fact, rejected by some and formed an early Church heresy (see below).

Jesus was conceived (Mtt.1), born to Mary (Lk.2, Gal.4), grew up like normal men (Lk.2), ate and drank (Mk.2), felt emotions (e.g. for the widow of Nain Lk.7:13, for the two blind men at Jericho Mtt.20:34, over Lazarus Jn.11:33) and, of course, was beaten and killed (all Gospels, Phil.2). The letter to the Hebrews specifically states he shared our nature (Heb.2:14f) except for sin (Heb.4:15).

Jesus as God

That Jesus was also God was revealed in stages in the new Testament:

First in the synoptic Gospels Jesus is presented as a great Teacher (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount Mtt.5-7), Miracle-worker, Proclaimer of the Kingdom (in his parables Mtt.13) but with authority from God (Mtt.11:25f), and as a Prophet (Mtt.21:11). However, Jesus begins to imply his divinity when, in his use of the title **'Son of Man'** to refer to himself, he uses apocalyptic imagery (Mk.13:26-27 and 14:62) to parallel the description in Daniel 7, and especially when he refers to himself as **'the Son'** in the context of God the Father (Mtt.11:25f). Finally, it is the resurrection and ascension accounts that verify his divinity.

Second St. Paul's writings look to the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, not his earthly ministry, to show he is God (Phil.2:6, Ephes.2:19f, Col.1:15ff, 3:2). St. Paul accepts Jesus as both Man and Son of God **"This is the Gospel concerning the Son who, in terms of human nature was born a descendant of David, and who in terms of the Spirit of holiness was designated Son of God by his resurrection"** (Rm.1:4), and is 'Lord' or God (Rm.10:9, 1 Cor.12:3, Phil.2:11).

Third, by the time of St. John's Gospel, further reflection on Jesus' pre-existence as God, that is contained in such texts as Phil.2:6, led to the conclusion that Jesus was linked with God's Wisdom, his Word, and so was intimately connected with God's act of creation as well as redemption **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning"** (Jn.1:1-5, includes the use of 'Theos' or God). John's Gospel also has Jesus clearly claiming his equality with God **"Before Abraham was I am"** (Jn.8:58) and **"The Father and I are one"** (Jn.10:30). The word 'Theos' or God is also applied to Jesus in Heb.1:8.



Early Church Heresies

Christians today automatically accept that Jesus was both God and a man. But there were many in the early Church who considered themselves Christian, or followers of Christ, but either rejected his humanity or his divinity.

Docetists believed that Jesus only came in the spirit and only **appeared human**. This is the view in the apocryphal Gospel of Peter.

Ebionites were Jewish Christians who accepted Jesus was both a great prophet and, indeed, the promised Messiah, but **nothing more**, certainly not God.

Adoptionists believed Christ is only a special man who was **adopted** as God's son at his baptism by the Holy Spirit. An exponent of this type of thought was Paul of Samosata, while an extension of the heresy was created by Sabellius who saw the work of the Son and the Spirit only as **different names** to describe God the Father.

Gnostics who believed in Jesus' power and saw him as a divine being of some kind, but someone without a real human body because they believed flesh is corrupt. Although divine, he was not God, only an intermediary between God and man, much like an angel.



The problem for the early Church was not only to state the 'dogma' of Jesus as being both God and man, but also to explain **how this occurs** (the role of theology). There were two main ideas, or schools of thought, about this:

In Alexandria, Egypt, the approach was to stress Jesus as the Word, as in John's Gospel, who became united to a human body. By starting with the Word, Jesus' divinity and unity were emphasised, but it was difficult to make complete sense of his humanity. This school of thought was known as **Word-Flesh**.

In Antioch, Syria, the approach was reversed and was known as the **Man-God** theology. Its emphasis was on Jesus the Man first, then his divinity. But the way it was expounded seemed to imply that the two natures acted independently of one another. The problem, then, was to show how there was real unity between them.

The Formulation of Truth

The process whereby the deep theological truths about Jesus' nature were better understood came about for **two** reasons: **First**, the acceptance of Christianity by the Emperor Constantine in 312AD led him to bring together all the bishops in the Roman Empire to resolve a particular heresy that threatened to divide the Church, namely the Arian heresy. This first great meeting of bishops was held at Nicaea in 325 AD and as the first General Council of the Church. **Second** it became normal practice thereafter that matters of universal importance for the Church could only