

Chapter 19

Jesus Christ

1 Introduction

Chapter checklist

The chapter considers three ways in which Jesus Christ has authority: as a moral teacher of wisdom, as liberator of the oppressed and as Son of God. It considers: Jesus' role as liberator of the marginalised and his challenge to secular and religious authority; his teaching on repentance, inner purity and forgiveness; his divinity as expressed in his relationship to God, miracles and resurrection. The chapter concludes by discussing whether his authority is unique.

2 Jesus Christ's authority

Key question

What does it mean for someone to have authority?

Jesus Christ has authority for Christians because of his teaching, his example and relationship to God – many non-Christians admire him and consider that he has authority, especially in his moral teaching. But even amongst Christians there is no single factor as to why he has especial authority and this is due in part to the elusive nature of authority.

(a) What is authority?

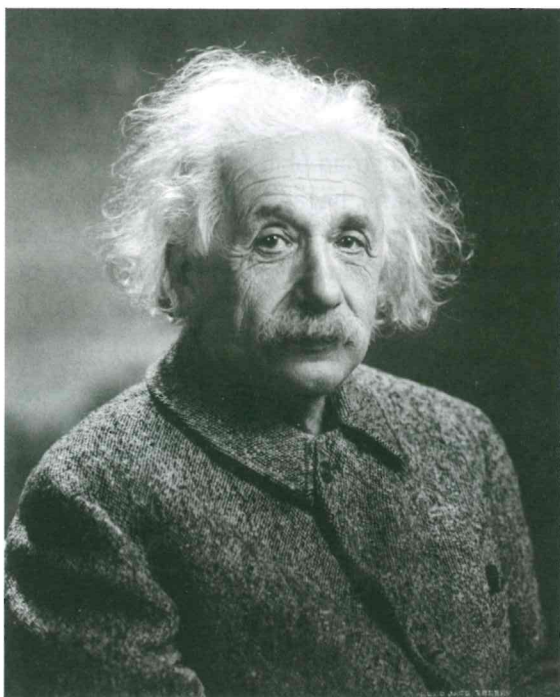


Why do parents have authority over their children?



What authority does a soldier have to fight?

What does it mean when we say a person or an institution has authority? Recognition of authority means that we recognise them as having special powers which we acknowledge and defer to. How and why we acknowledge these powers is by no means clear. Here are three different ways in which authority works.



Why is Einstein considered to be an authority in physics?

- Authority sometimes refers to those who are more experienced and have a greater understanding of life and the world. For example, a child recognises the authority of his parents to punish him because they are responsible for looking after him and he accepts their greater knowledge and moral wisdom so that when he is disobedient he accepts he will be punished.
- Authority is ascribed to someone who is highly knowledgeable or skilled in their field. It is by their authority that others can act and change the world. For example, Albert Einstein is an authority on physics; Emile Durkheim is an authority on sociology; Immanuel Kant is an authority on philosophy.
- Authority can also be transferred by proxy from one person to another. For example, when a soldier fights and kills the enemy in battle, he does so by acting on the authority of the state. As he acts on the authority of the state, it is the state which takes on the ultimate responsibility of his actions. But as soon as he acts outside this authority then his actions are not recognised as being lawful; he therefore becomes a murderer not a legitimate combatant.

The chief characteristic of authority is recognition. Without recognition of others, those who may have had authority become nothing.

(b) Jesus' authority

For Christians, Jesus Christ is recognised as a fundamental source of authority. But it is by no means clear how and in what way his authority is recognised. Even from the earliest days, Jesus' authority was discussed and disputed. All the Gospels record how his authority was constantly being questioned and how he, in return, questioned the authority of his Jewish and Roman accusers.

This chapter will review three areas in which Jesus Christ is considered to have authority:

- **Jesus as teacher of wisdom and morality.** Jesus' moral example and teaching is authoritative because he developed Jewish ethics in ways which people found enlightening as a means of living morally and spiritually fulfilled lives.
- **Jesus the liberator.** Jesus' actions challenged the political and religious authorities. He took on the mantle of the great prophets before him (such as Amos and Isaiah) and used his skills as a reformer to tackle the social issues of his day.
- **Son of God.** Jesus' intimate relationship with God gave him the authority to carry out God's will on Earth and ultimately to bring salvation.

3 Jesus the teacher of wisdom

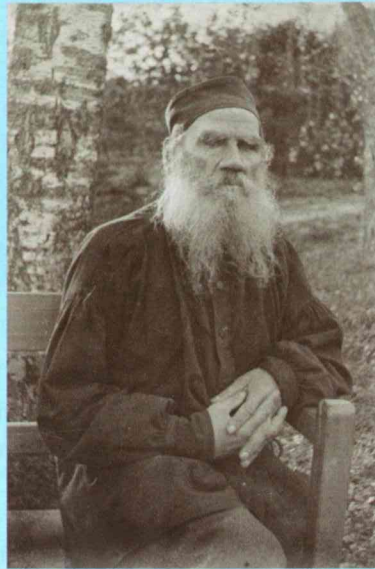
(a) Jesus' affirmation of life

It was during First World War that the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, a soldier in the Austrian army, began to read Leo Tolstoy's *Gospel in Brief* and was completely won over by his presentation of Christ. For the first time he felt that he was spiritually alive and with a clarity of vision. He wrote in his diary, 'I am on the path to a great discovery. But will I reach it?'

Key persons



Ludwig Wittgenstein



Leo Tolstoy

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951):

Born in Austria but spent most of his adult life teaching and writing at Cambridge University. He was considered by Bertrand Russell to be a philosophical genius. His first great work *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921, English edition) developed his picture theory of language and relationships to logical propositions. His experience of war and conversion to Christianity brought about a profound shift in his thought and in his subsequent philosophy. He developed an interest in ordinary language and what he termed 'language games'. These are most clearly expressed in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910): One of Russia's great novelists who also wrote many essays on philosophy and theology. His *Gospel in Brief* (1896) argues that the significance of Jesus' life lay in his moral teaching with five moral commandments: do not be angry, but be at peace with all men; do not seek delight in sexual gratification; do not swear anything to anyone; do not oppose evil, do not judge, and do not go to law; do not make any distinction among men as to nationality, and love strangers like your own people.

For Wittgenstein the truth and authority of Christianity lay not in God's promise of redemption and the reward of an afterlife but in living life as honestly as possible. What gave Jesus authority was his role as a teacher of wisdom.

Wittgenstein admired Jesus because he affirmed authentic human living. This is all the more striking when we know that Wittgenstein was at the time working on his first great philosophical book, *The Tractatus*,

Key terms

Form of life (or *Lebensform* in German) In Wittgenstein's philosophy of language refers to the historical, sociological, moral and psychological conditions in which ordinary language operates and has meaning.

Torah Refers to the Jewish body of law and teaching traditionally believed to have been given to Moses at Mount Sinai around 1250bc. It is contained in the first five books of the Bible.

Sermon on the Mount Found in Matthew 5–7 and is Jesus' longest discourse on ethics. It begins with the qualities or virtues a Christian requires to lead the good life and then discusses a range of moral and religious issues, from the use of force to the practice of prayer and worship.

Key quote

What is this? A new teaching – with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.

Mark 1:27

whose aim was to test language against basic propositions about the world. But increasingly Wittgenstein was dissatisfied with this notion because there are very few propositions which can be held to be true – and the ones we are left with don't tell us much about life as we actually experience it. Wittgenstein argued that unless an idea can be *lived*, practised and experienced then it has no value. It has been suggested that it was Wittgenstein's admiration of the person of Jesus Christ which was largely responsible for this shift in his philosophical outlook.

For Wittgenstein (as for countless others), what impressed him about Jesus was his commitment to the truth, his courage to speak against hypocrisy, his simple unadorned lifestyle and ultimately his acceptance of death. By the time Wittgenstein came to write the *Philosophical Investigations*, his older notion of philosophy had made way to the idea that the function of language is not merely to make logically true or false propositions about the world, but to be a '**form of life**' as a way of living. The purpose of philosophy, therefore, is to clarify words and meanings and strip away confusion so as to *practise* the authentic life. Thus, for Wittgenstein, Jesus is not an abstract idea but the 'living word', the embodiment of the external moral and inner spiritual life.

(b) Jesus' moral teaching

Just how different was Jesus' moral teaching from the Judaism of his day and what made his teaching authoritative? There is considerable debate amongst scholars as to whether Jesus was a moral reformer or revolutionary as regards the practice of the **Torah** was concerned. In the collection of his teaching material known as the **Sermon on the Mount**, where the gospel deliberately presents Jesus as the new Moses going up a mountain to receive and deliver the Law, Jesus says:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil. For truly, I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever then breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same so, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:17–19

The ambiguity of this statement is the meaning of 'fulfil'. Did Jesus think the essence of the Torah (or law) was not being practised by the religious leaders and teachers so that as a reformer he was returning it to its original purpose? Or did he think that with the arrival of the Kingdom of God the Torah would be replaced, so that his teaching was a preparation for the new order and a radical departure from the old moral order?

Read Luke 19:1–10 for the story about Zacchaeus.

Key terms

Metanoia The Greek word usually translated as repentance. But it also means a radical change of mind-set and heart.

Parable of the Lost Son or the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) One of several parables Luke collects together in his Gospel on the theme of 'lost and found'. The 'lost' are probably those who have strayed from their Jewish faith.

Key quotes

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

The Lord's Prayer, Matthew 6:12

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

Matthew 5:27–28

Let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.

Matthew 5:37

Besides the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus does not appear to have given long discourses but preferred to teach in a variety of ways, through parables, short sayings, everyday examples and actions (such as healings). His moral teaching covers a wide range of issues but here are four examples.

(i) Forgiveness and repentance

At the heart of Jesus' announcement of the coming of the Kingdom of God was the call to repentance. The word repentance in Greek is **metanoia** and means a radical change of mind-set or heart; it is more than merely saying sorry, but a desire to change a whole way of life. Jesus gave many illustrations of repentance, including the tax collector Zacchaeus who offered to pay back all those he had cheated. But perhaps the most famous of Jesus' parables which dramatically describes the spiritual and psychological effort required for true **metanoia** is the **Parable of the Lost Son**.

Having squandered his inheritance on a frivolous and selfish lifestyle, the son realises that his only hope is to return to his father's house and beg forgiveness. The parable also describes how hard it is to forgive, for whereas the son's father generously welcomes his son home with joy, his older brother is unable to forgive. It is easy to condemn the older son, but Jesus' parable recognises that true forgiveness is hard. When asked how many times a sin should be forgiven Jesus answered 'seventy times seven' (Matthew 18:22): that is, for as many times as it takes. Forgiving others is also at the heart of Jesus' prayer, the 'Our Father' or 'Lord's Prayer' where it is also associated with cancellation of debts, literal and metaphorical, meaning that once forgiven a person is set free mentally and materially to start afresh.

(ii) Motive and inner purity

Although Jesus was critical of the Pharisees, he admired those of them who were trying to achieve spiritual holiness or 'righteousness'. He taught his followers that their aim was to exceed the righteousness of the Jewish lawyers and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). He taught that morality is therefore about developing one's character and that requires rigorous analysis of motive. The Sermon on the Mount provides numerous examples of what he has in mind. For example, by checking anger, a person is not led to commit murder; by resisting lust, a person is not led to commit adultery; by resisting using oaths, then one's language and intentions are pure. The Sermon on the Mount sets a very high standard, for the aim of the moral life is perfection. Jesus says:

Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Matthew 5:48

(iii) Personal responsibility

Keeping the sabbath day holy is a central religious and social law because not only is it commanded in the fourth of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1–17) but it is the basis for social justice – everyone in society is entitled to a day free from labour. Jesus argued, however, that all too often people were using the sabbath laws as a means of avoiding social

Key question

How different was Jesus' moral teaching from that of other teachers of wisdom?

Key persons

The following teachers of wisdom are considered to have a key place with the following religious traditions: The **Buddha** or Siddhartha Gautama (563–483BC) with Buddhism; **Muhammad** (pbuh) (570–632CE) with Islam; **Moses** (thirteenth century BC) with Judaism; **Laozi** (d. 531BC) with Taoism; **Vivekananda** (1863–1902) with Hinduism.

Key person

John Hick (1922–2012): Professor of theology at Birmingham University and philosophy of religion at Claremont Graduate University.

responsibility. The rabbis had developed a list of 39 definitions and examples of work as a means of honouring the sabbath and keeping it holy, but in practice the Pharisees and Jewish lawyers were hiding behind their religious duties and failing in their duty to humans.

One of his memorable short sayings was: 'The sabbath was made for humankind and not humankind for the sabbath' (Mark 2:27). He pointed out the hypocrisy of the teachers of the law who allow an ox to be fed on the Sabbath but at the same time forbid treating a sick human being (Luke 13:10–17). Jesus therefore cured the sick on the sabbath when the occasion required it. Jesus knew the risks of deliberately breaking the sabbath rules which, if proved, might have resulted in the death penalty (the punishment for blasphemy).

Jesus focused on the sabbath rules because he wanted to show that:

- Morality requires personal responsibility, not blind obedience to the rules (he called the Pharisees 'blind guides').
- Religious practices are there to serve human needs.
- Being holy is not achieved simply by carrying out external rituals but by purity of mind.

(iv) Is Jesus just a teacher of wisdom?

For many scholars presenting Jesus as a teacher of wisdom is compatible with a belief in his resurrection (as a sign of his special relationship with God). But for other scholars all supernatural elements of Jesus' life are to be rejected as unscientific inventions of the early Christian Church to explain his divinity. Once these elements, such as Jesus' encounters with demons and performance of miracles, are stripped away we are left with the authentic Jesus, the teacher of wisdom.

For these scholars presenting Jesus as the teacher of wisdom and morality is particularly attractive as it means that Christianity is not in competition with other religions in claiming Jesus as the only means to truth because it recognises that there are other great teachers of wisdom such as the Buddha, Muhammad (pbuh), Moses, Laozi and Vivekananda.

John Hick describes such teachers of wisdom as 'gifts to the world' and argues that it is only once the supernatural elements of Jesus' life are reinterpreted as symbols of his close relationship with God that Christianity will be able to enter into full and healthy dialogue with other world religions.

Presenting Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and morality is clearly attractive for those who find the idea of his divinity hard to accept and for those Christians working on interfaith dialogue. For others such as Tolstoy, Wittgenstein and even Nietzsche, the power and authority of Jesus' moral teaching is that it does not rely on abstraction but rather a real engagement with and affirmation of life.

However, if scholars such as Hick are right, then it is not clear what gives Jesus' teaching any especial authority even for those who admire him. For if Jesus' teaching and wisdom is also to be found on the lips of other important teachers there is no especial novelty in it and no apparent reason for adopting it more than any other moral teaching.

4 Jesus the liberator

Just how politically motivated was Jesus and the Jesus movement which continued after his death? Much of Jesus' adult life, as presented in the Gospels, was spent in conflict with the Jewish authorities over the application of the law and then finally with the Roman authorities who put him to death on the grounds of rebellion and treason. The question is of more than merely historical interest because it implies that if Jesus was politically motivated then Christians are justified in being fully involved in the political world today. Many scholars agree that Jesus' teaching on the Kingdom of God was not just spiritual preparation for the age to come, but a call to change the social structures of society now. But there is far less agreement as to whether Jesus belonged to a particular political movement or party and what methods of political activism he advocated.

Key terms

Zealots A first-century Jewish political group who wished to rid Palestine of Roman occupation. They often use violent means and led rebellions. They played a key part in the revolt against Rome in 66–70AD.

Underside of history The aspect of history that is forgotten or missed but which in fact occupies the larger part of human existence. Liberation theologians use it to refer to the marginalised, oppressed and exploited members of society.

Preferential option for the poor The Christian duty of the privileged to side with the poor in solidarity and act against exploitation and injustice.

Key person

Gustavo Gutiérrez (b. 1928): A Peruvian Catholic priest and theologian who lives and works with the poor in Lima. His book, *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), was foundational in the development of liberation theology. He is often considered to be the father of liberation theology.

(a) Liberator of the poor

In S. G. F. Brandon's influential though controversial study of Jesus, *Jesus and the Zealots* (1967), he argued that the historical Jesus was a politically driven freedom fighter but that later presentations of him in the Gospels toned this down and re-wrote passages to make him a pacifist.

Although Brandon's argument has been severely criticised by scholars, the idea that Jesus was a political activist is particularly attractive in parts of the world where there has been considerable class antagonism and exploitation. During the time of civil war and massive exploitation of the poor in Latin America in the 1970s to 1990s, liberation theologians found inspiration in the **Zealot**-type presentation of Jesus. For too long the Jesus presented by the Church was as a politically neutral character who preached spiritual values without wanting to make changes to the unjust economic social structures. The liberation theologians saw in Jesus' actions a bias towards the poor and exploited. These are the people the liberation theologians described as occupying the '**underside of history**'. By thinking of Jesus as the liberator the Church ensures that the Christ of faith is fully engaged with the affairs of the world. If this doesn't happen then, as Gustavo Gutiérrez argued, all the characters in the Gospels become merely fictional stereotypes rather than actual people engaged with the same kind of issues we deal with today.

The liberation theologians describe Jesus' bias towards the marginalised as a **preferential option for the poor**; his historical example therefore sets the agenda for Christians in every historical age. As Leonardo Boff says:

A Christology that proclaims Jesus Christ as the Liberator seeks to be committed to the economic, social and political liberation of those groups that are oppressed and dominated. It purports to see the theological relevance of the historic liberation of the vast majority of people in our continent.

Leonardo Boff: *Jesus Christ Liberator* (1972), p. 266

Some priests really saw Jesus as a type of Zealot. Camilo Torres Restrepo, for example, was a Roman Catholic priest who joined the

Key quote

The duty of every Catholic is to be a revolutionary. The duty of every revolutionary is to make the revolution.

Camilo Torres Restrepo
(speech, 1965)

communist people's army as a soldier in the guerrilla war against the government troops. As he said, 'If Jesus were alive today, He would be a guerrillero.'

Key persons

Leonardo Boff (b. 1938): A Catholic priest. He was professor of systematic theology at the Institute for Philosophy and Theology at Petropolis, Brazil. In 1992, he left his priestly ministry and Franciscan religious order because he felt the Church was 'fossilised' and too stuck in its ways. He was awarded the alternative Nobel Prize in Stockholm (2001).

Camilo Torres Restrepo (1929–66): A famous Colombian Catholic priest who joined the communist guerrilla group ELN (The National Liberation Army of Colombia) in their active resistance against the government. Although by the time he came to fight he was no longer a priest, he still regarded his actions in a priestly way. He was killed in his first combat experience, when the ELN ambushed a Colombian military patrol.



Camilo Torres Restrepo

Gutiérrez argues that although Jesus may be seen as a Zealot he was much more than that. Jesus did not set himself up to be a national leader and it is frequently recorded in the Gospels that he told people not to think of him in political messianic terms. Furthermore, Jesus' mission was not just the restoration of Israel but all human societies. As Gutiérrez concludes:

The liberation which Jesus offers is universal and integral; it transcends national boundaries, attacks the foundation of injustice and exploitation and eliminates politico-religious confusions, without therefore being limited to a purely 'spiritual' plane.

Gustavo Gutiérrez: *A Theology of Liberation* (2001), p. 213

Key term

Samaritans A group of Jews living in Samaria midway between Judaea in the south and Galilee in the north of Israel. They were regarded by Judean Jews as being racially and religiously impure because they had married foreigners and built their own temple. Most Jews travelling north to Galilee would have avoided passing through Samaria.

(b) Liberator of the marginalised

Some of Jesus' most memorable parables deal with those who were considered to be on the fringes of society – often referred to by the religious leaders as the 'sinners' (or *hamartoloi* in Greek; literally 'those who miss the mark'). Sinners included despised trades such as tax collectors and dung collectors; the sexually impure such as prostitutes and bastards; religious heretics such as the **Samaritans**. These sinners

were considered unclean and any contact with them would necessitate undergoing washing ceremonies to remove contamination. The other group Jesus frequently mixed with were simply known as the 'people of the land' (or '*am ha'aretz*' in Hebrew) – the uneducated who were largely ignorant of the finer points of the Torah. These included: farmers, fishermen, servants and labourers. Jesus' teaching was revolutionary in so far as it frequently used sinners and people of the land as examples of the moral life rather than the religious leaders or members of the religious groups.

So, it is the despised Samaritan, for example, who in Jesus' parable, The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), illustrates true love of neighbour, mercy and generosity. In the parable a man is beaten up and left for dead. On their way to the Temple in Jerusalem two Jewish officials (a priest and Levite) fail to attend to the man perhaps fearing that if they touched his body they would become unclean. But it is the Samaritan man who dismisses these religious rules and carries out the central commandment of the law, to love God 'with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:28). Not only does the Samaritan treat the man's wounds but he pays for him to be looked after at a local inn. By using the Samaritan as an example of exemplary moral behaviour, Jesus touches on the consciences and prejudices of his audience; liberation is not necessarily about political revolution but in shifting consciousness.

Another example (Mark 5:24–34) is where Jesus touches a woman who has been bleeding for twelve years. According to the Torah (Leviticus 15:19–28) touching a woman who is having her period would automatically make him unclean and yet he chooses to see her action as one of faith and in accepting her, Jesus challenges some of deep-seated body prejudices and attitudes to women of his day.

Finally, Jesus frequently keeps table-fellowship with tax-collectors, prostitutes and thieves. Amongst the Pharisees table-fellowship meant maintaining very precise standards of religious rituals (keeping to the food laws, maintaining the sabbath rules and washing rituals, and so on), so Jesus' deliberate rejection of the table-fellowship rituals was a symbol of his frequently uttered phrase that 'the last shall be first, and the first last' in his vision of a transformed society, the Kingdom of God.

(c) Is Jesus just a liberator?

Many scholars find the depiction of Jesus as liberator powerful because it provides a model of how to challenge an unjust world. Others, though, consider that Jesus' authority was not political but spiritual. At his trial when Pilate asks him if he is the king of the Jews, Jesus replied:

My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed across to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here.

John 18:36

Key quote

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax-collectors, they said to his disciples, 'Why does he eat with tax-collectors and sinners?'

Mark 2:16

Key question

Was Jesus more than a political liberator?

Key quote

Then Jesus said to him, 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.'

Matthew 26:52

There is more Gospel evidence to suggest that Jesus never advocated political revolution supported by violent struggle. For example:

- At the Garden at Gethsemane when Jesus was arrested, he scolded one of his disciples for drawing his sword (Matthew 26:47–56).
- The authorities did not consider Jesus to be a revolutionary leader otherwise they would have arrested the disciples as well as Jesus.
- Jesus resists being called messiah or king. At the feeding of the multitude (John 6), when Jesus sees that they wanted to make him a king, the Gospel writer records that Jesus 'withdrew again to the mountain by himself' (John 6:15).

5 Son of God

Key terms

Son of God The term used by Jesus' followers to describe his special relationship with God.

Council of Chalcedon The city of Chalcedon (in modern Turkey) was chosen as being close to Constantinople (modern Istanbul) which was the centre of the Roman Empire and Church. The meeting in 451AD was attended by 600 bishops with the primary purpose of re-affirming the central Christian beliefs, in particular the divinity and humanity of Christ.

For many Christians Jesus' authority is of the third kind which we considered earlier (see page 304). For some, his authority comes from carrying out God's will in a special way and acting on God's behalf, whereas for others he was God or rather God embodied in human form. Philosophically and theologically these are immensely complex issues and the early Christians found them just as difficult to explain as we do today.

Jesus was given many titles, but one summarised all the others and that was the term **Son of God**. It was not a term Jesus used himself but his followers used it to describe his special relationship with God.

In Jewish terms, the phrase Son of God was often used to refer to the king, as someone chosen by God to carry out his will on Earth. As the king was anointed as a sign of his responsibility, there also developed a hope that a specially anointed person would arrive and free Israel politically, morally and spiritually. The Hebrew for 'anointed one' is messiah or *Christos* (in Greek). In other words, Son of God and Christ are equivalent terms.

But in the non-Jewish Greek world of the first century, Son of God referred to a human who had been elevated to become a divine being. That is probably what the centurion meant when he saw how Jesus died on the cross and said:

Truly this man was God's Son!

Mark 15:39

Whether the centurion meant Jesus was *the* Son of God, or a son of God, it is clear that he considered that Jesus was more than a mere mortal. In time, the Church combined the Jewish and Greek meanings of the term Son of God and the official view was that Jesus Christ was both fully God as well as being truly human. In 451AD a council of church leaders at **Chalcedon** defined Jesus Christ as:

... one and same Son, the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man ... one and the same Son, only-begotten, divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Chalcedonian Definition of Faith

Chalcedon did not and has not finalised exactly what Christians mean when they called Jesus Christ the Son of God.

(a) Christology

Key term

Christology The area of Christian theology concerned with the nature of Jesus Christ's relationship with God.

The nature of Jesus' relationship with God is called **Christology**. There are broadly two kinds of Christology – from above (also called high Christology) and from below (also called low Christology). The kind of Christology Christians believe in changes what they think is meant by salvation, the relationship of humans with God.

- **Christology from above** focuses on Jesus' divinity and God's act of bringing humanity back into relationship with him. High Christology is not something which can be proved for it relies on faith.
- **Christology from below** focuses on Jesus' message, example and teaching. Salvation focuses on how people respond to Jesus the way this helps to develop their relationship to God and the world.

(b) Knowledge of God

Key question

Did Jesus think he was the divine Son of God?

Even Christians who hold a high Christology position realise the difficulty of claiming that Jesus knew he was the Son of God if at the same time it is also thought that he was fully human. For example, in John's Gospel, Jesus makes a number of great statements, beginning with 'I am ...'. 'I am' is especially powerful because it is reminiscent of God's description of himself to Moses when he reveals his name as 'I am' (Exodus 3:14).

Key quote

God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'

Exodus 3:14

Jesus says,

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

John 14:6

In some ways this couldn't be clearer. Jesus expresses that his unique relationship with God the Father is the only means to salvation because, as he says elsewhere in John's Gospel, 'The Father and I are one' (John 10:30) and, 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9).

Yet, for some theologians what these sayings really illustrate is not so much that Jesus was God, but that he was fully consciousness of God's will and entirely desired to fulfil it. Again in John's Gospel, Jesus says 'the Father is greater than I' (John 14:28) because as a human being he could not have been all-knowing and all-powerful as God is.

(c) Miracles

Key question

Do Jesus' miracles prove he was the Son of God?

Who then is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?

Mark 4:41

Jesus accompanies his words with many 'mighty works and wonders and signs' which manifest that the kingdom is present in him and attest that he was the promised Messiah.

Catechism of the Catholic Church para. 547

What is the answer to the question posed by Jesus' disciples in Mark's Gospel? Jesus had just ordered a great storm on the Sea of Galilee to be calm and brought the disciples to safety, but it is not immediately apparent to them what kind of person has the power to do this. The disciples would have known that in the Old Testament prophets such as Moses and Elijah performed mighty wonders, signs or miracles but these were occasional and not attributed to the prophet themselves but to God working for them. By contrast, Jesus' frequently performs miracles and every stage of his earthly life is marked by wonders and signs. In traditional Christianity, the disciples' question is one of awe; they have grasped that 'the mighty works' which Jesus performs are the result of his own commands and are therefore confirmation of his divinity and status as the Son of God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* follows the same line of reasoning when it says:

So miracles strengthen faith in the One who does his Father's works; they bear witness that he is the Son of God.

Catechism of the Catholic Church para. 548

But for many other theologians, miracles are not so much indicators of Jesus' divinity as special moments of insight into his teaching on the nature of the Kingdom of God. They argue that the New Testament does not have a single word for miracle but uses terms such as 'mighty works', 'wonders' and 'signs'. These are not terms describing how the laws of nature have been suspended but rather moments of deep insight and awe about the nature of God and reality. Those who hold a low Christology interpret Jesus, 'miracles' as they would parables; that is as dramatic signs to illustrate his teaching and understanding of God.

Key terms

Incarnation Literally means 'in flesh' and is one of the central Christian teachings that God became flesh as a human being in the person of Jesus Christ.

Theotokos The Greek term translated variously as 'God-bearer' or 'God-producer' when referring to Mary, the mother of Jesus, and is widely used today in the Eastern churches. Other Christians prefer to refer to Mary as the Mother of God rather than theotokos.

(i) Birth and incarnation

Traditionally Jesus' birth to Mary is a miracle. She is a virgin and the conception and pregnancy is the result of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). While this may be a unique occasion, its significance is more than just a biologically unusual moment. As the Chalcedonian Definition states, this is the **incarnation**, the moment when God becomes fully human; Mary doesn't conceive just another human being but God in human form. This is why she is described as **theotokos**, or God-bearer. For God to restore humans to the state of perfection before the Fall, he had to become human.

However, from early times Christian theologians have been deeply divided over exactly what the incarnation means. The following are all examples of those whose views were all rejected as heresies by the Church (at Chalcedon) even though their views were influential.

- **Nestorius** (d. c.451) argued that the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human, were completely separate, and only became one when the human Jesus will become one with God's will.
- **Apollinarius** (c.310–390) argued that in the incarnation the divine will replaced Jesus' ordinary human reason. Jesus was still a complete person as he possessed body and soul and as such he would have experienced suffering in the flesh, but he could not have sinned because,

Key question

Why have the Christologies of Nestorius, Apollinarius and the docetics all been regarded as heresies by the Church?

Key term

Docetic Comes from the Greek word meaning to 'seem' or 'appear'. Docetism is the view that although Jesus may have appeared to be a full human being, this was only so that God could communicate with humans.

Key quote

Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.'

John 9:39

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as his human rational soul had been replaced by the divine *logos*, he would have never experienced any form of inner conflict on how to act.

- **Docetic** Christians taught that at the incarnation God only appeared to take on human form but Jesus could not have been fully human. As the Son of God he was fully divine and brought salvation through his special knowledge of God.

Nestorius' theology still finds particular favour from those today whose Christology is 'from below' as it gives a psychological rather than a scientific explanation of Jesus' human and divine nature. It is much more convincing to think of Jesus' relationship to God being one of the obedient son rather than having part of him which was God.

(ii) Miracles as signs of salvation

Both high and low Christologies agree that Jesus' miracles are signs of salvation. As signs (the preferred term in John's Gospel) they indicate what it would be like to live in a world restored. His healing miracles in particular illustrate Isaiah's vision of a renewed society where seeing, hearing and walking are also symbols of new insight, understanding and acting in the world.

*Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened;
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then the lame shall leap like deer,
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.*

Isaiah 35:5–6

So, for example, in the story of the healing of a man born blind (John 9:1–41), the focus of the story is not so much on how he receives his sight but the contrast between the man's gradual faith as 'seeing' and understanding of Jesus as the bringer of salvation and the inability of those who have physical sight but are blind to the truth of his teaching.

Sometimes a contrast is made between Jesus' healing miracles and his 'nature' miracles. But salvation does not just apply to the human–God relationship but to the whole of the nature. So, for example, Jesus' walking on the water (Mark 6:47–52) is a reminder of how God's Spirit hovered over the waters of chaos in the creation of the world (Genesis 1:2) to bring order and beauty out of chaos.

Even the Gospels themselves do not regard Jesus' mighty works as conclusive proofs that he was the Son of God. They record moments when even in his own time miracles were seen to be works of magic which were no different from those performed by local 'wonder makers'.

(d) Resurrection

If Jesus' death on the cross had marked the end of his life as a teacher, then perhaps the notion that he was the divine Son of God may never have been considered, but of all events in the Christian story, Jesus' resurrection was the most important.

However, there was clearly something different about Jesus' resurrection as resurrection was a Jewish idea taught by the Pharisees of Jesus' time that the righteous would be resurrected to live in God's

Key question

Does Jesus' resurrection reveal him as the divine Son of God?

Key quote

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:20–22

Key person

Wolfgang Pannenberg (1928–2014): A German theologian. In his influential book, *Jesus – God and Man* (1968), he argued that Jesus' resurrection, not his life, was a decisive moment in history which revealed him as God's Son.

Key question

Why do Christians worship Jesus Christ?

kingdom at the end of time. What appears to have made the difference was firstly, that Jesus' resurrection was experienced by hundreds of different people over a long period of time and not just immediately after his death and secondly, the overwhelming experience of the early followers was that something decisive had changed in their relationship with God; Jesus' resurrection marked the start of a new era.

(i) Confirmation of divinity

When St Paul describes Jesus' resurrection as the 'first fruits' of the harvest (1 Corinthians 15:20) his metaphor expresses a theoretical possibility that is now a reality for all humanity and all creation (Romans 8:29), that God brings everything to completion.

But even those scholars, who see Jesus as no more than an ordinary human being during his lifetime, the resurrection is the decisive moment which reveals him as the divine Son of God. Wolfgang Pannenberg, for example, argues that as Jesus' resurrection is uniquely a sign of God's completion and perfection of creation at the end of time, then it 'visibly and unambiguously' reveals him as God.

Only because the end of the world is already present in Jesus' resurrection is God revealed in him.

Wolfgang Pannenberg: *Jesus – God and Man* (1968), p. 69

(ii) Authority to worship and proclaim

The Incredulity of Saint Thomas, 1603 by Caravaggio

Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'

John 20:27–28

Key quote

And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.'

Matthew 28:19

The story of doubting Thomas (John 20:24–29) is a powerful example of how the resurrection was more than the transformation of Jesus' body into its spiritual state, but was also the experience of God's presence. It is a religious experience which confirms Jesus Christ as Lord who can be worshipped as God without committing blasphemy. But the story goes on to commend those who believe in the resurrection without having first-hand experience of the resurrected Jesus. This is crucially important as Christians take it on trust that the resurrection is the deciding event which gives them authority to proclaim the truth that Christ is the Son of God.

6 Uniqueness

Key question

Was Jesus' relationship with God very special or truly unique?

For many Christians, it matters very much whether Jesus Christ is unique or not. If Jesus is just one of many teachers of wisdom, political liberators or visionaries, then it undermines the significance of the Christian message.

On the other hand, the very idea of uniqueness is meaningless as no one is identical with another and we are in that sense all unique. For many Christians, Jesus' 'uniqueness' is just a way of explaining their personal belief and commitment in Christ as the one who defines their existence.

(a) History and faith

The New Testament scholar E. P. Sanders, in his investigation of the historical Jesus, commented that there is no way that the Christian claims about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Son of God can ever be substantiated from the evidence of history alone. This is because history and faith are separate categories.

History, in fact, has difficulty with the category 'unique'. Adequate comparative information is never available to permit such judgments as 'uniquely good', 'uniquely compassionate' and the like. It is, rather, a fault of New Testament scholarship that so many do not see that the use of such words as 'unique' and 'unprecedented' shows that they have shifted their perspective from that of critical history and exegesis to that of faith. We can accept with argument Jesus' greatness as a man, but we must stop well short of explaining his impact by appeal to absolutely unique personal qualities.

E. P. Sanders: *Jesus and Judaism* (1985), p. 320

Key term

Exegesis The close analysis and interpretation of a text.

Key person

E. P. Sanders (b. 1937): Professor of New Testament at Oxford University and then Duke University. His influential books, which include *Jesus and Judaism* (SCM, 1985) and *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (1993), investigate the relationship of Paul and Jesus to Judaism.

Sanders argues that Jesus' miracles, teaching on non-violence, hope for outcasts, and eschatological hope or teaching of God's grace make him substantially different from others at the time, but these are not sufficient to make him unique.

On the other hand, Sanders does not take into account the significance of the resurrection because for him it cannot be objectively and historically analysed as it belongs to the subjective category of faith. But for other scholars, whose Christology is from below even, the resurrection is the decisive moment and reveals Christ's divinity in an entirely new way.

But does this make Jesus unique? Some Christians consider that it does, for Jesus' teaching, his death and resurrection establish a new relationship with God as 'the way, and the truth, and the life' (John 14:6) and not a way or a truth. For others (such as John Hick) though the resurrection is a powerful metaphor of Christian hope – the triumph of hope over despair, it is not a unique idea or claim and nor should it be.

(b) The Christ-event

As the question of uniqueness is ambiguous, then perhaps it is unhelpful and should be abandoned. That is John Macquarrie's conclusion.

Macquarrie's argument is that every life is in some respects unique, as everyone lives their own particular historical existence in a different way. Jesus' life was no different in that respect. Unlike Pannenberg, Macquarrie rejects the claim that any one moment in Jesus' life makes him uniquely the Son of God. What makes Jesus especially significant is his place in history; in the events which led up to his life, the effects of his life and on human history afterwards.

Key question

What does it mean to say that Jesus Christ was a defining moment in history?

Key quote

I would have to say that the word 'unique' is not helpful in discussing this question.

John Macquarrie: *Principles of Christian Theology* (1977), p. 304

Key person

John Macquarrie (1919–2007): Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity, Oxford University. His philosophical theology was strongly influenced by Martin Heidegger's existentialism. Of his many books, the most popular titles are *Existentialism* (1972) and *Principles of Christian Theology* (1966).

Key term

Christ-event Refers to Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection. It is used by scholars to suggest that the significance of Christ lies in no one particular historical moment but the whole of his life and its relationship with history before and after.

Viewing the whole of Jesus' life and its place in history is called the **Christ-event**. The meaning of his life is not to be found in any *one* particular moment of his existence (such as his birth, his miracles or resurrection) but the part the whole of it plays in understanding human existence. Macquarrie prefers to think of Jesus' life as being a *defining* moment in the human relationship with God (or Being as he prefers to call God) but not exclusively so. This is unique in so far as it is a 'focus of Being ... in this particular person, Jesus Christ', but other non-Christian religious figures have also been defining moments of human existence in world history. However, for Christians, Jesus Christ is significant because of the effect the Christ-event has on their lives and in:

... *the deepest level of conscience, where conscience is understood as man's fundamental self-awareness as one is summoned to an authentic personal and communal existence.*

John Macquarrie: *Principles of Christian Theology*, (1977), p. 305

In summary, although Macquarrie rejects any presentation of Jesus Christ which claims he is unique, he does not think that Christ is just another prophet, political leader or teacher because for many people Christ defines what it means to live an authentic human existence. It is in that existential sense that Christ becomes, but only for each particular individual, 'the way and the truth and the life'.

Summary diagram: Jesus Christ

