

Teachings and beliefs about Jesus

Focus

This topic examines the diversity of beliefs about Jesus in the early Church and attempts by the Church to clarify orthodox belief.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this topic, you should:

- understand how some early Christian beliefs came to be seen as heresies, that is, as wrong or erroneous beliefs
- appreciate that these erroneous beliefs were seen as threats to the survival of Christianity
- be able to identify credal statements rebutting these erroneous beliefs

Introduction

What is something that you really **believe** to be true? It might be a belief that Pink is a better singer than Lady Gaga or that the Broncos will win the next rugby league grand final or that Emerald is a great place to live. (Whatever it is, keep it simple!)

Now ask yourself **why** you believe that and why not all people will share your belief (even if you are convinced that it is true!). Lastly, see if you can name three people who would **agree** with you and three who would **disagree** with you.

Hopefully this has made you think a bit about beliefs. You may have thought of questions such as, 'Is what I believe **really** true?' or 'If my belief is true, why doesn't everyone believe it?' or 'Have I **always** believed this?'

These are the sorts of questions that confronted the early churches. In particular they had to decide what they believed about **Jesus**. This, as we shall see, was not a simple process.

Here are five statements about Jesus. I ask you to respond to each statement by putting a tick in the appropriate box.

Statement	Certainly true	May be true	Probably not true	Certainly not true
Jesus wasn't worried about dying because he knew he was God.				
Sometimes Jesus got sick.				
When young, Jesus never got into trouble from his parents.				
Jesus could work miracles because he was God.				
Jesus' death proves he is human and his resurrection proves he is God.				

The decisions that you had to make about which box to tick are similar to some of the decisions that the earliest churches tried to make about Jesus. Different people held different opinions about Jesus' nature. Some believed that Jesus was not fully human. This belief was called **docetism**. We will now have a look at docetism in some detail.

Docetism: One end of the spectrum

Docetism is the belief that Jesus was **divine** but not human; that is, Jesus did not have a real body: he only seemed to be a human person. The word comes from a Greek word *dokein* which means 'to seem, to appear'. A person who holds such a view is called a docetist.

Docetism seems to have made an early appearance in the church and was certainly established before the final editing of John's Gospel at the end of

the first century. This claim can be made because in that gospel we find incidents that appear to have been put into the account specifically to rebut the docetist belief. One example of such an incident is found in John's account of the **crucifixion** where it is mentioned that when a Roman soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear, blood and water flowed out (Jn 19:34). It is very difficult to get real blood from what only seems to be a body!

Some of the early debates about Jesus' humanity might seem **trivial** to us. There was, for example, discussion about whether or not Jesus blinked! Some said that he did because all humans need to blink to lubricate their eyeballs. Some docetists said Jesus did not blink because he did not have a real body, only an appearance of a body (like a ghost) and therefore did not have to lubricate his eyeballs. Still other docetists said that Jesus did not have to blink because he did not have a real body, but chose to blink so as not to confuse his followers. There was also disagreement about whether or not Jesus would have cast a shadow. You should be able to work out the three main positions on this issue.

As I said, all of this might seem extremely trivial, and there is no doubt that sometimes the debate did degenerate into the pursuit of the trivial. However, there were some very important **implications** of docetist beliefs.

Docetist beliefs were seen as **threats** to Christian teachings about salvation and baptism. If the docetist belief was true, then Jesus (divine but not human) could not die a real human death, and therefore could not rise from the dead. Yet Christians believed that **salvation** came about through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul had told the church in Rome, 'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom 6:3-4). Here was a very real dilemma! If the docetists were correct, Paul's teaching about the importance of baptism could not possibly be valid.

Docetism was also a threat to Christian understandings of **eucharist**. The early Christian churches, as we know from Paul's letters and the synoptic gospels, celebrated a meal in which they declared that through the power of the Spirit the bread and wine became the body and blood of Jesus. But if the docetists were right, then this would be an impossibility as Jesus had no body and no blood.

The leader of the Christian community in Antioch around 100 CE was a man named **Ignatius**. During a time of persecution Ignatius was arrested and then taken to Rome where he was eventually put on trial and

executed. Ignatius' journey from Antioch to Rome took about two years, and he wrote letters to the Christian communities that he encountered along the way. Ignatius' letter to the Christians at Smyrna on the west coast of Turkey indicates that docetist beliefs were fairly widespread by 105 CE.

In that letter Ignatius wrote:

And suffer He [Jesus] did, verily and indeed; just as he did verily and indeed raise Himself again. His Passion was no unreal illusion, as some skeptics aver who are all unreality themselves. The fate of those wretches will match their belief, for one day they will similarly become phantoms without substance themselves.

For my part I know that He was in the actual human flesh, even after his resurrection. ... Moreover, He ate and drank with them after He was risen, like any natural man, though even then He and the Father were spiritually one.

... After all, if everything our Lord did was only illusion, then these chains of mine must be illusory too! Also, to what end have I given myself up to perish by fire or sword or savage beasts? Simply because when I am close to the sword I am close to God, and when I am surrounded by the lions I am surrounded by God. But it is only in the name of Jesus Christ, and for the sake of sharing His sufferings, that I could face all this; for He, the perfect Man, gives me strength to do so. (*Ad Smyr 2-4*)
(Staniforth, 1984, pp. 119-120)

Notice here that Ignatius has identified a further problem with docetist beliefs. The early Christians as far back as Paul had understood persecution and martyrdom to mean that they were sharing in the suffering and death of Jesus so as to share in his resurrection. But, if Jesus was not fully human, then one could not share in his **suffering** and death because Jesus did not really suffer or die.

I hope that you can now see that there was a lot more to docetism than questions about the reality of Jesus' blinking or casting a shadow. Docetism posed a threat to the beliefs and rituals of the earliest Christians and to how they understood the persecutions they were undergoing. In short, everything they held as important was under attack.

Adoptionism: The other end of the spectrum

Docetists claimed that Jesus was divine but not fully human. At the opposite end of a range of views, a belief known as 'adoptionism' developed. It was first put forward formally by a group of Jewish Christians known as Ebionites around the end of the second century, but the belief had been held much earlier than this. Very simply, adoptionism asserted that Jesus was **human** but not really divine. Adoptionists

thought that Jesus was just a human being whom God 'adopted' as a special son and to whom God gave special attributes (such as resurrection) not given to everyone. Another form of adoptionism claimed that Jesus was a human being who became God as a result of the resurrection.

Adoptionists like the docetists posed a **threat** to the early churches. The earliest Christians had come to believe that God became incarnate (human) in Jesus so as to save us. But if, as the adoptionists claimed, the incarnation did not occur (Jesus was not really God to begin with), then people could not be saved.

Ignatius seems to have clashed with adoptionists as well as with the docetists. In his letter to the church at Antioch, Ignatius writes or perhaps quotes from an early hymn:

Very Flesh, yet Spirit too;
Uncreated, and yet born;
God-and-Man in one agreed,
Fruit of God and Mary's seed;
At once impassible and torn
By pain and suffering here below:
Jesus Christ, whom as our Lord we know.
(*Ad Antioch 7*)
(Staniforth, 1984, pp. 77-78)

Notice here how Ignatius is trying to state that Jesus is **fully** human and fully divine. This is what he means when he says 'At once impassible and torn'. Impassible means to be incapable of suffering, and it was believed that God being all-powerful and unchangeable could not suffer. Humans are capable of being 'torn by pain and suffering'. So here we have Ignatius attempting to refute both docetism and early adoptionism by saying that Jesus is divine ('impassible) **and** human ('torn").

Irenaeus of Lyons who died around the year 200 CE argued strongly against the later adoptionists and Ebionites. Irenaeus claimed that if Jesus were not 'of God' he could not have been the saviour

Irenaeus wrote an important work called *Against the heresies* around 180-185 CE. In part of this work he makes the following statement:

Now it has been clearly demonstrated that the Word which exists from the beginning with God, by whom all things were made, who was also present with the race of men [sic] at all times, this Word has in these last times, according to the time appointed by the Father, been united to his own workmanship and has been made passible man. Therefore we can set aside the objection of them that say, 'If he was born at that time it follows that Christ did not exist before then.' For we have shown that the Son of God did not then begin to exist since he existed with the Father always; but when he was incarnate and made man, he recapitulated [summed up] in himself the long line of the human race, procuring for us salvation thus summarily, so

that what we had lost in Adam, that is, the being in the image and likeness of God, that we should regain in Christ Jesus. (*Adv. haer.* III.xviii)
(Bettenson, 1967, pp. 29-30)

In this extract from *Against the heresies* Irenaeus rebuts the adoptionist position by claiming that the Word (Christ) could not be 'adopted' since Jesus had **always existed** with God (hence Jesus was divine).

The search for the middle path

By the time of Irenaeus, differences of beliefs, especially about Jesus, were many and they were seen as a threat to the survival of Christianity. It seemed imperative for a **middle path** about the divinity/humanity of Jesus to be found.

The early church tried to achieve this 'middle path' in three ways:

1. by centralising **authority**
2. by developing a **canon** of approved books for the Christian Scriptures
3. by applying what came to be known as the '**Rule of Faith**'.

You will find this threefold process explained in this extract from Henry Chadwick's book *The early Church*. Please take the time to read it now.

... the central issue was that of Authority. What was the true interpretation of the Old and New Testaments? Who now occupied the teaching chairs of the apostles and could give clear guidance to bewildered believers? Where could one find reliable evidence of what the apostles had really taught?

Ignatius of Antioch sought to answer the problem of centrifugal movements by insisting upon the local bishop as the focus of unity; without him the life-giving sacraments could not be administered. He gave this, so to speak, a vertical justification by claiming that the bishop is God's representative on earth, and earthly counterpart corresponding to the heavenly Monarch, so that 'we ought to regard the bishop as the Lord himself.'

A more permanent justification of ministerial authority came from Rome. About the end of the first century there was a revolution in the Corinthian Church which deposed its old clergy and put new men in their place. In deep fraternal concern a formal and successful letter of protest was sent by the Roman Church, composed by Clement, probably the presiding presbyter or bishop of the Church. The letter, which was written with extreme care and solemnity and claimed to be inspired, besought the Corinthians to preserve ordered unity and to rectify the scandal caused by deposing members of the sacred order who stand in due succession from the apostles, even if not actually ordained by apostles, and who have 'blamelessly offered the gifts' in the holy rite of the eucharist.

At Corinth Clement found no doctrinal deviation, but in this idea of a succession from the apostles there was a weapon capable of being developed in the subsequent conflicts with Gnosticism. Against any heretical claim to possess secret traditions of what Jesus had told the apostles in the forty days after the resurrection, there was the clear argument that the apostles Peter and Paul could not have failed to impart such doctrines to

those whom they had set over the churches, and that by the line of accredited teachers in those churches of apostolic foundation no such heretical notions had been transmitted. The succession argument carried the implication that the teaching given by the contemporary bishop of, say, Rome or Antioch was in all respects identical with that of the apostles. This was important, for two reasons. In the first place, the faithful were thereby in some sense assured that revelation was not only knowable by a retrospective historical knowledge derived from either the apostles' occasional writings or anecdotal gossip, but had in the bishop a contemporary authority, able and authorized to speak God's word in the present. In the second place, it enabled the defenders of orthodoxy, especially Irenaeus of Lyons, to oppose to the proliferating Gnostic sects, none of which agreed with one another and all of which were continually modifying their views, the concept of the monolithic church, universally extended in space and with unbroken continuity in time, unanimous in its possession of an immutable revelation.

The second weapon of the orthodox defence was the gradual formation of the New Testament canon. In the first century the Christian Bible had simply been the Old Testament. Authority resided in this scripture and in the words of the Lord, which long circulated in oral tradition, as is apparent in the letter of Clement to the Corinthians. The authoritative standing of this oral tradition continued to be high even after the sayings and doings of the Lord had been written down in the 'gospel' according to Mark, Luke, Matthew, or John. Even as late as the time of Irenaeus (c.185-90) this oral tradition of the words of the Lord was regarded as an authority that had not yet been wholly merged with the written gospels. But the controversy with Marcion and the Gnostics gave a sharp impetus to the control of authentic tradition which a written document possessed, and which oral transmission did not. Justin Martyr, who probably knew all the four canonical gospels, seems to have used Matthew, Mark and Luke in a gospel harmony, to which his pupil Tatian added St John to form his *Diatessaron*. The synoptic gospels seem to have achieved general acceptance rather earlier than St John's gospel, the authority of which was disputed by some. The existence of four versions of the gospels was a troublesome puzzle in itself. Marcion accepted only one. The Valentinians accepted not only the well known four but many additional documents professing to contain traditions of the secret sayings of Jesus, like the *Gospel of Thomas* recently recovered from the sands of Egypt. Irenaeus ingeniously vindicated the fourfold gospel on numerological principles. Four, he urged, was a sacred number corresponding to the four winds, or the four faces of the cherubim in Ezekiel and the Johannine Apocalypse with faces representing an ox, a calf, a man, and an eagle. But apart from accepted use in church lectionaries the prime criterion was apostolicity. Mark and Luke were set beside Matthew and John as being sanctioned by Peter and Paul respectively.

The Gospel of John caused some controversy because of its evidently discrepant account compared with the other three Gospels, but it was skillfully defended by Irenaeus as being the work of John son of Zebedee, to whom he also ascribed the Revelation.

The strict application of the criterion of apostolicity in Rome led to the exclusion from the western new Testament of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which Roman tradition knew to be non-Pauline, and it was only readmitted in the West more than 200 years later on the authority of the eastern churches. It also led to the eventual exclusion of writings like the *Shepherd of Hermas* and the epistle of Clement to the Corinthians which did not claim to be apostolic. A fragment giving the New Testament canon probably of Rome about 200 (the 'Muratorian canon') explains that the Shepherd is good

private reading, but as its author was neither apostle nor prophet but a recent writer it is disqualified for admission to the lectionary. Naturally enough, orthodoxy and apostolicity were equated. This made it difficult to detect the non-apostolic authorship of orthodox documents like the second epistle of Peter (which, nevertheless, was debated for a long time). Other disputed and eventually successful documents were the revelation of John, the epistles of James and Jude, and the second and third epistles of John. Likewise disputed but unsuccessful candidates on the orthodox side were the Acts of Paul and Thecla and the Apocalypse of Peter. Sometimes modern writers wonder at the disagreements. The truly astonishing thing is that so great a measure of agreement was reached so quickly.

The third and last weapon against heresy was the 'Rule of Faith', a title used by Irenaeus and Tertullian to mean a short summary of the main revelatory events of the redemptive process. Irenaeus declares that the whole Church believes 'in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and the seas and all that is therein, and in one Christ Jesus the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation, and in the Holy Spirit who through the prophets preached the dispensations and the comings and the virgin birth and the passion, and the rising from the dead and the assumption into heaven in his flesh of our beloved Lord Jesus Christ, and his coming from heaven in the glory of the Father ... to raise up all flesh.' The crux of this summary for polemical purposes lies in its assertion of the unity of the divine plan from Old Testament to New, a theme which Irenaeus developed in his doctrine of 'recapitulation' or the correspondence between Adam and Christ. The heretics did not believe the supreme God to be maker of heaven and earth and, with their low valuation of the Old Testament, were not interested in the fulfillment of prophecy.

This rule (Irenaeus claimed) is what the bishops teach now and therefore comes down from the apostles. In content it is akin to the formulas used in the questions put to candidates for baptism and is simply the credal pattern based on the New Testament. Tertullian treated it as independent of Scripture because, in argument with the heretics, it was better defence than the Bible, over the interpretation of which one can argue long with the sole effect of bewildering simple folk who want a short and direct answer. Tertullian argued that the Bible is often difficult to interpret. Obscure passages must be interpreted by those which are plain. Moreover, the Bible is old. To appeal to the Rule of Faith is to appeal to what is now being taught by the churches of apostolic foundation. So Tertullian, following Irenaeus before him but going considerably further, seems here to have distinguished between Scripture and Tradition almost as if they were distinct sources of revelation. Nevertheless, Tertullian was also well aware that the Rule of faith is derived from Scripture: for him to say that the Rule is the key for interpreting the Bible is no different from saying that obscure passages must be interpreted by the clear. The argument is of course circular: the tradition of Church teaching must be proved orthodox by the biblical revelation; yet doubtful books are admitted to the New Testament canon because they are orthodox by the standards of Church tradition, and only the tradition can ensure that the interpretation of Scripture is sound.

(Chadwick, 1987, pp. 41-45)

You will see in this reading a reference to '**gnosticism**'. This was another belief system in early Christianity. It was a fusion of Persian, Jewish and Christian ideas. Essentially it taught that Jesus was a 'spark of the divine' come to earth in human form (but not in real humanity). Other people could capture a spark of divinity and thus acquire special knowledge

(*gnosis*) of God. The few people who had this **secret** knowledge were known as *pneumatics* which means 'spirit-filled'. Pneumatics could be men or women and generally rose to positions of leadership in the churches that followed the gnostic path.

Gnostics claimed that the appointed bishops were not pneumatics and thus had no authority. Irenaeus condemned their ideas in *Against the heresies*. In doing so he condemned everything about gnosticism including their tradition of having both women and men in church leadership. The Catholic Church today is still experiencing the effects of Irenaeus' total condemnation of gnosticism.

We have learned much about gnosticism in recent years, because in 1945 a large number of **scrolls** of gnostic scriptures—dating back to the early fourth century CE—were discovered in a cave near Nag Hammadi in Egypt by some men and a boy who were on their way to commit a murder! Fortunately they were so excited by their discovery that they never got around to committing the planned murder.

The threefold process described by Chadwick (1967) was not enough to impose one way of theological thinking, so the practice of holding **Church Councils** began. These were gatherings of bishops and others at which statements were issued about what was regarded as 'orthodox' (correct) belief and teaching. Most of these Councils were reactions to new ideas and resulted in the formulation of credal statements, that is, statements about what all Christians were expected to believe.

In the first five centuries of the church's life there were a number of Councils. The four most important and their main teachings are as follows (McBrien, 1994, p. 489):

Date	Council	Main teaching
325	Nicaea	Jesus is <i>homoousios</i> , of the same substance, with the Father, 'true God from true God'.
381	Constantinople	Jesus had a human soul.
431	Ephesus	In Christ there is only one divine person. Mary is the Mother of God.
451	Chalcedon	In Christ there are two natures, human and divine, united hypostatically in one

		divine person, without confusion, change, division or separation.
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Nicaea was a response to Arianism which taught a form of adoptionism, that Jesus was the greatest of God's creations. The Council of **Constantinople** responded to two beliefs. Some theologians from Antioch held that the Word became a specific human being but did not have a human soul while some from Alexandria in Egypt taught that the Word became humanity, but not a specific person. The Alexandrians, like the Antiochenes, also claimed that therefore Jesus could not have had a human soul.

The Council of **Ephesus** was quite an exciting event with Christians from opposing theological camps rioting in the streets and doing battle over the teachings of a theologian called Arius. Arius said that in Christ there were two persons, a human person and a divine person, and that Mary was the mother of the human person but had no relationship to the divine person. The Council declared that there was only one person in Christ, a divine person, and in this sense Mary could be said to be **Mother of God**.

One of the results of this Council was that some theologians then said that because Christ was a divine person he could have only a divine nature. We are now back at docetism in a new form known as **Monophysitism**. As a result of this, the Council of **Chalcedon** made its declaration that in the one divine person there are two distinct natures. The Council of Chalcedon also ratified a creed written nearly one hundred years previously. We know this creed as the **Nicene Creed**:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

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, one in
Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he was born of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.
For our sake he was crucified
under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered, died, and was buried.

On the third day he rose again
in fulfillment of the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right
hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the
Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son
he is worshipped and glorified
He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one
baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen

I have underlined the phrases that specifically refer to Jesus. Some of these phrases were written to contradict docetist ideas while others challenged adoptionist beliefs.

Complete the table below in which you decide which phrases about Jesus in the creed are refuting docetism or adoptionism. I have completed one example for you.

Phrase	Against Docetism (D) or Adoptionism (A)	Reason for choice
God from God	A	Says that Jesus did not become God, but always was God
one in being with the Father		
Through him all things were made		
he was born of the Virgin Mary		

he suffered, died and was buried		
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Conclusion

I hope that you have enjoyed our short journey into the world of the early Christian churches, and that you have come to appreciate the complexity of those early centuries when Christians earnestly tried to come to an understanding of who Jesus really was. Moreover, you should now have an awareness of why it was deemed necessary to formulate Christian beliefs in dogmatic credal statements to be upheld by all Christians.

When we as teachers of Religion present Jesus to our students we need to be careful that we do not fall into docetism or adoptionism. Too much emphasis on Jesus as a miracle worker with super-human powers can lead to a form of docetism in which Jesus is seen as something other than human. Too much emphasis on Jesus as a Galilean peasant with a message of social justice can result in Jesus being regarded merely as an outstanding human being. This is a form of adoptionism. As teachers we need to achieve the balance.

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