

Class 5: Christology

What's so special about Jesus?

“Each eye can have its own vision separately; but when we are looking at anything...our vision, which in itself is divided, joins up and unites in order to give itself as a whole to the object that is put before it.”

-John Calvin

“Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to”.

- C.S. Lewis, “Mere Christianity”

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

-Jesus, John 14:6

THE NATURE OF CHRIST

In the last chapter we looked at the condition of humanity, anthropology. There we learned that we were created to be in right relationship with God, and with the ability to obey or disobey God. However, with the Fall, our relationship with God was broken, and we lost the ability to lead an obedient life. In this chapter, we will look at Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, and His work to restore us.

Who was this Savior? In brief, we can say three things about Jesus: (1) He was fully human; (2) He was fully divine, and (3) these natures are a unity in one personality.

The Humanity of Jesus

Jesus was fully human. He was born of a woman, from the womb of Mary. He grew in wisdom and stature. He displayed normal bodily responses to physical and mental stimulation. Jesus had all human emotions, but without sinning.

Theologian B.B. Warfield surveyed the gospels for the emotional make-up of Jesus in his study “The Emotional Life of Christ.” He notes that Jesus felt compassion and love for the people of Jerusalem and Lazarus and his family; moral indignation at the money changers; the affliction of the Man of Sorrows, distress at the thought of the cross, sorrowful unto death; amazement at the faith of the centurion; joy in God’s work; anticipation of the Last Supper with the disciples. His emotions displayed themselves in physical reactions. He hungered (Matthew 4:2), thirsted (John 19:20) and was weary (John 4:6). Jesus wept (John 11:35), wailed (Luke 19:41) and sighed (Mark 7:34). A loud cry was wrung from Him at the moment of death. Nothing was lacking to make the impression that Jesus was a human being fully like ourselves.

The display of strong emotions by Jesus is an encouragement to us that there is a place for Godly emotions. And yet, throughout the expression of these emotions, Jesus is always in control. Jesus is always master of himself.

The Nicene Creed (325 AD)



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

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius
Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living
and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.

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

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic
Church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness
of sins.

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

Amen.

In all ways, He was like us, except that He did not sin. The sinlessness of Jesus, His fulfillment of the Law, had both negative and positive aspects to it. Negatively, Jesus restrained Himself from transgression. He challenged His accusers to find any fault in Him. However, Jesus not only restrained Himself from sin, He also affirmatively fulfilled the Law by zealously fulfilling the Law's spirit as well as its letter. His meat was to do the will of His Father (John 4:34) and zeal for His Father's house consumed Him (John 2:17). Hebrews says that Jesus is able to sympathize with us in our weakness, for He was tempted in every way like we are, but did not sin. (Hebrews 4:15). The sinlessness of Christ is more than just an example to us. Since every sin carries with it the penalty of death, this perfect obedience was required in order for Jesus to offer a sacrifice of infinite value.

The Divine Nature of Jesus

At the Council of Nicea in 325, the church declared that Jesus is of the same divine nature as the Father. The New Testament demands this conclusion. Jesus claimed to be the Lord of the Sabbath (Mark 2:28). Jesus was called "Lord" by the early church (Acts 2:36) implying authority, mastery over the lives of His people. No Jew would have acknowledged anyone in this position except God Himself. Jesus claimed to have the authority to forgive sins, transgressions against God. (Mark 2:1-12). Who can forgive except the one offended? Jesus received worship when Thomas confessed, "My Lord and My God!" (John 20:28). With each of the "I am" statements Jesus identified Himself with the God who revealed Himself to Moses in the burning bush as "I Am." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was unafraid to claim that He was greater than Moses, since His words were to be accorded obedience over the Law. Hebrews says that Jesus is higher than the angels (Hebrews 1:4), Moses (Hebrews 3:3) and Melchizedek, the high priest (Hebrews 7). Paul says that the fullness of God dwelt in Jesus (Colossians 1:19). He is described as the creator, upholder and ruler of the universe (Colossians 1:16-18). There are other passages even more direct, which we will discuss under "The Pre-existent Christ" below.



Christ is One Person

Although perfect man and perfect God, Christ was nevertheless one person, a **unipersonality**. Jesus was not God underneath, covered by human flesh. The two natures are joined "without being altered, disunited or jumbled" (WCF ch.8, para. 2). The Scriptures reveal the Father, Son and Spirit as distinct persons in the Godhead. There is nothing like this in the two natures of Jesus Christ. Jesus is consistently referred to as one person - as "I" or "He," not in plural. He showed no sense of confusion from having a split or disjointed personality. Jesus is one person.

THE PRE-EXISTENT CHRIST

The clearest statements of the nature of Christ are set out in John 1:1-14, Philippians 2:5-11 and I John 1:1-3. From these passages we see that Christ was with God in the beginning (I John and John), that Christ was the equal of the Father (Philippians), and that He was in intimate relationship with God the Father (John), and that He was God Himself (John).

The Bible refers to Jesus as "the only-begotten of the Father" (John 1:14). Jesus is also called "the firstborn over all creation." (Colossians 1:15). Both Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons deny the deity of Christ based on these concepts. It is primarily because of their denial of the deity of Christ that these groups are considered to be cults or sects rather than Christian denominations.

Both of these groups are echoing arguments heard at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. These arguments were made by Arius, who was condemned as a heretic. Arius argued that the use of the word “begotten” implies that Jesus has not always been, that He had a beginning in time and is not eternal.

The Nicene Creed reflects the church’s response. The church determined that the Bible’s references to Jesus as the “firstborn” or “begotten” son must be understood from the background of Jewish culture. From that perspective the term “firstborn” is a statement of Christ’s exalted status as the heir of the Father. Just as the firstborn son in Jewish culture received the patriarchal inheritance, so Jesus, as the divine Son, receives the Father’s kingdom as His inheritance. The two books that refer to Jesus as begotten (John 1:14 and 18 and Hebrews 1:5) are also the books with the clearest and highest Christology -- that is, these same books proclaim the exalted position of Jesus. The Nicene Creed declares that Jesus was “begotten, not made.” Jesus was, therefore, not a created being. The Council decided that Jesus is “very God of very God,” and “of one substance with the Father.” He is not less than or different in essence from the Father.

When Jehovah’s Witnesses knock on your door, you would probably discuss the same verses of the Bible, which were the subject of discussions at the Council of Nicea almost 1700 years ago. The outcome will be the same. The Orthodox Church has determined that the pre-existent Christ was God, of the same substance of the Father. There are others outside of orthodox Christianity who believe Jesus to be something less.

THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF CHRIST

Jesus lived a life that was righteous in every respect, a perfect life. Most people think of sin in negative terms – I will be all right if I “do not smoke or chew, or go with girls who do.” Jesus fulfilled all the prohibitions of Scripture, but also **He went to all lengths to live a life of active righteousness.** When Jesus asked John the Baptist to baptize him, John protested, but Jesus said, “Let us fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:15). It was said of Jesus, “Zeal for my Father’s house will consume me.” (John 2:17). Jesus said, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to finish his work.” (John 4:34). These are examples of Jesus’ work to fulfill not only the prohibitions of the Law, but also the positive requirements of righteousness. When Jesus was put on trial, Pilate was right to say that he could find not fault in Jesus, for He was the lamb without fault or blemish. As we have seen, the righteousness of Christ is our hope of a right standing before God.

THE HUMILIATION OF JESUS

The passage in Philippians chapter 2 tells us that Jesus did not think His equality with God a thing to be grasped, but Jesus emptied Himself, taking on human likeness, and humbled Himself, even to death on the cross. This passage is referred to as the “kenosis” passage, from the Greek word for “emptying.” This humbling was entirely voluntary on the part of Jesus, and it is this act that is the ground for Jesus’ exaltation above every name on earth and under the earth.

THE ROLE OF THE CROSS AND THE THEORIES OF THE ATONEMENT

By His atoning death on the cross, Jesus won redemption for multitudes. Jesus won for us a restored nature and a right relationship with God. But how was this redemption the result of the cross? There have been a number of explanations given for the cross.



Ransom to Satan Theory

According to this view, we were captive to Satan because of sin. Christ on the cross was offered to Satan as a ransom for the souls of those who believed in Jesus. Satan accepted the transaction, but could not hold Jesus when He turned out to be the Son of God. This theory involves God in a rather shady transaction. Yet, there is a certain element of truth in the theory in that Satan and evil were indeed dealt a decisive blow on the cross.

Recapitulation Theory

This view suggests that even as the first Adam introduced sin into the world, Christ introduced obedience to undo what Adam had done. Again, there is an element of truth in this, in that Jesus did indeed introduce perfect obedience to God into the world - yet a good example is inadequate to change our hearts. We need more than another good example - we have more good examples than we can follow.

Satisfaction Theory

In a modified form, this is the view of the Roman church today. According to this view, God's honor had been violated and offended because we had withheld from God what was due him. Thus, the violation of God's honor must be satisfied. Christ, who gave perfect obedience to God, thereby gave God honor and did not deserve to die. However, He permitted Himself to be crucified upon the cross, bringing infinite glory to God. If dishonor to God brings punishment, then honor and glory to God brings reward. But Christ, being the second person of the Trinity, needed no reward and so He passed His reward on to us as forgiveness of our sin. The shortcoming of this view of the cross is that it puts the emphasis on the honor of God rather than the justice and holiness of God.

Moral Influence Theory

There is nothing in the character of God, according to this view, that requires justice or satisfaction. The cross is simply God's identifying with and suffering with sinful humankind. This demonstration of God's love for and identification with us moves upon the heart of the rebellious sinner to turn from sin and to respond to God's love with obedience. This accurately makes the cross of Jesus an act of identification with humanity, but fails to provide for our need for forgiveness and does not bring about salvation.

Vicarious Substitutionary View

The historic view of the Reformed church. From Chapter 3, you will recall that Anselm was a very influential thinker, and he was the first to articulate the idea of vicarious substitutionary atonement. According to this theory, vicarious substitution occurs when the offended party makes payment on behalf of the offending party. Suppose you are brought to court for negligent collision because of a traffic accident and you are fined. But suppose further, the person whose car you hit steps forward and pays the fine for you. This is an example of substitutionary payment.

The example would be improved if you had hit the judge's car. The judge must uphold the law and is compelled to exact the penalty for violation because if he does not support the legal structures of society, those structures will collapse. However, having fined you, the judge now pays your fine.



“Christ the Judge”
by Michelangelo

That is what we mean when we say that Jesus was substituted for us. He took our place and died our death. He bore the punishment for our sins on the cross. As Isaiah puts it, “...the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Isaiah 53:6). Or, as we read in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Other passages supporting the vicarious substitutionary view include Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, by becoming a curse for us...” and Hebrews 9:28, “So Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people...” That is what we mean by the substitutionary understanding of the atonement--the offended party makes payment for the offender by taking his place.

Most of the theories of the atonement have some element of truth to them, yet no one theory can adequately encompass all that the cross means. God cannot ignore sin as though it were non-existent or unimportant. The love of God and our sin meet at the cross. The crucifixion of Christ is the central point of redemptive history, for at the cross our sins are borne in the reconciling love of God.

We can say this about the cross: **reconciliation** really occurs there. There was something objectively real to God at Calvary. As God enables us to respond to what He has done there, as we in faith turn to this Jesus of the cross, we are reconciled to God. As we turn in faith and commitment, we come into the living, dynamic, personal relationship with God for which we were intended.

SALVATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

So salvation is available to us through the cross. But what about the people before Christ? After all, God told the Jews that they were His people, set aside for Him alone. How were they saved?

God's View of Time

We have discussed God's view of time. God created time. He is not limited by it. He sees all of it at once from an outside vantage point. From that vantage point, God sees past, present and future as a sort of eternal “now.” From God's viewpoint, the cross's effect moves both backwards and forwards through time. The writer of Revelation says, “Jesus is the Lamb that was slain from the beginning of the world” (Revelation 13:8). From the time of the Fall, God tells Adam and Eve of the one who will crush the head of the serpent. Surely these verses tell us that it has always been the plan of God to use the cross to restore our relationship to him, and that the restoration was effective from the beginning. **Jesus' death on the cross is the means of salvation for all people and for all time, even in the Old Testament.**



But if it was God's plan to restore us by the cross, how could the Jews of the Old Testament know of the plan? If Jesus were the only way, how could people who did not know Him become part of that plan?

We believe that the Old Testament provided men with a **progressive revelation** of God's plan. Jesus said that Abraham saw Jesus' day and rejoiced (John 8:56-58). The writer of Hebrews said that people of the Old Testament lived by faith. (Hebrews 11). And what was the object of that faith? Jesus Christ, to the extent He had been revealed to those people.

Prefiguring and Foreshadowing, Types and Signs

Jesus consistently taught that He was the centerpiece, the main topic of the Old Testament. He said that the Scriptures (to the Jews whom He was addressing, the Old Testament) bear witness to him. (John 5:39) He said that Moses wrote about him (John 5:46). When He began his ministry, He read from Isaiah 61 about the Messiah's mission and message, and added, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:21). In other words, Jesus claimed to be the subject of Isaiah's writing. After the resurrection, when the disciples were discouraged, Jesus joined two of them on the road to Emmaus and "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, He explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (Luke 24:27). The plan Jesus showed them was a powerful encouragement. "Were not our hearts burning within us while He talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32).

How was Jesus revealed in the Old Testament? **God revealed Jesus to the Old Testament Jews by prefigurings and foreshadowings, by types and signs.** What does that mean? Jesus was not fully revealed, but many things that the Jews heard or were commanded to do showed Jesus to them. For instance, the covenant we have described foreshadowed a relationship between God and His people based on the shed blood of Jesus. Isaac escaped death because of the sacrifice of the ram in Isaac's place. Jacob saw a ladder built from heaven to earth, by which God descended to us, and that ladder was Christ (John 1:51). In the Passover, death moved over the homes of the Israelites based on the blood of the lamb. The people of Israel followed God's mediator Moses from slavery to freedom, prefiguring the freedom from bondage to sin to freedom in Christ (Romans 6). They were accompanied by a rock, which was Christ. (I Corinthians 10:4). Jesus was the bread and the water of life for the Israelites in the desert as He is for us. The temple worship, especially the sacrifice of the lamb for the sins of Israel, pointed to Jesus.

The prophecies caused the people to look forward to a Messiah who would come specifically from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1), from the lineage of David (Isaiah 9:7), who would minister primarily in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1), who would be a shepherd stricken, causing the sheep to scatter (Zechariah 13:7), who would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zechariah 11:12), who would suffer and be insulted and have lots cast for his clothing (Psalm 69). But this Messiah would emerge victorious to sit at the right hand of the Father (Psalm 110).

All of these are examples of the prefiguring and foreshadowing, types and signs by which Jesus was known to the people of the Old Testament. **The people of the Old Testament looked forward to the cross as we look back to it,** but with a lesser knowledge based on God's progressive revelation.

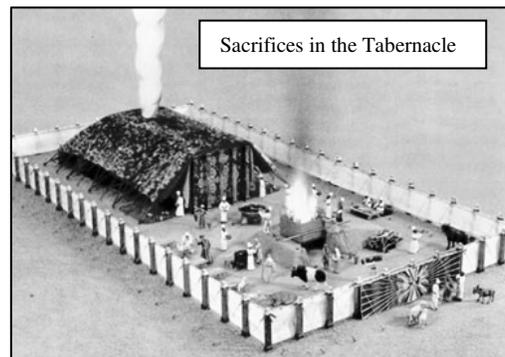
There is one specific area of prefigurings and foreshadowings, types and signs that we will look at in greater detail, because it reveals an example of Old Testament knowledge of Jesus and because it bears on the work of Jesus. Jesus was a mediator of the relationship between God and His people as prophet, priest and king.

JESUS AS PROPHET, PRIEST AND KING

In the Old Testament there were three offices through which God communicated the covenant relationship. God worked through **prophets, priests and kings** who were **mediators** of the covenant. Each of these offices is perfectly performed by Jesus.

The responsibility of the **prophet** was **to speak to the people for God**. The prophet foretold the future, but at least as importantly, he forthtold, calling the people of Israel into right relationship with God. Jesus performed this same responsibility. He called the people, whether the religious leaders or the lost sheep, to right relationship with God. Even a Samaritan woman of questionable moral character could see that Jesus was a prophet (John 4:19). Jesus took the place of the prophets. “In many and various ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a son.” (Hebrews 1:1,2).

The responsibility of the **priest** was **to speak to God for the people**. The priest offered sacrifice for the sins of God’s people, and interceded in prayer for the nation of Israel, God’s chosen people. The unique thing in Christ’s action for us is that, instead of sacrificing a sheep or a bull for the forgiveness of sins, He sacrificed himself. This was the only way of offering a sacrifice that would serve once and forever. Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, the place of honor, where He intercedes on behalf of the chosen people. (Hebrews 8:1, Romans 8:34).



The responsibility of the **king** was **to rule over all**. Jesus is now the sovereign over His people. Jesus preached that the kingdom of God was at hand. Before Pilate, Jesus said that His kingdom was spiritual and not physical, saying, “My kingdom is not of this world,” (John 18:36).

These were the three mediators through whom God worked in the Old Testament. The people of Israel anointed their leaders with oil as a sign they had a special task. Prophets, priests and kings were anointed to show they were set aside with special responsibilities. The people of Israel looked forward to a promised and expected mediator, who was referred to as the “Messiah,” the Hebrew word for “anointed.” This promised Messiah was Jesus. The word “Christ” is the Greek equivalent of “Messiah” or “anointed.” “Jesus Christ” is then a title or description, meaning “Jesus the anointed,” or “Jesus the mediator.”

Jesus is our prophet, priest and king. He speaks to us for God; He speaks to God on our behalf; and He rules over all. Each prophet, priest and king in the Old Testament prefigured and foreshadowed Jesus. The people of the Old Testament looked forward to the promised Messiah, who would perfectly mediate the covenant between God and His people. As they looked forward to this Messiah, they looked forward to and placed their hope in Jesus.

THE RESURRECTION

Jesus did not stay on the cross or in the grave. After His death and entombment, after three days, Jesus rose again.



The resurrection of Christ is declared by Paul to be the fundamental truth of the gospel. “If Christ is not risen,” he says, “then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also in vain.... you are still dead in your sins.” (I Corinthians 15:14,17). The apostles were in despair and fear on Christ’s death and before His resurrection. Then remember the change in them on Easter morning. They were right to be so transformed. Consider what hinges on the fact of the resurrection:

1. All of Christ’s claims and the success of His work rest on the fact that He rose from the dead.
2. If He rose, the gospel is true and the identity of Jesus is certain. He is the Son of God, equal to the Father, God manifest in the flesh.
3. If He rose, His words are true, and dependable as words of life.
4. If He rose, His sacrifice has been accepted as a satisfaction of divine justice, and His blood is a ransom for many.
5. If He rose, He has acted as federal head for His people, and His resurrection secures and illustrates the new life we will enjoy.

But if Christ is not risen, none of these glorious possibilities are true, and Paul is right, we are without hope. “But,” Paul assures us “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (I Corinthians 15:20).

The fact of the resurrection may be the best-authenticated fact in history.

1. It was foretold in the Old Testament.
2. Christ Himself foretold it.
3. The empty tomb was never explained.
4. The witnesses to the fact that Christ was seen alive after His death were numerous, (more than 500 at once) competent and worthy of confidence.
5. The sincerity of conviction of the believers cannot be questioned, as their entire view of life changed and they made sacrifices for their convictions otherwise unimaginable.
6. The testimony of witnesses was confirmed by signs and wonders that could not be explained.

WE BELIEVE *WHAT*?

7. The resurrection has been commemorated from its occurrence to the present by a change in the day of the week of God's worship.
8. The testimony of the Holy Spirit to the truth of the resurrection continues in the hearts of believers even to the present day.

The resurrection of Christ is a promise that as Jesus has been raised from the dead, we also will be raised.

Additional resources:

Louis Berkhof, Systematic Theology, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, pp. 305-414, 1996.

Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Abridged Version, P & R Publishing, pp. 337-420, 1992.

R.C. Sproul, Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, Tyndale House Publishers, 1992.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions 23-26 on Jesus as prophet, priest and king; Question 27 on the active obedience of Christ.

**CHRISTOLOGY
QUESTIONS**

- 5-1. What three statements can be made about the nature of Christ?
- 5-2. What do we mean by the “unipersonality” of Christ?
- 5-3. What was the issue decided at the Council of Nicea? What groups are separated from orthodox Christianity today by that decision?
- 5-4. What is the “kenosis” passage? What does “kenosis” mean?
- 5-5. Explain the major theories of the atonement.
- A.
- B.
- C.
- D.
- E.

WE BELIEVE *WHAT*?

- 5-6. What is the Reformed view of the cross?

- 5-7. How is God related to time?

- 5-8. How were people in the Old Testament period saved?

- 5-9. How was Jesus revealed to the Old Testament Jews?

- 5-10. What were the three offices of the Old Testament?

- 5-11. What was the responsibility of the prophet? How was Jesus a prophet?

- 5-12. What was the responsibility of the priest? How was Jesus a priest?

- 5-13. What was the responsibility of the king? How was Jesus a king?

- 5-14. In what way is the resurrection of Jesus a promise?

