

How Is Jesus God?



Session 1



Luke 8:22-25; John 1:1-18; Philippians 2:5-11

Session Objective

In this session, youth explore the divine nature of Christ and the incarnation. They have the opportunity to wrestle with a centuries-old question: How is Jesus both truly human and truly divine?

Faith Statement

Question 35. How can Jesus be truly God and yet also truly human at the same time?

The mystery of Jesus Christ's divine-human unity passes our understanding; only faith given by the Holy Spirit enables us to affirm it. When Holy Scripture depicts Jesus as someone with divine power, status, and authority, it presupposes his humanity. And when it depicts him as someone with human weakness, neediness, and mortality, it presupposes his deity. We cannot understand how this should be, but we can trust that the God who made heaven and earth is free to become God incarnate and thus to be God with us in this wonderful and awe-inspiring way.

—*The Study Catechism: Full Version*

Session Overview

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Enhancements

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Advent Wreath Ritual
Lenten Ritual
"Boy Like Me/
Man Like You"
Explore *He Was One of Us*



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Each of the four Gospel accounts in the Bible handles Jesus' entrance into the world a bit differently. Mark's Gospel first mentions Jesus by name in the context of his baptism. Matthew's Gospel begins with seventeen verses concerning Jesus' lineage and only seven verses about Jesus' birth. Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, offers a pastoral narrative with angels, shepherds, and the baby Jesus in a manger. Even more unique, the beginning of John's Gospel speaks to Jesus' relationship to God and to the world. Read John 1:1–14 and reflect on the following questions before taking time to pray for the young people in your class.

- How do these words of Scripture shape your understanding of Jesus Christ?
- How would you respond if someone asked you, "How can Jesus be truly human and truly God at the same time?"
- What three words would you use to describe your current relationship with Jesus Christ?



Understanding the Scripture

For centuries, the question "How can Jesus be both truly human and truly divine?" has expressed a divine mystery. Sometimes mysteries are meant to be solved and at other times mysteries are best honored if they are appreciated with awe and wonder. While we will attempt to use our minds to understand the mystery of Christ's divinity and humanity, we will do well to remember that the best response is worship and praise like the words of praise that are found in Philippians 2:5–11. It is widely believed that this Scripture passage is a hymn of praise or doxology to Christ. Paul may or may not have composed this hymn; some suggest that he borrowed the hymn from the church's worship as a way of reminding church members of the claim on their lives. It is known as the kenotic hymn, from a Greek word meaning "emptied." Jesus, truly God, emptied himself, humbled himself, and took the form of a servant.

In the prologue of John's Gospel, Jesus is called the Word who was with God, who was from God, who was God, and who created the world, came into the world, and saved the world. This poetic beginning to John's Gospel bridges the two spheres of God's presence made known in Jesus of Nazareth: the Christ (the eternal sphere or cosmic Word of God) and the temporal sphere (the world and the incarnate Word). These first eighteen verses of John help the reader understand Jesus of Nazareth as no ordinary person, but as God wrapped in human flesh so that the Divine might transform the world and all humanity from the inside. The incarnation of God in Jesus Christ meant that the physically remote and distant divine God could be seen, heard, and known in ways never before possible. God didn't stay distant, but came close, and was bound to the everydayness of human experience.

The story of Jesus calming the storm in Luke 8:22–25 is the first of three stories in Luke 8 that reveal Jesus’ power and authority. In these stories, Luke raises the foundational question that can be found throughout this part of his Gospel: Who exactly is Jesus? The disciples of Jesus ask this question amid their fear and amazement (8:25). Perhaps the confusion that Jesus’ followers were experiencing signaled one of the earliest instances of humans who were struggling to understand Jesus’ dual nature.



Understanding the Faith Statement

In 1998 the 210th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) approved two new catechisms for use as teaching tools for the church. The second of these is the *Study Catechism*, which was divided into two versions: the *Full Version* and the shorter, somewhat simplified *Confirmation Version*. Both follow the traditional sequence of the *Apostles’ Creed*, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord’s Prayer. The *Confirmation Version* is designed to be used with youth during the confirmation process, while the *Full Version* can be used in the training of church officers, in adult study groups, in the education of new church members, or in many other settings.¹



Teaching Today’s Question

Understanding the dual nature of Jesus Christ (being truly human and truly divine) can be challenging for young people and adults alike. As you lead your group members in engaging with this session’s question, help them understand that they are not alone in struggling to formulate a response. The questions and discussions surrounding the mystery of God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ have been a part of Christianity since its beginning. As with some other aspects of Christianity, there is a point at which we accept the mystery of God through faith. This can be a confusing and sometimes uncomfortable prospect for young people as they seek to understand the world around them.

1. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Catechisms: Reference Edition* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), p. 64.



Enter

Option A: Connecting with the Trinity

- Newsprint, markers

Before participants arrive, write *God* at the top of a sheet of newsprint, *Jesus* at the top of a second sheet of newsprint, and *Holy Spirit* at the top of a third sheet of newsprint. Post the sheets of newsprint around the meeting space.

Give each participant a marker as he or she arrives and invite each person to write a word or short phrase on each sheet of newsprint that describes the part of the Trinity that is written on it. When all of the participants have arrived, ask the group to respond to the following questions by moving next to the sheet of newsprint that corresponds to their response. After the participants move in response to each question, spend time exploring why each person chose the response that he or she did.



- Which person of the Trinity do you know the most about?
- Which person of the Trinity do you know the least about?
- Which person of the Trinity is the easiest to connect with?

Gather the group in a circle and explore the following questions together:



- Which descriptive words or phrases appear on all of the sheets of newsprint? Which words or phrases appear on only one or two sheets of newsprint?
- According to the responses on the sheets of newsprint, how are the persons of the Trinity complementary? How are they unique?
- Do you think the Trinity is easy or difficult to understand? Why?

Option B: Images of Jesus

- Collection of pictures of Jesus Christ (one picture per person)

Before participants arrive, collect a variety of pictures depicting Jesus Christ in culturally diverse ways. You will need one picture per participant. Pictures might be available in your church library or around your church building. Pictures are also available on the Internet. Be sure to check copyright information before you download pictures from the Internet.

Give each participant a different picture of Jesus to study and give the group time to examine the pictures. Tell the participants that you are going to read a series of questions to them and that they need to reflect on each question as they look at their pictures. Read the following questions slowly, allowing thirty seconds between questions.



- What do you notice about Jesus in this image?
- How does this image help you understand who Jesus is?
- How is this image the same or different from what you thought Jesus looked like?
- How is this image of Jesus similar to or different from who you thought Jesus was?
- What does this representation of Jesus tell us about the artist who created it?
- What does this image tell us about how we think of Jesus or want Jesus to be?

Give each participant an opportunity to share his or her image with the rest of the group and to share one thing that came to mind while reflecting on the questions that were being read. Place the images together in the middle of the meeting area and ask: How do these artistic representations of Jesus give us a picture of what Jesus looked like? Why does Jesus look different in different cultures?



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

Gather the participants in a comfortable location and use the following questions to guide a conversation that explores the question “How is Jesus God?” Encourage the young people to ask their own questions that relate to this question. Pray the opening prayer.



- Why do we call Jesus *God* if God is Jesus’ dad?
- What things about Jesus are humanlike and what things about him are godlike?
- How is Jesus truly human *and* truly divine? How is it possible to be two different things at one time?

Option B: Interviews



Copy of “Interviews” (Web Resource 1a) for each participant, pens

Give each participant a copy of “Interviews” (Web Resource 1a) and a pen, then tell the group how much time you are giving them to complete this activity. Send the participants throughout your church building to interview as many people as possible and to record each person’s responses in the spaces provided. When all of the participants return, give each person an opportunity to share the responses that he or she heard from various people. Explore the following questions together:

Opening Prayer

God of all things, be with us today as we come together in your name to explore the questions that your faithful followers have been asking for years. Help us to open our minds so that we can be transformed by your Spirit. Help us to support each other as we read your Word and engage in conversation about your amazing power. Amen.



- Did people find the interview questions easy or difficult to answer?
- Why do you think they found the questions easy or difficult?
- Which responses were similar? Which were different?
- Which responses to the question “How can Jesus be truly human and truly God at the same time?” make the most sense?

Pray the opening prayer.



Explore

Option A: Truly Human, Truly God

Bibles, index cards, markers

Give each participant an index card and a marker. Ask each person to write *Truly Human* on one side of the card and *Truly God* on the other side. Make sure each participant has a Bible and ask everyone to look up Luke 8:22–25. Invite a volunteer to read the passage out loud to the group and then ask: Is this passage more about Jesus being truly human or truly God? Invite each person to share his or her response to the question by holding up one of the sides of his or her index card. Give each person an opportunity to explain his or her response. As time permits, read and discuss the following Scripture passages in the same way: Matthew 21:12–17, Mark 15:33–39, Luke 4:16–21, Luke 24:36–53, and John 11:28–44. Explore the following questions together:



- What do we learn about the nature of Jesus Christ in these Scripture passages?
- What do we learn about the nature of God and the relationship between Jesus and God in these Scripture passages?
- Is it possible to separate Jesus’ humanity from Jesus’ divinity? Why or why not?

Option B: God Incarnate

Bibles

Make sure each person has a Bible and ask participants to look up John 1:1–18. Divide the verses equally among the participants and ask each person to silently read his or her assigned verse(s). After a few minutes, invite each person to read and explain his or her verse(s) to the rest of the group. Explore the following questions together:



- What do we learn about the relationship between God (the Father) and Jesus Christ (the Son) in this passage?
- What does this passage teach us about the nature of Jesus Christ? about the nature of God? Can Jesus’ humanity and Jesus’ divinity be separated? Why or why not?
- What does the word *incarnation* mean? (*in* = into; “*carneus*” is Latin for “made of flesh”) How is God incarnate in Jesus Christ?

Option C: Paraphrasing Philippians 2:5–11

Bibles, paper, pens

Divide the participants into small groups, with two or three people per group, and give each small group a sheet of paper and a pen. Make sure each participant has a Bible and ask everyone to look up Philippians 2:5–11. Divide the verses equally among the small groups and ask each small group to rewrite their assigned verses in their own words. After a few minutes, invite a volunteer to read Philippians 2:5–11 out loud to all of the groups. Then invite each small group to read their paraphrased verses out loud in order. Explore the following questions together:



- What does this passage teach us about the nature of Jesus Christ?
- Can Jesus' humanity and Jesus' divinity be separated? Why or why not?
- What does this passage teach us about the nature of God?
- What do we learn about the relationship between God and Jesus Christ in this passage?



Express

Option A: Looking at the Faith Statement

Copy of "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1b) for each person

Gather the participants in a circle and pose this question: How can Jesus be truly human *and* truly God? Have the group work together to create a two- or three-sentence response to the question by going around the circle and inviting each person to give the next word in the response. You will need to go around the circle as many times as it takes to complete all of the sentences. (For example, the first person could say, "Jesus," the second person could say, "is," the third person could say, "truly," and so on.) Then explore the following questions:



- How easy or difficult is it for you to respond to this question? What makes it easy or difficult?
- How do you think someone who has never heard of Jesus Christ would respond to this doctrine that Jesus is both truly human and truly God?

Give each participant a copy of "Session 1 Faith Statement" (Web Resource 1b). Read and discuss the Faith Statement on the page, using the questions provided. If you have a large class, this can be done in small groups. Have the small groups report back to the entire class before continuing to the next learning activity.

Option B: Acting It Out

- Two medium-sized bags

Divide the participants into two equal groups. Hand each group a bag and give the groups three minutes to place five small objects found in the meeting space into the bag. Have the groups exchange the bags. Give each group a few minutes to create a skit that explains the dual nature (truly human, truly divine) of Jesus Christ. Each group member must participate in the skit, and all five objects in the bag must be used during the skit. Have the groups present their skits to one another. Explore the following questions together:



- How easy or difficult was it to explain the dual nature of Christ in your skit? What made it easy or difficult?
- How do you think someone who has never heard of Jesus Christ would respond to this doctrine that Jesus is both truly human and truly God?

Option C: Creating Symbols

- 8½" x 5" sheets of card stock, pencils, scissors, tape or glue, various colors of 8½" x 11" sheets of construction paper, various colors of paint, sponges, newsprint

Divide the group into pairs and give each person a sheet of card stock and a pencil. In each pair, ask one person to draw and cut out a simple symbol for Jesus' *humanity* and ask the other person to draw and cut out a simple symbol for Jesus' *divinity*. These symbols could be original or they could be symbols that the participants have seen before. Encourage the participants to make their symbols as large as possible. Explain to the participants that, since it is not possible to separate Jesus' humanity from his divinity, each set of partners needs to find a way to join their two symbols without losing the integrity of either symbol. Make tape or glue available to those who need it.

Give each pair of participants a sheet of construction paper and have them place their newly created symbol on the paper. Invite the participants to dip a sponge in paint and dab the paint around the edges of the card-stock symbol. When finished, have the participants remove the symbol, which will reveal a reverse image of the symbol. Glue all of the newly painted symbols together as a collage on a sheet of newsprint and display in a prominent location. Give each set of partners an opportunity to share their symbol with the rest of the group. Explore the following questions together:



- How are the symbols similar? How are they different?
- How could looking at these symbols help someone who is struggling with the question "How can Jesus be truly human *and* truly divine?"



Exit

Circle Prayer

Gather the participants in a circle. Beginning with the person whose birthday is closest to today and continuing clockwise around the circle, give each person an opportunity to share a response to this question: What have you learned today about the nature of Jesus Christ? Then invite each person to find out one prayer request from the person on his or her left. Tell the group that during the closing prayer, you will give each person an opportunity to share the prayer request that he or she just heard. Pray the closing prayer.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

“Family Connections” (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the four sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Advent Wreath Ritual

If you are using these sessions during Advent, consider leading your group in an Advent wreath ritual at the beginning of each session. Read “Advent Wreath Ritual” (Advent Connections Web Resource) to learn more about creating this ritual. The liturgy that connects with this session is found in “First Week of Advent” (Advent Connections Web Resource).

Lenten Ritual

If you are using these sessions during Lent, consider having a Lenten ritual at the beginning of each session. Read “Lenten Ritual” (Lenten Connections Web Resource) to learn more about creating this ritual. The liturgy that connects with this session is found in “Session 1 Lenten Ritual” (Lenten Connections Web Resource).

Closing Prayer

Holy and amazing God, be with us as we go from this place. We thank you for the time that we’ve had together to grow in our faith and in our relationship with you. Hear now, O God, the prayers of our community.

(Give each person an opportunity to share the prayer request from the person on his or her left.)

We thank you for this group with whom we can share and struggle as we tackle tough theological questions. Challenge us to continue asking questions and exploring our faith as we go out into the world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

“Boy Like Me/Man Like You”

Give each participant a copy of “Boy Like Me/Man Like You” (Web Resource 1c). Have one or more volunteers read the lyrics out loud to the group and then play a recording of “Boy Like Me/Man Like You” by Rich Mullins. Discuss the song, using the following questions:



- Think of a friend that you’ve known for only a couple of years. How did you get to know him or her? What makes it easy or hard to know a person?
- How do we know Jesus when he is not bodily present with us? Can we guess what his life was like and find similarities with our own?
- What three words describe your current relationship with Jesus Christ?

Explore *He Was One of Us*

Read and discuss *He Was One of Us* by Rien Poortvliet (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 1994) with your group. This book features lifelike illustrations of various events in Jesus’ life from his birth through his resurrection. Use the following questions to help the discussion:



- What three words would you use to describe these illustrations?
- Which of the illustrations jumps out to you as being the most meaningful?
- Do these illustrations change your understanding of Jesus in any way? Why or why not?

If time permits, gather the participants around one of the illustrations in the book. Play contemplative music in the background and invite the participants to spend two minutes looking at the illustration. Challenge the group members to use the two minutes to examine the illustration closely, looking for various insights about Jesus and the people around him. After two minutes, invite the participants to share their experience.



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