In the year 325 AD, almost 300 years after the church began on the Day of Pentecost, the church was in serious danger. There were people who were teaching things that were not true, things that were not biblical. Their ideas became very popular and widespread – they were leading a lot of people astray.

So a group of over 300 of the most influential leaders of the church at the time met together for over a month to decide what the stance of the church would be on some of the most important matters of doctrine and theology.

That first meeting is what we now call the First Council of Nicaea, and it was the first of seven different ecumenical councils that happened until the late eighth century. These councils were convened to determine what was orthodox, which means what the right or true doctrines and beliefs of Christianity were. Their goal was to make sure that the church was staying true to what was laid out in the truth of Scripture, and what the Apostles taught in the earliest days of the church.

I bring that up today, because much of what they discussed at those councils, and many of the wrong beliefs that they were trying to counter, were all about who Jesus really was. Six of those seven councils were mostly devoted to deciding what to do with Jesus Christ, determining what the position of the church should be, biblically, on things like whether Jesus was divine, whether he was human, how it worked for Jesus to be fully God and fully Human, and how he related to God the Father. They knew that they had to get those things right, because if they didn’t, it would affect the church for centuries to come. And it is one of those parts of our faith that we absolutely have to get right.

Almost everyone that you will ever talk to will agree that Jesus was a historical person. Almost everyone agrees that he was a great moral teacher. Some will even go so far as to call him a prophet. It’s undeniable that Jesus had a huge impact on the course of history. However, there are far fewer people in our world today who have a biblical understanding of who Jesus is, fewer still have the relationship with him that he desires to have with them.

Those who do not have a biblical understanding of Jesus often put him in the same category as other historical greats. They lump Jesus in with people like Aristotle, Plato, Ghandi, Mother Theresa. People who have changed the course of history by their actions and by their teachings.

The problem with that is, yes, Jesus changed the course of history by his actions and teachings, but Jesus is not in the same category as other people we recognize as history-makers. Jesus is in a category all his own. Jesus was not just another great man. He was God himself, walking among us. And unlike all those other great men and women of history, Jesus is alive today, and sitting at the right hand of God.

This is one of the very basics of our faith, this is not only one of the core values of Agape Christian Church, but one of the core values of every person who calls themselves a Christian. There are lots of beliefs that we can disagree about and still be unified as brothers and sisters in Christ. There is a church right down the street who believes it is unbiblical to worship God with instruments. Obviously we differ there, but those people are still our brothers and sisters in Christ. There are other things that you and I can disagree about and still agree that we are both Christians. But what we believe about Jesus is not one of those things.

What you believe about Jesus Christ is one of the most important things you could ever get right. And it is absolutely essential that we make sure that our beliefs about Jesus have their foundation in the truth of what the Bible says about him. If you do not believe what the Bible says about Jesus Christ, then you cannot, in good conscience, call yourself a Christian. This is at the very core of what it means to be a Christian, at the very core of what it means to follow Jesus as his disciple. And if we are going to follow after Jesus, then we better get this right.

This morning, I want to take us through the basics of who Jesus is, and to do that, we’re going to look at Philippians 2. In Philippians 2, Paul uses the example of Jesus to show the Philippian’s what true humility looks like. What we ended up with is one of the most powerful and succinct descriptions of who Jesus is and what he did.

There are several characteristics of Jesus that Paul points out throughout this passage that are important for us to understand. And the first two we are going to look at are what caught up people in the early centuries of the church: that Jesus is both fully God, and fully man at the same time. That sounds pretty normal to us today, because we have heard those ideas for so long, and they have been accepted by Christians for so long. But in the early church, these were brand new ideas.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped,

Philippians 2:5–6 ESV

Paul tells us that Jesus was in the form of God. That word form is the Greek word μορφή (*morphē*), which means the fundamental nature, or the fundamental essence of something. It’s not only how the thing looks, but what it is inside and out.

You could put an orange skin around an apple, but that doesn’t change the morphe, the form of the apple. An apple is by its very nature, by its form and substance, an apple. You can call an apple an orange all day long, and all it means is that you’re wrong. Our society has a little trouble with that whole idea of calling something what it really is sometimes.

Paul says Jesus is really God, in his very nature, in his very essence. He was God, inside and out. John says it like this:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John 1:1–3 NIV

Those can be confusing verses. What is John talking about with this Word? If we look down to John 1.14, we see that the Word that John is talking about became flesh and dwelt among us, that John the Baptist was sent as a witness to tell people about him before he arrived. And when you look at all that John has to say about this ‘Word’ you find out very quickly that he’s talking about Jesus. So if we look at those verses again and substitute Jesus’ name in for ‘Word’ then we see what John is teaching about who Jesus is.

 In the beginning was Jesus, and Jesus was with God, and Jesus was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through Jesus all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

John 1:1–3 NIV

John very clearly tells us that Jesus is God himself. He also gives us a couple of other characteristics of Jesus there as well. The first is that Jesus is eternal.

One Sunday morning a few years ago, I mentioned in my sermon that Jesus was eternal, that he had no beginning and no end, it wasn’t even the main point of that particular sermon, but it caught the attention of one of the men in the congregation. He took me aside and told me that I was wrong about that, that Jesus came into existence for the first time when he was born in the manger in Bethlehem. Which is definitely not what John teaches us here, or what the Bible teaches elsewhere.

If you are wondering why we are doing this series on the core beliefs and values of our faith, that is a great example. That was something I took for granted that people understood, but that’s not always the case. This man had been a Christian for probably almost 70 years, and yet did not have a biblical understanding about who Jesus really was. These are not things we can take for granted, which is why we teach them.

Interestingly enough, that particular belief about Jesus, that he was came into existence when he was born in Bethlehem, was almost exactly the false belief that inspired the first church council of Nicaea to meet to begin with. They were trying to combat that false belief in the church all the way back in the fourth century, and yet it still hangs on today.

Several weeks back we talked about the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is a hard concept to understand. But what you need to know about God is that his nature and his character do not change. So he is today just as he was before the beginning of Creation, that doesn’t change, and all three persons of the Trinity are included in that.

John also wrote the book of Revelation, where we see even more of the deity of Jesus, even more of his eternal nature. Three times throughout the Book of Revelation, Jesus calls himself the Alpha and the Omega. Those were the first and last letters of the alphabet in Greek, the language the New Testament was written in. So it would be like Jesus saying he is the A, and he is the Z.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Revelation 1:8 ESV

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

Revelation 22:13 ESV

Jesus is God, and he is eternal, just like God. He had not beginning, he will have no end, and he will always be. He wouldn’t be God if that were not true.

If we go back to Philippians 2, we find the second major characteristic of Jesus laid out as well: Jesus was fully God, but he was also fully man.

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Philippians 2:6–7 ESV

That word grasped means to forcefully take something, or to keep holding onto something by force. Some of our English versions say that Jesus was equal with God, but he didn’t consider that something to be used to his own advantage, or something he should hold onto no matter what. Instead, he gave up some of what it meant to be God.

Jesus did not ‘empty himself’ of being God. The word that Paul uses here is a word that means to remove oneself from high status, to eliminate the privileges associated with high status or high rank. Jesus was still God, but he chose not to use his equality with God to his advantage, he chose to live as a human being, even though he was God.

One of the characteristics of God is that he is omnipresent, which means he has the ability to be in all places, at all times. When Jesus put on flesh and came to earth as a human being, he voluntarily restricted that ability. He was now bound in human form. God is also omniscient, which means he knows all things. Yet Jesus apparently chose to be restricted in that sense as well.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Luke 2:52 ESV

Jesus would not have to increase in wisdom if he already knew all things. That was one of those things that he voluntarily gave up in order to come to earth as a man for our sake.

In coming down to earth, Jesus became God incarnate. That word incarnate is not found in the Bible, but it comes from the Latin word incarnare, which means to take something that does not naturally exist in a physical form and put flesh on it, give it a body. That’s exactly what John talks about in:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:14 NIV

This was more than just God manifesting himself to us, this was actually God becoming flesh to live among us. That’s exactly what Isaiah prophesied would happen in:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Isaiah 7:14 ESV

We’re used to that word Immanuel because we talk about it at Christmastime, but it’s actually a Hebrew word that means ‘together with God’, or ‘God with us’. This was God coming down himself to live with us. Paul says in :

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form,

Colossians 2:9 NIV

All the fullness of God wrapped in human flesh. So why is that important, why does it matter that Jesus is fully human? For that answer, we turn to Hebrews 4.

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:14–16 ESV

There are a couple of really important points in those few verses. First, Jesus is our high priest, he is our intercessor, which means that we no longer have to go through another human being to get to God the way the Israelites did, we can now go directly to Jesus. We have access to God because Jesus has bridged that gap between us and God.

But Jesus is not just our high priest, he is also able to sympathize with our weaknesses, he knows exactly what we struggle with when we struggle with sin. He knows how hard it is to follow after God, because he was here, he went through it, he walked in our shoes. And yet, he also gives us hope, because he was here and went through all the same temptations that we do, yet he succeeded where we often fail.

Jesus knows what we have gone through, he knows where we have been, he knows what it’s like to walk this earth as a human being. Jesus was just like us in every regard, except for sin. That means that he is the perfect one to offer us peace and comfort, he’s the perfect one to help us through the things we struggle with, and he’s the perfect one to be our intercessor before God.

All that things that make Jesus our perfect intercessor and high priest also made him the perfect sacrifice. In order for our sins to be paid for in full, our sacrifice had to be one who was perfect. So Jesus came and lived among us, he lived a sinless life, and then he was crucified to pay the penalty for our sins – Paul says:

And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:8 ESV

In the towns surrounding Jerusalem, there were lots and lots of shepherds. Shepherding flocks of sheep was big business, because every single day there were lambs being sacrificed at the Temple. The shepherds around Jerusalem weren’t raising their sheep for meat, or for their wool. Those lambs were born and bred for one purpose: to one day die as a sacrifice for the people.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he had a lot in common with those lambs, because he, too, was born to one day die as a sacrifice for the sins of all humanity. Some people question if Jesus really had to die. If God is really God, if he’s really in control, then why couldn’t God have just pardoned all of our sin, why couldn’t he just commute our sentence, and be done with it.

[God sent] his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Romans 8:3–4 ESV

That word requirement is singular in the Greek. It’s not all the different commands of the law that Paul is talking about there, it’s the one righteous requirement that sin has to be punished, it has to be dealt with. If God did not follow his own righteous law, then he would no longer be a righteous God. God is holy, and God is just. That means that he cannot be around sin, and sin has to be punished.

We, the sinners, should have paid that price, which for us, means eternal death, separation from God for all eternity. But John 3.16 tells us that God loved us so much that he sent his only son, so that if we believe in him, we might not perish, we might not have to face the consequences of our sin, but we might have eternal life instead.

Jesus paid that penalty for us, he took our punishment so that we wouldn’t have to. Jesus came to this earth as a human being knowing what he would face, knowing all the pain and torment he would go through, he faced a horrible death, was killed and buried in a tomb. And he did that because he loved us so much.

But hear this very clearly: none of what Jesus did would have mattered at all if he had remained in the grave. The thing that sets Jesus apart from all the other wise men and women of history, the thing that sets him apart from all the other people who have died for a cause, the thing that made him worth following, the thing that changed absolutely everything, is that Jesus died, but is no longer dead. He rose from the grave after three days in the tomb.

If Jesus had not risen from the grave, that would mean that nothing else that he did matters. That would mean that the Bible, which tells us of his resurrection, would no longer be trustworthy, and subsequently we would no longer have a foundation for our faith. It would mean that we no longer have hope of eternal life. That we could no longer trust anything else that we know about Jesus. Paul says it like this:

And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

1 Corinthians 15:14, 17–19 NIV

Paul is saying that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then everything we do is useless, we might as well go home and spend our Sunday mornings at home, instead of worshiping God. Because if Christ has not been raised from the dead, all of this is useless. But then Paul goes on:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

1 Corinthians 15:20–22 NIV

See, Paul understood very clearly that this was the central truth of Christianity, this was the only reason that following Jesus was worth anything. Because we don’t follow some wise man from long ago who made a great impact on the world. We follow a Savior who paid the penalty for our sins with his life, but then rose from the grave himself, and is alive and sitting at the right hand of God right now. Jesus conquered the power of sin and death for our sake, so that we could spend life eternal with him. Paul writes later:

…”Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 15:54–57 NIV

This is the good news of the Gospel, this is the reason that we have hope for a life after this one. Because Jesus died for us, he paid the penalty for our sins, he conquered the power of sin and death, and we who believe in him get to share in that victory for all eternity.

Understanding the good news of the Gospel and believing what it says begins with knowing who Jesus is. It means believing what the Bible tells us about Jesus, believing that he actually did all the Bible says he did. And maybe most importantly, it means believing that Jesus will do what he has promised he would do.

Ultimately, our goal is that you will not only come to know about Jesus, but that you would come to know him on a personal and intimate level. Because is it in knowing Jesus and trusting in him that we have salvation and hope for all eternity.