

“And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord,  
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of the Virgin Mary . . .”

*Hebrews 1:1-5 (NRSV)*

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,<sup>2</sup>but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.<sup>3</sup>He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,<sup>4</sup>having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

<sup>5</sup>For to which of the angels did God ever say,

“You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you”?

*Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)*

<sup>18</sup>Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. <sup>19</sup>Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. <sup>20</sup>But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. <sup>21</sup>She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” <sup>22</sup>All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

<sup>23</sup>Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”

which means, “God is with us.” <sup>24</sup>When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, <sup>25</sup>but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

*This week we return to the question, “Who is Jesus?” Are we really ready to affirm him as the Messiah, as the Lord, as God himself?*

And so we return to Jesus. Yes, he is the one to whom all roads must, in the end, lead. You’ll recall that a few weeks ago, as part of our *Confronting the Objections* series, we tackled the contentious question, “Is Jesus the Really the Only Way?”<sup>1</sup> As we saw, the answer is an inescapable “yes,” so long as Jesus is who he claimed to be and who, for 2,000 years, almost all Christians have proclaimed him to be. Thus, we shouldn’t be surprised that much of the Apostles’ Creed is focused on Jesus. This is where we will be for three weeks in this seven week series.

Thus, we find ourselves back at the question, “Who is Jesus?” By the time we finish the section of the Apostles’ Creed on Jesus, we’ll have a much better idea of how to answer that question. Some of this will be obvious, some of it probably new to you.

There are six claims about Jesus in the opening section. When we recite the creed, we affirm that we trust all these are true – we believe them, we have faith in their truth.

- There was/is a man named Jesus.
- He is the Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>This was the Weekly Bible Study for January 24, 2010. It can be found on-line at [www.standrewencounter.org](http://www.standrewencounter.org) under “Weekly Bible Studies.” Nearly 400 studies are archived there as pdf files and all can be easily downloaded.

- He is God's only Son.
- He is Lord.
- His birth was conceived by the Holy Spirit.
- He was born to a woman named Mary who had never had sexual relations.

Let's take all six in order.

### *Jesus*

Jesus' name focuses us on this particular man, given the name Yeshua ("Jesus" in English) at his birth. The name means "God Saves" in Hebrew. Elsewhere in the Bible, the name is rendered as "Joshua." More will be said about this man, Jesus, but there will be nothing about where he is from or even about the bulk of his public ministry.

The Apostles' Creed
I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth;
And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

### *Christ*

Though we often treat "Jesus Christ" as if they were the man's first and last names, "Christ" is actually a title. It translates the Greek word, *christos*, which translates the Hebrew *masiah*, which means "the anointed one." Sometimes we take the Hebrew *masiah* more directly through the Greek and into English as "Messiah."

Though Israel and the Law are not mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, this designation of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, brings in the OT story, for the kings of Israel were referred as "anointed ones," *masiahs*. By the time of Jesus there had not been a legitimate king of Israel from David's family for more than 500 years. The Jewish expectation was that God

would raise up such a king and this man would usher in the long awaited kingdom of God, when all the world would see that the Jews had been right all along and would come to worship the one true God.

It is critical in reading the New Testament to understand that the Jews expected the Messiah to be a human and certainly not God himself. "Messiah" and "God" were two different persons, two different categories. Indeed, the fact that Christians claimed those two categories came together in the man named Jesus was a key reason why most Jews rejected Jesus and all the claims about him.

Naming Jesus as "Christ" at this point in the creed is not a claim to his divinity. It *does* claim that this Jesus is the one in whom the OT story culminated and that his coming did usher in the kingdom of God.<sup>2</sup>

### *His only Son*

This is where it begins to get tricky. The Apostles' Creed merely claims that Jesus is God's only son. Naturally, we see in this a clear and definitive statement of Jesus' divinity. But the truth is that designating someone as a "son of God" wasn't necessarily such a claim. Read Genesis 6 to meet some rather far-out "sons of God." By the time of Jesus, it was increasingly believed that a Roman emperor was the son of a god – and some were the only son!

<sup>2</sup>If all this seems new to you, it should make more sense as we go through this series and the upcoming series, *The Big Picture: Connecting the Dots*, that will start in May.

Now, I do think that those who originated the baptismal questions and answers from which this creed sprang intended to make a claim here about Jesus' divinity, but it wasn't long before the church leaders had to come back to this and write something much clearer about Jesus' divinity. Here is the relevant passage from the Nicene Creed, written in 325AD:

“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.”<sup>3</sup>

You can see my point. No one could possibly misread the claim in the Nicene Creed that, yes, Jesus is God and the phrase “his only Son” means just that.

### *Our Lord*

A “lord” is a master, aka the boss. And that is exactly the claim for Jesus. In a sense, it speaks to his function. It too is not directly a claim to Jesus' divinity, to equating him with God. It is a term of exaltation, which refers to God raising Jesus in rank and power, lifting him up above all other persons. As will be made clear a bit later in the Apostles' Creed, Jesus is exalted to be Lord and Judge, to “sit at the right hand of God,” which is a further expression of exaltation, as is the affirmation of Jesus' “ascension.”

All this speaks less to Jesus' divinity than to his authority. The claim is that Jesus is in charge and the claim extends to all persons whether they acknowledge Jesus as Lord or not. The fact that Barack Obama is my president does not depend on my agreement or even knowledge. Likewise, Jesus is Lord of every person on the planet, whether they've heard of him or not.

We need to hear the political challenge in claiming that Jesus is Lord. In the Roman Empire, which stretched from the British Isles to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, everyone was under the rule, the authority, of Caesar. He called the shots, determining even who lived and who died. Caesar was Lord. That's just how it was. There can be only one Lord above all lords and that was Caesar. He was the king of kings.

But the Christians claimed that Jesus was Lord, that he was the one who commanded their ultimate allegiance. . . . And so do we. Every time we stand to say the creed, we affirm that Jesus is not only our Lord, our master, we claim that he is the Lord of everyone. And as Lord, Jesus shares in the honor that is God's and is to be obeyed as God is to be obeyed. . . . So much in one little word!

### *Conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary*

I combined this week's final two phrases for a simple reason – they are best seen as two sides of a single coin – and that coin is Jesus. These two statements are claims that Jesus is divine (“conceived by the Holy Spirit”) and human (“born of the Virgin Mary”). Truly God and truly human.

These claims proved to be some of the most contentious among Christians. Some claimed that Jesus was the person closest to God, even the most God-like, but not really and truly God. Others claimed that he only appeared to be human, but wasn't really, truly human like you and me.

These controversies raged across the Christian communities in the early centuries and gave rise to the great creeds, for such questions lie at the heart of our beliefs about the Trinitarian nature of God. If Jesus is truly God, then aren't there two Gods, but then

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<sup>3</sup>From the UMC hymnal. “Begotten” isn't a word we use much more anymore. Human children are begotten of human parents. Puppies are begotten of canine parents. We beget our own kind. Thus, to call Jesus God's only begotten Son is to make clear that he uniquely shares God's DNA, to use an analogy.

again, aren't we monotheistic – and so on. You can imagine the late night discussions and mental headaches that arose from such questions.

As noted before, the Apostles' Creed is so brief that early church leaders had to write more. On p. 3 above, I printed the text of the Nicene Creed that sets forth Jesus' full and undiminished divinity. Here is how that creed goes on to set forth Jesus' full and undiminished humanity:

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 became truly human.<sup>4</sup>

### *Fully God and fully human?*

Try to get your brain around that for a minute. It isn't surprising that the Christian community has always had to work through well-meaning but misguided attempts to explain how Jesus could be really, truly God and really, truly human at the same time. How could one person have two natures, divine and human?

As I've mentioned briefly, one proposed solution was to deny that Jesus was truly God. Another was to deny that Jesus was truly human. Great councils of the church met to explain why these are serious errors that undercut the Gospel and to clarify what Christians do mean.

Here are a few more ways we can get this wrong:

- Here, the mystery is solved by seeing Jesus as having only one, unique nature, a hybrid of sorts – the unique “God-man.” Of course, then he wouldn't be truly God or truly human! It would be as if Jesus was a third “species.”
- Another way is to suggest that Jesus had a truly human body, but lacked a human rational mind or soul, instead being filled with the divine Logos/Word. Jesus then becomes “God in a bod,” again losing his true humanity. There is much more to being human than this bag of blood and bones.
- Or perhaps Jesus is a perfect “moral union,” much like persons in a perfect marriage. One nature doing the “God stuff” and one nature doing the “human stuff.” Of course, he is then only half God and half human. For good reason, the church councils insisted that Jesus' two natures are inseparable – not a right and left or top and bottom.
- Or still another choice . . . “Jesus' humanity was like a drop of wine in an ocean of his divinity.” But then what remains of Jesus' humanity? How can we speak of a “drop of humanity” in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was fully and completely human. He was the most human, human!

It would be a mistake to see all this as so much pointless speculation. Christians have always known that answering the question, “Who is Jesus?” lies at the very heart of the Gospel. Christians of all stripes have wrestled with Scripture, trying to make sense of what is revealed there about Jesus. Yes, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). And yes, Jesus was born to a young woman from a small village in Galilee. The creed writers didn't invent anything, they simply brought together the core teachings and practices of the early church. Their language expressed, in increasingly precise terms, those teachings and practices.

The great Christian confessions, including the UMC statement of faith, uphold two inseparable natures, divine & human, in one person, Jesus – sort of two “whats” and

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<sup>4</sup>You can see that the vocabulary of theologians begins to make its appearance; in this case, “incarnate,” which means “in the flesh.” Jesus is God incarnate, God in the flesh.

one “who.”<sup>5</sup> How can this be? Trying too hard to answer that question has led inevitably to distortions of Jesus and of the Gospel.

The great cloud of witnesses to the Good News urges us to stay true to the full revelation of Scripture and avoid some understandable mistakes: don’t deny the full and true divinity and humanity of Jesus; don’t divide him into two persons; don’t make him into some hybrid “God-man.” Instead, embrace and proclaim the Jesus-Who-Is, not a Jesus of our own making, even if we can’t penetrate all the mysteries of God.

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In this week’s section of the Apostles’ Creed, six truth claims are made about Jesus. For each of the six, discuss and reflect on the implications to the world and to yourself if it isn’t true.

1. What if Jesus had not been born? Where would we be in the biblical story? Try to imagine the course of human history if there had been no Jesus.
2. What if Jesus wasn’t the long-awaited Jesus Messiah? What of God’s promise of rescue was still unkept?
3. What if Jesus isn’t really God’s *only* Son? What if Jesus was only one of many?
4. What if Jesus isn’t really Lord? Who would have ultimate authority over you? Anyone? Anything? What if Jesus was Lord only over his own followers? How would that change the Good News?
5. What if Jesus isn’t really God? Why do you think the early church fought so hard to protect the claim of his genuine divinity? What happens to the Good News if Jesus isn’t really and truly and fully God?
6. What if Jesus isn’t really human? Why is this claim so important to the Good News? What does this claim say about you and me?

### Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p><b>Monday, Romans 1:1-7</b> How would you summarize what Paul says about Jesus in the opening verses of this letter?</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Mark 11:1-19</b> Everything here is supposed to convey that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah/King.</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, John 1:1-18</b> Can we read this too often? This is John’s unequivocal statement of Jesus’ divinity.</p>	<p><b>Thursday, 1 Peter 1:1-2</b> Do you see the Trinitarian nature of Paul’s salutation?</p>
<p><b>Friday, Philippians 2:5-8</b> What do you think is meant by “though he was in the form of God . . . emptied himself”?</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>

<sup>5</sup>Using “what/nature” and “who/person,” Jesus is two “whats” (two natures, human and divine) and one “who” (Jesus). We can speak of the Trinity as one “what” (a single divine nature) and three “whos” (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

# Encounter

Wednesday evenings at 6:45 In Wesley Hall  
*a time for fellowship, worship, and learning*

## ***The Cosmic, Crucified Christ: a study in Colossians*** **March 3: A Cosmic Christ?**

Who is Jesus? Really? This question lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Paul envisions Jesus in a way that can be nearly incomprehensible. What does it really mean to call Jesus "cosmic?" And what does a cosmic Christ mean for us? Join us as we take a close look at Colossians 1:13-23.

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## ***The Seven Faith Tribes: Religion in America, 2010***

Continues this Sunday, Feb 28, in Scott's 11:00 class:  
**Mormons in America**

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## ***Heresy: Why it matters what Christians believe***

A new series in Scott's class at 11am on Sunday  
Beginning Sunday March 7

### Sermon Notes

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