

## Praise for *Confessing Jesus*

Socrates faced death, saying, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” Molly Lackey helps us live life (as well as face death) by examining ourselves in light of who Christ is and what He has done for us. Plumbing the central truths of Scripture in eminently accessible fashion, she leads her readers to know themselves as God knows them in Christ. She faithfully teaches that life examined in light of Christ is worth living now and for eternity.

—**Rev. Dr. Kevin Golden**, associate professor of exegetical theology,  
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Catechesis in the Church can sometimes be reduced to making sure a person can define the “big words” we use on Sundays, but in our world of chaos and confusion, Molly very simply puts forward the truth of your identity as being found in Jesus and in Him alone. Who is Jesus and why does His work matter, you ask? *Confessing Jesus* does exactly that: it candidly confesses Jesus—His life, death, and resurrection—and grounds your life and hope in Him. With discussion questions at the end of each chapter, *Confessing Jesus* is helpful for individual study or groups.

—**Rev. John Bussman**, senior pastor, St. Paul’s Lutheran Church and  
School, Cullman, AL

Whether you’ve been Lutheran for one year, eighty years, or anywhere in between, Molly presents our core theology of “Jesus for you” in an engaging, relatable, and honest way. She retells our story of salvation with toe-holds for every reader,

with a beautifully clear exposition of Law and Gospel. In our rapidly changing culture and sometimes overwhelmingly confusing world, Molly's words about who we are in Christ and His creation bring a delightful and introspective pause in order to refocus on what Christ has done for us, why that's a big deal, and how we can rest in Him.

—**Sarah Gulseth**, digital media specialist, KFYO Radio

A lot of energy is being spent in our current culture to know one's identity. Things become even more problematic when individuals turn inward for answers. This is why Mrs. Lackey's book, *Confessing Jesus*, is so incredibly pertinent, timely, and helpful. With a refreshing writing style, combined with a deep knowledge of Scripture, culture, and history, Mrs. Lackey turns a searching culture outward to the who, what, where, when, and why of Jesus. But how does confessing Jesus address identity? Mrs. Lackey wonderfully answers this in the pages of *Confessing Jesus*, saying, "To know ourselves, we must first know Christ." Indeed, Mrs. Lackey's gem of a book gets all of us to the core of our identity—hearing and knowing how Jesus defines us.

—**Rev. Dr. Matthew Richard**, pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Minot, ND, and author of *Will the Real Jesus Please Stand Up? 12 False Christs* and *Minute Messages: Gospel-Filled Devotions for Every Occasion*.



# CONFESSING JESUS

The Heart of Being a Lutheran

MOLLY LACKEY



Published by Concordia Publishing House  
3558 S. Jefferson Avenue, St. Louis, MO 63118-3968  
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, this book would not have been possible without my wonderful husband, Jonathan. Thank you for putting up with the endless “Can I bounce an idea off you?” conversations, for encouraging me when I was in the trenches, and for being the spiritual head and anchor of our little family. Thank you for your prayers and your words of comfort, especially during the difficult task of writing a first book. I love you and am so grateful for you.

No author is an island, and no book gets published without a host of people on the publishing side of things. My good friends at Concordia Publishing House have been utterly indispensable in the creation of this book. From my first brainstorming sessions to the final proofread, you have all been a Godsend. Thank you especially to Laura Lane, Wayne Palmer, Holli Rolfes, Anna Johnson, Denise Prange, and Jess Paterik.

Finally, I would like to give thanks to God for the life and work of Paul McCain, publisher and executive editor at CPH. I got to know Paul during my internship at CPH in the summer of 2019, and I treasure in my heart all those trips to his office to talk about Reformation history, theology, life as a Southern Lutheran,

books I need to read, forgotten corners of Luther's *Table Talks*, and any and everything else. We continued a lively email correspondence afterward, and he was deeply encouraging and helpful in the early stages of this book's pitching and planning. After Paul's unexpected death in November 2020, I have lost count of how many times I have wanted to email him some Luther tidbit I found online or ask his advice on writing and on life. But I know that Paul's and my Redeemer lives, and I take great comfort in knowing that he rests in the arms of our Lord, who will raise him and all the faithful on the Last Day. I'm looking forward to it.

SOLI DEO GLORIA.







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# INTRODUCTION

Do you know who you are?

That probably sounds like a weird question. Well, duh, I'm me! Sure. We all carry around a mental sack of facts that we pull out when we meet new people: name, hometown, marital status, vocation, occupation, kids, pets, hobbies, whatever. But that's not really who we *are*, is it? You're a lot more than where you live and what you do on weekdays. Unfortunately, our post-modern culture hasn't helped matters by preaching that you're defined by what you want; now, it seems like we're all defined by who we want in the White House, by who we want as a sexual partner, or by what we want—wealth, beauty, status, acceptance. With so many things by which to define ourselves, we seem to know who we actually are less and less and less.

Do you know who you are? A lot of people nowadays don't. Young and old alike are struggling with the constant shifting of culture, society, and even our own personalities. We can't define ourselves from within ourselves because the very nature of our lives means that we are always changing—growing up, growing old, changing where we live, changing where we work, changing our minds. Everything is always changing inside of us, so we

need to look outside of ourselves to something that doesn't change in order to define ourselves. But where do we go? What do we need?


***Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia!***

*(LSB, p. 156, from John 6:68)*

We turn to Jesus to find out who we are. Maybe that seems a little weird. We sometimes have a hard time connecting what we do in worship on Sundays—let alone complicated beliefs about who God is and the nature of salvation—with our “normal” lives and our “real life” selves. Sometimes pastors will talk about “Sunday morning disconnect,” where people act one way at church and a completely different way the rest of the week. While this is a very real problem—we should strive to honor God and love our neighbor every day of the week, not just for an hour on Sunday morning—sometimes the problem is less open and obvious than immoral or unhelpful behaviors. Sometimes the problem is that we’ve become a patchwork of little identities, all warring for our full attention, our full devotion, our full selves. Maybe our external behaviors seem consistent and our friends and family think that we have it all together, but inside we’re a jumbled mess. Maybe we do all the “right” things, but we don’t know who we really are.

Jesus Christ defines who we really are. This is a core truth of our Christian faith.

**Our status before the almighty God in eternity is defined by Jesus, and our own awareness of**



**ourselves is defined by how we think about Jesus.  
In order to know ourselves, we must first know  
Christ.**

But like so many things in our postmodern world, it can feel like we have to figure out how to know Christ all on our own. That's a daunting task, to be sure. Maybe we have some success—or maybe (and usually) not—but it always feels like Jesus is a little *blurry*, far off, unreal, not well defined. We know some bits and pieces about Jesus, some cliché slogans or abstract terms, or maybe we just have some vague feelings, but they don't really all fit together. Jesus still feels far off and flat, like a character in an old, half-forgotten fable, or a distant object seen without much-needed glasses. As a result, we feel the same way about ourselves. We know a lot about ourselves—our interests, hobbies, skills, background, family tree—but somehow, we feel like we're missing something. We don't know Jesus, and so we don't know ourselves.

Thankfully, we don't have to figure out who Jesus is and why He matters alone. The title of this book, *Confessing Jesus*, attests to this. The word *confess* comes from the Latin verb *confiteor*, which means “to say together” or “to say completely.” You see, if we try to talk about Jesus on our own, we always end up with an incomplete picture, a jigsaw puzzle with missing pieces. We put distance between ourselves and Christ and feel like strangers in our own souls because we can't possibly figure out the answers on our own. But when we speak about Jesus *together*, examining what the Church together has drawn from the Bible

and taught about Jesus for the past two thousand or so years, we can also speak about Jesus *completely*, seeing a complete picture of Jesus—or, at least, as complete a picture as we can arrive at as frail, imperfect humans.

This desire to speak together about Jesus was also the driving motivation for Martin Luther behind the Protestant Reformation. Luther believed that inaccurate, nonscriptural teachings and practices had accumulated within the church of his day. It was his desire to go back to the basics, back to who Jesus is and what He has done for us, in hopes of getting a clearer picture of Jesus—and of himself.

Like a lot of people today, Luther was plagued by feelings of immense guilt, feelings that he couldn't seem to assuage no matter how much he tried to prove to himself and to others that he was a good person. But from the depths of his anxiety, fear, and guilt, he plunged back into the Scriptures, where he found Christ—and found out what Christ actually thought about him.

It was this clear, consoling image of Christ that drew me to the Lutheran faith. Like Luther, I had felt immense guilt—guilt that was unrelenting even in the face of my attempts to show my own goodness—and a sense that I didn't really know Jesus or myself. This book mirrors my own path from a confused understanding of Jesus to a bold confession of Christ, passed down to me by faithful pastors and teachers who opened the Word of God to me.

Maybe you've felt this way too. Sometimes, the bustle and changes of life can overtake or distract us, and pretty soon our image of Jesus becomes clouded, out of focus. Or maybe you've

always had questions about your faith and your identity, but you haven't known quite how to ask them or where to start.

My hope with this book is to show you the real, comforting presence of Jesus, the heart of what it means to be Christian, especially as a Lutheran. It is a book by a layperson, for other laypeople, which I hope will spark a deeper understanding of and appreciation for who Jesus is. As such, it is not exhaustive. It might lead you to ask more questions, too, questions that I hope you will take to your pastor. Together, we'll dive deeply into five big questions that lie at the heart of Lutheran identity, drawing inspiration from the "Five Ws" (Who? What? Where? When? Why?), those five most basic questions that we learn in elementary school to ask in order to fully know and understand something or someone. We'll ask these five questions:

**Who is Jesus?**

**What did Jesus do?**

**Where is Jesus now?**

**When is Jesus coming back?**

**Why did Jesus do all this?**

We'll consider each of these questions deeply, drawing from Scripture and our own Lutheran Confessions, which in turn were drawn from the faithful wisdom of countless Church Fathers and theologians from the preceding 1,500 years. As we meditate on Christ together, we'll come to see Jesus as He really is: present with you, even now, to comfort, rescue, and redeem you, now and for eternity. In the process, we'll also finally understand

ourselves by seeing ourselves not in fragmented isolation and the ever-changing, always-refracting lens of the world, the devil, and our fallible, feeble selves, but rather through Christ, who has reconciled us to God and to our fellow brothers and sisters in Him.

But before we can know ourselves, we must first know Jesus. Like the Greek believers who approached Philip, we likewise say, “We wish to see Jesus” (John 12:21).







CHAPTER ONE

# WHO IS JESUS?

Who is Jesus? This question is probably the most important question you've never asked. Maybe you already have, but for most people, Christian or not, they already have a lot of preconceived ideas about Jesus that keep them from asking this all-important question: "Who is Jesus?"

We're going to start from scratch in this chapter. We're going to answer this question by telling the story of Jesus in three different ways: Jesus as God, as man, and as God-man.

Of course, there aren't three different Jesuses. There is only one person of Jesus, both God and man, distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit but united with them in the Trinity. Jesus does, however, have two "natures," by which we mean a certain set of characteristics that defines a category.

For example, cats have a nature. They have a set of experiences, abilities, and physical characteristics that make them all cats. Under normal conditions, your typical cat is supposed to skitter about with whiskers and a tail, have a more-or-less curious disposition, enjoy eating fish (or kitty food, as the case may be), and be good at hunting and catching things, whether that's mice or toys.

What sets Jesus apart as the most important and unique individual in all of history is that He has two natures: He has a human nature and a divine nature. This means that Jesus has the experiences, abilities, and other characteristics of a human, while also exhibiting the characteristics of God. He was born in time, and yet He was present at the birth of the universe; He grew in knowledge and stature, and yet He is all knowing, all present, and all powerful; He could (and would!) be harmed, injured, and

killed, and yet He brought healing and life. He is both God and man, 100 percent each, simultaneously.

What this means is that Jesus is one *person*. When we say “person” here, we’re not talking about a human individual. Rather, it’s a way of referring to a unified essence or entity. We confess that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8), but we also confess that Jesus took on a human body at a specific point in history, when He “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary” (Nicene Creed). Jesus existed before He became man, and His essence, or person, has remained the same throughout all time.

It is very important that we don’t mix up Jesus’ human nature and His divine nature because it is necessary that He be both God and man, not a fifty-fifty mixture. But it is also important that we don’t act like there are two Jesuses, a human Jesus who died on the cross and a divine Jesus up in heaven. That’s also wrong. That’s why we’ll be telling the story of Jesus three times: once to talk about His divine nature, once to talk about His human nature, and one last time to put it all together, both natures in the one person of Jesus Christ, and what that means for you and me.

## Jesus Is True God

Jesus is true God, existing from eternity, all knowing, all powerful, transcendent, without flaw or weakness or sinful inclination. Jesus not only does not err or sin but He *cannot* err or sin—He is utterly, absolutely, completely perfect in His very being.

It is impossible to make an intellectually honest and scholastically legitimate argument against the existence of a person named

Jesus of Nazareth (more on that in the next section). Yet even with the acknowledgment that there was a person named Jesus of Nazareth, if He was just a man, His existence wouldn't make much of a difference for us. What is significant for us and for all of human history is that Jesus is God.

Before we go any further, though, we need to take a step back. What does it mean to be God? Who—or what—is God? Maybe you've never asked yourself this question before. If you were raised Christian, especially, you have probably always taken it for granted that there is an entity called God who rules over the universe. But in order to understand who Jesus is, we need to understand what it means to confess that Jesus is God.

The universe can be sorted into two basic categories: things that are God and things that are not God. Things that are not God are also called creation—and the God who made them, the Creator. You, me, your family, your pets, your neighbor's rock collection, the plant you keep forgetting to water, the Horsehead Nebula, the nucleus of a hydrogen atom, and everything else you can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch—and a lot of things you can't, like gamma rays and the molten iron core of the earth and even angels—they all fall into the category of creation. It's a pretty broad category, but all creatures share these very important things in common: they are not self-sufficient, they are not eternal, and they are not limitless. All of creation is deeply dependent, temporal, and limited by space and time . . . and the law of gravity and the water cycle and cellular respiration and lots of other things. And we are all, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, absolutely dependent upon God, our Creator.

This dependence is our ultimate identity, the thing that defines us and will always define us, even when Jesus returns.<sup>1</sup>

A hierarchy exists among created things, though it might not be what you would expect. For example, some Christians speak as though angels, the heavenly messengers of God, are of greater worth or significance to God than human beings. This tendency sneaks in especially after a loved one has died, when people might say that their deceased family member or friend has been transformed into an angel and is now in a better place. To be sure, a transformation does occur at death—the soul is separated from the body, a phenomenon we will return to later—but people do not cease to be human beings and become angels like the cosmic equivalent of getting a promotion or leveling up in a video game. Humans are humans eternally (a topic we will consider more deeply in the fourth chapter), and that’s a good thing. God created human beings as the crown of His visible creation (Genesis 1:26–28). Human beings, just by existing, are more significant and God-pleasing than dogs or trees or the ocean or the whole universe.

When God created our first parents, Adam and Eve, He imparted to them His image. Theologians sometimes refer to this as the *imago Dei* (im-AH-go day-EE), a Latin term that means “image of God.” This is an important but complicated part of

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1 You ought to notice that none of the things in this list are *bad*. Sin isn’t on this list. This is a really important point, but one that we’ll have to return to in the next chapter. Suffice it to say for now: when sin entered the universe at the fall, it defaced and polluted the nature of all created things. We cannot now, by our own reason or strength, choose or will to rectify the problem of sin, whether that is our desire to do evil or our sentence to harm, decay, and death. But this was never meant to be, and it will be done away with once and for all when Jesus returns in triumph, which we’ll turn to in the fourth chapter of this book. What will remain, even when Jesus returns to remake the heavens and the earth, is our identity as created beings and our dependence on God.

our God-given identities. The Book of Genesis indicates that some part of the image of God was lost in the fall. We were no longer able to refrain from sin and perfectly love as God does. On the other hand, some part of the image of God does remain in us. Like God, we are self-reflective, meaning we are aware of ourselves and how we affect the people and things around us. We are also, even after the fall, moral beings, meaning that we recognize the difference between right and wrong. Even non-Christians generally strive not to hurt people if they can help it, especially not the people they love. We are also capable of living in lifelong, intentional relationships with one another, whether that is in marriage, motherhood, fatherhood, or friendship. Neither clouds, cells, caterpillars, nor any of the rest of creation has this identity. No matter how cute and affectionate your dog is, he is not capable of self-reflective, moral thought. But you are because God chose to impart His image to you.

**The human person is of unimaginable worth to God—which is why Jesus became a man in order to save us from eternal separation from God.**

In contrast to us, God is not created. He is the Creator, outside of time and space, sufficient in Himself, without need for any person or thing. This is a bare-bones definition of what it means to be God, and one that we can actually talk about with people who aren't Christians, like Muslims, Hindus, or even some of the Greek philosophers popular in Jesus' own day. For example, the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BC) spoke of a God that was superior to the Greek pantheon of Athena and Apollo and friends that you might be familiar with, a God that

was transcendent and unchangeable. He called this God “the unmoved mover” because this God had created (or “moved”) the universe into existence; the unmoved mover had set off the first domino in the chain, but he himself was not in the chain, and he wasn’t even a domino. We can agree with Aristotle on this point, but there is still a lot more that needs to be said about God.

We can learn about God in two ways: (1) through nature and reason and (2) through the Bible. By looking around us, we know that God is ordered, because of the fixed rules by which the universe operates, like gravity or mathematics, or the patterns that show up in creation, like the Fibonacci sequence or anatomical similarities between different animals. We know also that God is just: His Law has been written on the hearts of all men (Romans 2:14–15) so that all civilizations have similar legal codes, outlawing murder, theft, and adultery. Additionally, when societies ignore these laws, either altering their legal codes or scorning their consciences, bad things generally follow. Time and time again, history shows us that after periods of moral decadence and unethical living, cultures are left vulnerable to hostile takeovers, from the sack of Rome by the Visigoths to the rise of Hitler in Germany. Our own bodies sometimes bear the punishments for our sin: consider, for example, how gout was historically a disease that affected nobility because of their overindulgence in wine and rich foods. Nature itself bears witness to the wrath of God against evil, from hurricanes and earthquakes to pandemics. If we only had nature to tell us about God, we would probably end up like a lot of pagans: believing that God is orderly and just but is also fickle, angry, and out to get us, and that He must be appeased at all costs.

But we don't just have nature to tell us who God is, and we don't believe in a god that must be appeased like the pagans do. In addition to this "natural" knowledge of God, that is, things we can figure out on our own from nature, we also have "revealed" knowledge of God, that is, knowledge that we *can't* figure out on our own but that is instead given to us, or revealed, by God. God reveals His full identity to us in His Word, the Bible. Maybe you have heard someone describe the Bible as an acronym for "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth." While true to a point—God does provide His moral law to us in Scripture—this description actually misses the purpose of the Law: to show we are sinners powerless to save ourselves. The purpose of the Bible is that it reveals to us God's identity, and, you guessed it, points us to Jesus.

The Bible tells us again and again that God is merciful. He is so merciful because His very nature is love: "God is love" the apostle John tells us (see 1 John 4:7–21). This doesn't mean that God is squishy feelings of affection or romantic feelings of attraction. Rather, "love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:4–8). Maybe you have heard this verse in the context of a wedding or a funeral. To be sure, as Christians, we ought to strive to live our lives in this sort of love, especially toward our spouse, family, and friends. But we will always fall short. We can't meet this standard for love, a fact to which we will return in the next chapter. But if God is love, and these verses from Paul tell us what love is, then they are also telling us



*who God is*, especially the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, who is God *for us*, the physical embodiment of divine mercy here to save and redeem mankind.

But what does all of that mean? For one, this is a radically different understanding of God than our pagan friends like Aristotle have. “Pagans,” used here to refer to people who are not Christian, simply do not have this way of viewing God, because they do not know the Bible or they reject what the Bible would teach them about God. We can’t really see much of God’s love and mercy if we just go off of fallen creation. We have some, sure: some might see love in a god creating worlds and men and critters. They may even see mercy in the cycles of nature, night relenting to day and winter relenting to springtime. But these are such general kinds of love and mercy; they don’t really tell us anything about salvation or whether God cares about us as unique individuals. The dog-eat-dog world around us is more likely to make it seem like salvation is something earned by hard work rather than given freely as a loving gift from God.

But the Bible tells us that God loves us dearly, mercifully relents from His wrath, and cares for the individual. The psalmist writes that God formed him—and you and me and everybody else—lovingly and uniquely in his mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13). Isaiah echoes this, referring to “the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb” (Isaiah 44:24). God said to Moses—and says to all of us—“I know you by name” (Exodus 33:17). But He doesn’t just know us—He also loves us so deeply that He has chosen to save us. God knows each of us intimately, knowing our thoughts, words, and deeds even before we think, speak, or do them (Psalm 139)—even all of our sins, public and secret—yet He chose us before creating the first atom in the universe (see

Ephesians 1:4). John 3:16, a favorite of Sunday School children everywhere, captures God's love perfectly: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." This sweet, glorious, freeing Good News is for everyone, and it comes to us through God's Son, Christ Jesus.

Before we finally get to talk about Jesus and His divinity, it is worth noting that sometimes Christians and non-Christians have a hard time with the overwhelming mercy of God. Some Christians emphasize that God is fair and just above all things, or that He is sovereign and powerful above all things, or that He is rational and orderly and logical above all things. Certainly, all of these are attributes of God. God is just, sovereign, and orderly. But as Lutherans, we believe and teach that God is first and foremost *merciful*. For example, it would have been just, sovereign, and orderly to wipe out all of humanity as soon as Adam and Eve bit into the forbidden fruit. They broke the only rule in the universe: they rejected God. But rather than destroying all of humanity, God decided, out of unfathomable love and mercy, to send His own Son to die in our place to save us from this sin and death. Isn't it unjust to let a guilty man off for his crime? Isn't it humiliating to welcome back a traitor and betrayer? Isn't it disorderly to take the deserved punishment away from sinners and put it on the only sinless man, who is also God Himself, instead?

Frankly, it doesn't make sense. We do not deserve the mercy that God pours out on us. But this is how God makes Himself known—His unfathomable and immeasurable mercy. God is love, a self-sacrificing love that will bear all things in order to redeem the object of that love: us. Therefore, Jesus, true God, true Love, poured out His divine power and mercy to heal, redeem,

and save us. That outpouring can be hard for us to face—how could the Word that spoke the universe into existence pour out His blood on a hideous torture device? We will consider that in greater detail in the next chapter, but you are right to be overwhelmed. Your non-Christian friend has a reason to be confused by the faith you confess. It doesn't make sense. It is a divine mystery that God chose us, but that's part of who God is—a merciful mystery that we don't seek to rationalize or figure out but merely revel in, and we give thanks for the profound Love of God, Jesus.

Let's examine another important element of God's identity that ties in with love, a reality that is deeply significant to our understanding of Jesus. God exists as a Trinity—three divine persons, yet one God. We must be careful when we talk about the Trinity because we can easily slip into error. Additionally, it is one of the most misunderstood doctrines of our Christian faith by people outside of the Church, and a poorly chosen analogy can end up generating more confusion, doubt, and unbelief than simply admitting that we don't understand either.

For example, perhaps you have heard a well-meaning Christian say she believes in a "God who exists in three ways." Unfortunately, this idiom is dangerously close to a heresy known as modalism, which the Early Church condemned. Modalism teaches that God reveals Himself in three "modes"—as though God plays three roles or wears three masks: God as Creator, God as Savior, and God as Sanctifier. Lutherans and the overwhelming majority of other Christians, like Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Anglicans, among others, reject modalism and analogies that sound like it, because it denies the biblical truth that God exists in three *distinct* persons. The Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit are distinct, unique persons, not roles or masks assumed and cast aside. This easy slip from a good-hearted but incorrect analogy into literal heresy means that we must be very careful with how we speak about the Trinity.

Here is what we *can't* say. As Christians, we *do not* say that we worship three Gods. This is spelled out in very clear language in the Athanasian Creed, the long creed we confess once a year on Trinity Sunday. It is so thorough, in fact, that the best we can do here is summarize it and put it into slightly more digestible language. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all God, but they are united in being God, or, as the Early Church Fathers said, they share a single *divine essence*. But, it's not like there is one God who just puts on a Father, Son, or Holy Spirit mask when the situation calls for it. The Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit; the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son. Each is a distinct person with a distinct role. God the Father created the world. God the Son, Jesus, is the Word through which the world was made, and He became man (we'll get to that in a few pages); through Jesus, the world was saved. God the Holy Spirit points us to Jesus, creating faith and working in us sanctification.

If the Trinity is confusing to you, that's okay. It's confusing to everybody, even the Church Fathers and theologians who first wrote helpful things about the Trinity for the rest of us. It's confusing because a lot of God's identity is hidden to us creatures. A great deal of it is revealed, like we said earlier, either through nature or in the words of the Bible, but there is still a lot we don't know—and probably *can't* know. This is part of what it means to be God, after all: since God is not a creature,

it wouldn't make much sense for Him to be readily understood through creaturely reason.

We can say this, though: the Trinity points us back to the fact that God is love. God exists as three persons, yes, but in perfect unity, perfect love. And from this perfect love, He also created the world and everything in it. From this perfect love, Jesus, the Son of God, became incarnate, died, and rose to save you. In perfect love, the Holy Spirit continues to stir up in you faith and good works.

Jesus, then, exists as the Second Person of this Trinity, sometimes called the Word or the Son. Jesus is not God's son in a biological sense—God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are pure spirit, meaning they do not have physical bodies. Those depictions you see of God the Father as an old, bearded man are not meant literally, but rather they help communicate the idea that He is the Father. Jesus, unlike the other two persons of the Trinity, has a human body.

Jesus existed as God the Son before the incarnation when He took on human flesh and was born of Mary. Jesus existed together with the Father and the Holy Spirit before the beginning of time and the creation of the earth, and He also appears throughout the Old Testament. Traditionally, the Church has referred to these appearances as the "preincarnate Christ" or "preincarnate Son." Typically, theologians across history have considered most instances in the Old Testament of "the angel of the LORD" to refer to Jesus before His incarnation. (The word *angel* means "messenger" in both Hebrew and Greek, and therefore does not necessarily mean the spirit-being dwelling with God in heaven that we normally think of when we hear the word.) For example, when an angel appeared to Hagar to comfort her in the desert,

that was Jesus. When Jacob wrestled with someone, that was Jesus. The voice that spoke to Moses out of the burning bush was a visitation of the preincarnate Christ, as was the rock that brought forth living waters in the desert, which Paul references in 1 Corinthians 10:4.

But the divine Logos, the eternal Son, “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Philippians 2:6), and so He stepped forth from the halls of inscrutable eternity to take on human flesh—our form—in order to save us. But what does that mean, that God has a body now in Christ? To answer that, we’ll first look at what it means that Jesus is also true man.

## Jesus Is True Man

Jesus is true man, a first-century rabbi (or teacher) who traveled around the Roman province of Judea, amassed followers, made enemies with the political and religious elites, preached, taught, spoke, laughed, cried, ate, drank, slept, walked, and was ultimately arrested, tried, crucified, and killed on charges of blasphemy.

**It is vital that we understand that Jesus is also a real man—fully human, a fellow brother and partaker in our flesh.**

Now, lots of religions talk about people being gods. For example, some of the Roman emperors referred to themselves as a “son of god,” though they were of course not referring to the Christian God, Yahweh, but rather one of the many from their pagan pantheon. The Romans also had mythological figures who were

both god and man; however, these individuals were the result of relations between a god and a human, like Hercules the demi-god, who was half-god, half-man. Jesus of Nazareth, the historical figure who is also the Second Person of the Trinity, *became* man in time. He wasn't a man who earned divine status, nor was He the product of relations between a person and God (Christ's miraculous conception occurred by the Holy Spirit in Mary's womb, not through typical reproduction). He is the coeternal Second Person of the Trinity, who, at this moment in time, took on human flesh, fully.

Jesus was likely born around the year 4 BC (which is a little confusing—sorry, but the people who first came up with BC and AD were a little off on their math!) and was crucified around AD 30. Jesus' mother was a young woman, likely a teenager, named Mary. Mary, engaged to marry a man named Joseph, was visited by an angel, Gabriel, who told her she would miraculously conceive a baby by the work of the Holy Spirit (more on that later), despite being a virgin (Luke 1:26–28). An angel also appeared to Joseph, telling him not to divorce Mary because the baby in her womb had been conceived by the Holy Spirit, not a man, and is the prophesied messiah and “will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:18–25). Both Mary and Joseph were descended from King David. Some theologians believe this accounts for the discrepancies between the genealogies given at the beginning of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Thus, even on Jesus' adopted father's side, He is still the “shoot from the stump of Jesse” (Isaiah 11:1) and Son of David.

When Jesus was born, He was probably a lot like other babies. With ten tiny little fingers and ten toes, a big head that He wouldn't be able to keep upright on His own for months, and

a body about the size of a loaf of bread, this is how the Word of God, who spoke the universe into existence from nothing, entered into our world: small, helpless, reliant on His mother to feed, bathe, dress, and otherwise care for Him.

Most of Jesus' life between His birth and the beginning of His ministry at age 30 is a bit of a blur. The Bible gives us a few stories—the Magi appearing while Jesus was a toddler (Matthew 2:1–12), the subsequent flight into Egypt to escape Herod (Matthew 2:13–18), the family's return to Judea (Matthew 2:19–23), the youth Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41–52). Many of these accounts are significant because they fulfill Old Testament prophecies. For example, Jesus' birth to the Virgin Mary at Bethlehem fulfills prophecies from Genesis 3:15, Isaiah 7:14, and Micah 5:2. Those genealogies at the beginning of Matthew and Luke show that Jesus fulfilled at least a half dozen prophecies throughout the Old Testament foretelling the Messiah's lineage (see Genesis 12:3; 17:19; 21:12; 22:18; 49:10; Numbers 24:17; 2 Samuel 7:12–13; Isaiah 9:7). Hosea's words "out of Egypt I called My son" (11:1) ring true at the flight to and return from Egypt; and even the slaughter of the innocents, when King Herod ordered all the infant male children killed in an attempt to halt the coming Messiah (Matthew 2:16–18), was predicted: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more" (Jeremiah 31:15). Additionally, these experiences all underscore the humanness of our Lord. Jesus is fully human, which means He experienced all of what it means to be human, including the experience of being born and growing up, developing physically and mentally, growing taller and stronger, sleeping, waking, becoming hungry, getting hurt, falling ill, feeling lonely.



Sometimes, we have a tendency to think of being human as a sort of punishment in and of itself. How many times have you heard someone say they were “only human,” for example? Or have you ever been told that, after death, Christians become angels? Both of these sentiments confuse the nature of what it means to be human, and as a result, obscure Jesus’ true identity and our own.


Human beings are sinful as a result of the fall. This truth is found again and again in the Bible and is readily apparent in our lives and throughout history. A key part of what it means to be human has been fundamentally changed as a result of the fall: mankind is now enslaved to sin and death. We cannot right our relationship with God by our own strength or merit, and we are now open to pain, harm, illness, decay, and ultimately, death.

Jesus likewise suffered as we do. Traditionally, theologians refer to this as Christ’s “humiliation.” After all, why would God, who created and rules all things, allow Himself to suffer, whether that’s experiencing hunger or death on a cross? Some other religious groups, such as Muslims, view the Christian belief that God became man in Christ as deeply offensive for this very reason—and, though it may push against our reason, we view His incarnation in wonder! It is utterly baffling that the God who spoke the stars into existence would take on mortal, physical flesh so that He would have to experience all of the limitations of our human bodies, ultimately culminating in being tortured to death.

But this is the other vital part of what it means to be human: despite our fall into sin, being human is still good. Why? Because God says it is in the person of Jesus.

Yes, you are sinful by nature and you sin in thought, word, and deed. But, nevertheless, the almighty Lord of heaven and earth saw fit to bring together the sperm and egg that first sparked with your life. He made you, a human, male or female, as a person who has intrinsic worth as a creature made by the God who gives things their worth. He didn't make you a rock or a bug or a bear—though those are also good things created by God. No, He made you a human person, the crown of creation, to look after all the rocks and bugs and bears and everything else.

Sometimes, we forget that, despite the fall, creation is still good—being *human* is still good. We are no longer sinless, and creation has become horribly warped by the sin that has flourished, but both creation and humanity are *still* good because God has redeemed us and will restore all creation.



**God taking on human flesh in the person of Jesus is the ultimate affirmation of the goodness of being human, because your Savior, your God, is your Brother—your fully human Brother.**

Jesus' humanity also means that He is a historical figure. This doesn't mean He was *merely* a historical figure, but it does mean that Jesus has a verifiable historical record, a claim not many other religions can make. Many religions are completely ahistorical, meaning that their deities have little to no historically verifiable interactions with mankind. Most indigenous religions, as well as reconstructed neo-pagan religions like Wicca and certain occultist groups, have no historical record of the deities they believe in intervening with the physical world. To