

## How could Jesus be God? (KS3, KS4 and KS5)

I am frequently asked how Jesus could be God. So this is a brief study, under the general title of Leaders and Prophets, about this central belief of Christianity.

Christianity believes that God really came into this real, material world, being fully human whilst never losing His deity: he was not just a prophet. How did Christians ever arrive at such an idea? First of all we can look to the Gospels:

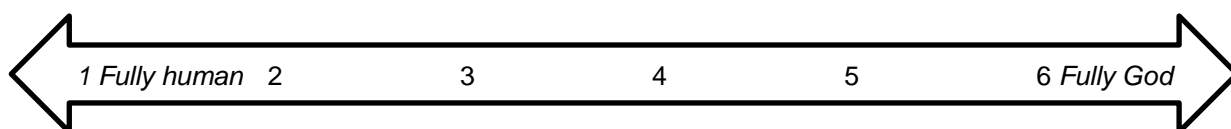
- Jesus taught it: he said 'I and the Father are one' (John 10.30), 'I am in the Father and the Father is in me' (John 14.11)
- Jesus showed it: his many miracles - 'it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you' (Matt. 12.28) – healing the sick and raising the dead
- Jesus proved it by his resurrection

Secondly, after the resurrection, and the reception of the promised Holy Spirit (Jesus had said he himself would send the Spirit) the first Christians had a great deal of thinking to do, rather like this: Jesus must have been the Messiah, fulfilled Old Testament prophecy literally ('Mighty God, everlasting Father' – Isaiah 9.6) and be coming back again as he promised; only if he is really divine can he do all this. And when he said 'before Abraham was, I Am' (John 8.58) he made the most staggering claim: he is that Word of God, that Wisdom of God, that very image of God, through whom everything was made in the first place (Proverbs 3.19) and in whom we are made!

Thirdly, talk of God's personified Wisdom and Word were current in Judaism at the time and, differently, in contemporary Stoicism – the divine Word (Logos) is the guiding principle, the inner formula, of the universe as a whole. So John opens with the claim: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'.

St Paul articulated what this means in his letters to the Philippians and the Colossians: he identifies Jesus as pre-eminent over all creation (Colossians 1.15-20), the means by which creation was made and is sustained, and in whom 'all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell'. He also explains (Philippians 2.4-11) that, in becoming man, Christ divested himself of divine privileges (omnipresence, omnipotence, etc.) and submitted to an ignoble death. So the incarnation is definitely in the Bible.

However, how this came to be understood over the ensuing centuries varied:



Some Christians came to see Jesus as a man adopted by God because of his holiness, 'Son' of God in an exceptional way but not God in the flesh. Conversely some others were so keen on Jesus being God, or God's Word, that the human element of Jesus was considered a mere minor addition, and possibly not really real

anyway (Apollinaris, Sabellianism, Gnostics). Others argued over whether Jesus' soul was divine, human, or both (Nestorius, Origen), and a major heresy argued that though he was divine and human together, God is so immutable and transcendent that the 'god' in Jesus must have been a lesser aspect of divinity, a special creation not eternal and not fully God (Arius). Did Jesus have just one unique nature (Monophysites) or two unmixed (orthodox definition)? Or two, unmixed indeed but actually separate (Cyril)? And so it went on!

It took the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople, in the 4th Century, to reach the most widely accepted definition in the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

Of course all these problems were caused by old views of humans – body and soul – and at a Platonic version of God, for whom matter was untouchable. Christianity had to break both moulds to get this definition of one Lord Jesus Christ, fully God and fully Man, a definition finally fully set out at Chalcedon in AD 451 – see <http://anglicanonline.org/basics/chalcedon.html> and note that even so there are variations within Christendom still. That's the thing about God, He just won't conform to our thinking! We have not got adequate categories to explain the Incarnation, that is clear, but it is the essential central mystery of Christianity.

Divided nature – what he does as God, what he does as man

This resource was written by Richard Coupe, one of RE:ONLINE's Email a Believer team. If your class would like to ask a Christian representative any questions about their beliefs, or to see answers to previously asked questions please visit <http://pof.reonline.org.uk/people-of-faith/christianity/>