

SESSION 10: The God-Man

Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28

Introduction

God created us to give himself to us, that we might glorify and enjoy him forever. Augustine expressed this in the very first paragraph of his *Confessions*: “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹¹⁴ Yet how can sinners ever *rest* in God? How can we who have inherited Adam’s guilt – and then added to it with mountains of our own sin – ever have peace of conscience such that we could *rest* in a holy and just God?

The answer is the gospel. “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending 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,” (Rom 8.3-4).

The center of the gospel is the person and work of Jesus Christ. It is to this person – and to his great work – that our standards now turn. In this session we will consider Christ’s person, offices, and estates. In the next we will consider the atonement. As we study these things, let us take care to study them not only as *information*, but as *revelation* leading to *adoration*. Here especially it is true that theology ought to lead to doxology. As we learn of Christ, let us delight and be glad in him.

The Person of Christ

The first paragraphs of WCF 8 gather together the biblical data on the person of Christ. Who is Jesus? He is the “only begotten Son... the Mediator between God and man, the Prophet, Priest, and King, the Head and Savior of his Church, the Heir of all things, and Judge of the world,” (WCF 8.1).

To say that Jesus is “the Mediator between God and man” means that he stands between God and man. He can do this because of *who he is* and *what he has accomplished*. Who is Christ? In WCF 8.2 we see “the constitution of the person of the Mediator as the God-man.”¹¹⁵

We should note the distinction made in WCF 8.2 between *nature* and *person*. When we speak of a nature, we speak of *essence and attributes*. When we speak of a person, however, we speak of *that which individuates nature*. To use an example, think of *appleness* and *apples*. ‘Appleness’ is the nature of an apple – its flavor, shape, texture, etc. ‘Apples,’ on the other hand, are the individual instances of ‘appleness.’ This is the distinction we have in mind between *nature* and *person*.

With reference to mere humans, there is always a one-to-one correspondence: a human person is *one living instance* of a human nature, comprised of a soul and a body. But with the God-man, things are different. In the case of Jesus, there is a *one-to-two relationship* – one person with two natures.

¹¹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3.

¹¹⁵ A.A. Hodge, *Confession of Faith*, 137.

Pipa explains, “The eternal Son of God is a person with a divine nature. This person took to himself a human nature, not a human person. The human nature became personal only when joined to the divine person.”¹¹⁶

The Hypostatic Union

The theological term for this union between the divine and human natures in the person of Christ is the *hypostatic union*.¹¹⁷ Our confession describes this union using some very important terms: “two whole, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person, without conversion, composition, or confusion. Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man,” (WCF 8.2). If we deviate from any one of these distinctions, we fall into heresy. Consider the following:

Heresy (condemned)	Separation	Conversion	Composition	Confusion	Comment
Nestorianism (431)	Y	N	N	N	2 natures, 2 persons, 1 body
Eutychianism (451)	N	Y	N	N	deity absorbed humanity
Apollinarianism (381)	N	N	Y	N	<i>Logos</i> replaces human soul
Monothelitism (681)	N	N	N	Y	2 natures, 1 person, 1 will ¹¹⁸
Orthodoxy	N	N	N	N	WCF 8.2

Remembering the unity of Christ’s person also helps us understand passages like Acts 20.28, in which Paul speaks of “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” Our confession explains this language thus: “Christ, in the work of mediation, acteth according to both natures, by each nature doing that which is proper to itself: yet, by reason of the unity of the person, that which is proper to one nature is sometimes in Scripture attributed to the person denominated by the other nature,” (WCF 8.7).

On the other hand, our standards are also careful to guard the distinction of natures in the person of Christ. Why? The answer lies in WLC 38-40.

The first of these insists that *the Mediator must be God*. Why? So that “he might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to his sufferings, obedience, and intercession; *etc.*” Vos handles some common questions:¹¹⁹

Why could not God, by a miracle, provide a sinless human being, such as Adam was before the fall, to act as Mediator and reconcile us to God?

Even a sinless human being, if merely human, would not have been able to endure the wrath and curse of God as Christ did. It was necessary that the Mediator be God in order to sustain and support his human nature in its temptations and sufferings.

¹¹⁶ Pipa, “Mediator of the Covenant,” in “Christ and Salvation” (lecture, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Taylors, SC, September 22, 2010).

¹¹⁷ The word ‘hypostasis’ means *person*.

¹¹⁸ The question of monothelitism is whether the will is part of a *nature* or part of a *person*. Monothelites believed there was only one will in Christ – the divine. The Council of Constantinople in AD 681 condemned monothelitism, determining that there were two wills in Christ – both human and divine – but always acting under the direction of the divine will. This means that Jesus has a real consciousness of his human nature, and yet the self-consciousness of his person is divine. Though always conscious of his humanity, even as a baby Christ was self-conscious of his deity. He always knew that he is the God-man.

¹¹⁹ J.G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*, ed. G.I. Williamson (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 91-92.

How could Jesus Christ, who was only one person, “give his life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45) and bear the penalty for the sins of many people?

If Jesus Christ had been only a human being – even a sinless human being – at most he could have acted as substitute for only one other person... But because Jesus Christ was not only a human being, but also truly divine... His divine nature gave an infinite value to his human nature, so that he could suffer and die for many people at the same time.

WLC 39 goes on to insist that *the Mediator must be man*. Why? In addition to the reasons given in the answer, we ought to consider that this is the only way in which God’s justice could be satisfied. How could Jesus be a true substitute for men, if he himself were not truly man? As the ancient church father Gregory of Nazianzus once said, “that which he has not assumed he has not healed.”

Finally, WLC 40 insists that *the Mediator should be God and man in one person*. Why? So that “the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person.” Again, Vos is helpful:

Why could not God provide two Mediators, one divine and the other human, to accomplish the salvation of his people from sin?

Because the relation between the works of each of the two natures required that these two natures be united in one person. A divine Mediator could not experience suffering except through a human nature; a human Mediator could not endure the required suffering, except as sustained by a divine nature. Therefore it was necessary, not only that the Mediator be God and that he be man, but that both natures be united in one person that his work might be a unity.¹²⁰

Accomplishment of redemption required the work of two natures. But work is not done by natures, but by a person. Thus we must insist upon one personal Mediator with two complete natures.

The Offices of Christ

As glorious as the incarnation is, incarnation alone cannot redeem man. In order for man to have peace of conscience with God, God’s justice must be satisfied. The Mediator must not only *appear*, he must also *act*. Thus our standards continue from the person of Christ to his work.

Accordingly, WSC 23 speaks of the offices Christ executes. “Christ executeth the offices of a prophet, of a priest, and of a king.” WSC 24-26 explains these offices.

How does Christ execute the office of a prophet? In the OT, he did so by inspiration. Note what is written by the apostle in 1 Peter 1.10-11: “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.” In the NT, Christ continues to execute his prophetic office. He did this firstly by incarnation (Jn 1.18), and then after his resurrection by pouring out his Holy Spirit. The Spirit inspired the NT writers (Jn 14.26), and indwells every believer (Eph 1.13).

The primary way in which Christ executes the office of a priest was “in his once offering up of himself a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God,” (WSC 25). But beyond this, he continues as our advocate before the Father even today (1 Jn 2.1). What does it mean to say that he is “making continual intercession for us?” Read WLC 55.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 95.

The third office which Christ executes is that of our King. WSC 26 explains this in summary form, and WLC 45 puts substantial meat on the bones. Christ’s kingship is not a paper tiger or a meringue pie in the sky. It is a real dominion exercised through his proclaimed Word, his powerful Spirit, his church officers and ordinances, and his particular providences – toward both friend and foe.

How easy is it to slip into serious – even deadly – error by neglecting one or more of Christ’s offices?

Prophet	Priest	King	Result	Verdict
Y	Y	Y	Christianity	Is 33.22
Y	Y	N	Antinomianism	1Jn 2.3-6
Y	N	Y	Moralism	Rom 3.10
Y	N	N	Intellectualism	Jas 2.19
N	Y	Y	Emotionalism	2Tim 3.16-17
N	Y	N	Mysticism	2Tim 4.3-4
N	N	Y	Legalism	Rom 3.28
N	N	N	Paganism	Rom 1.18-21

The Humiliation of Christ

WSC 23 speaks of Christ executing his offices “both in his estate of humiliation and exaltation.” Notice the structure here. Our Lord fulfills all three offices in both of his estates. He was prophet to us during his earthly ministry (humiliation), and remains prophet to us today during his heavenly reign (exaltation). The same is true of his priestly and kingly offices.

Christ’s humiliation is summarized in WSC 27, and expanded upon in WLC 46-50. There are several things worth noting in the latter.

Firstly, notice the expression “emptying himself of his glory,” (WLC 46). This is what Paul means when he writes in Philippians 2.6-7 that Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.” When was the last time we paused simply to wonder at this, that the God of infinite glory was willing to veil it – when doing so guaranteed that he would be despised, scorned, unrecognized by most, and ultimately murdered? Why did he do it? For us.

Secondly, note what WLC 47 records about Jesus being “made of a woman of low estate, and... born of her; with divers circumstances of more than ordinary abasement.” The last proof text cited is Luke 2.7: “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Is it not a striking thing to imagine the King of glory, born in a barn – surrounded by the cold, filth, and noise? But go on to Luke 2.22-24, and note the offering brought by Jesus’ parents: “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” The cross-reference here points us to Leviticus 12.8, where we are told that the birds were the offering brought by the poor who could not afford a lamb. Again, is this not striking – the one who owns “the cattle on a thousand hills” reduced to abject poverty? Again, why? Again, *for us*.

We might profitably dwell upon these things at some length. Though we are used to living in and breathing the fetid air of a world ravaged by sin, the eternal Son of God was not. Yet he did, for our sakes – all the while buffeted by natural infirmities and infernal enemies (WLC 48). Though we all deserve death, Jesus did not. Yet he died. Though we fear death as unknown, he faced it knowing full well what it would mean to bear “the weight of God’s wrath.” The pain he suffered when the Father turned away from him in abhorrence and wrath (Mk 15.34, Ps 22.1, Hab 1.13) must have been something like that of an eternal, perfect marriage turned to sudden divorce. And yet he went to the cross. Why? As the Nicene Creed states, “For us men for our salvation.” Do we dwell on this?

Speaking of the creeds of the church, we might also note how WLC 50 explains the expression “he descended into hell” from the Apostles’ Creed. Rather than see it as Jesus visiting the abode of the damned, our standards understand this expression to refer to the burial of his body until the third day. Though this may give us pause at first glance, it is consistent with Jesus’ own words to the penitent thief in Luke 23.43, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” Vos again offers a helpful note:

The word translated ‘hell’ in the Apostles’ Creed is not Gehenna (the place of punishment) but Hades (the realm of death). Our catechism teaches that the words “He descended into hell” refer to Christ’s being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time, the word *hell* being understood as “the realm and power of death.”¹²¹

The pastoral implications of this expression are explained by *The Heidelberg Catechism*:

Q. 44: Why does the creed add, “he descended into hell”?

A. To assure me in times of personal crisis and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, especially on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.

We all experience seasons of dryness in our affection for Christ. In such times, we would do well to ponder his humiliation – to remember what he suffered for us, and from what he saved us.

The Exaltation of Christ

The last topic we consider in this session is Christ’s exaltation (WLC 51-56). What does Christ’s resurrection and ascension mean for believers?

By his resurrection Jesus “declared himself to be the Son of God,” (WLC 52). In Deuteronomy 18.20-22 God declared that false prophets would die, and that the proof of a prophet was in the pudding of his predictions. Jesus claimed to be God (Jn 8.58, 10.30, 14.9) and foretold his resurrection (Mk 8.31, 9.31, 10.34). The reality of the latter vindicates the former. He really is the Son of God, and everything he tells us is true.

Jesus’ resurrection also declares that he “satisfied divine justice,” (WLC 52). Paul makes it clear that without the literal resurrection, there is literally no forgiveness of sins or life everlasting (1 Cor 15.13-18). But why did Jesus have to rise to prove divine justice satisfied? Paul does not state it explicitly, but we may infer it: if Jesus had *not* risen, then the guilt of sin was too great to be liquidated by his righteous sacrifice. Thanks be to God it was not – that he lives! Vos writes, “the penalty for sin had been completely paid and canceled; therefore death had lost its claim on him.”¹²²

Thirdly, Jesus’ resurrection is a promise to believers “to assure them of their resurrection from the death at the last day.” See Romans 6.5 and 1 Corinthians 15.20-26.

Before concluding this session, consider WLC 54. What does the answer to this question tell us? It tells us that Christ, currently seated at the Father’s right hand, is doing. The Father’s right hand is a place of authority and power, and from it our glorious King prosecutes his conquest of the nations. He is not vacationing until his return. He is reigning. And as he reigns, he intercedes for us:

¹²¹ Ibid., 113.

¹²² Ibid., 115.

Christ maketh intercession, by his appearing in our nature continually before the Father in heaven, in the merit of his obedience and sacrifice on earth, declaring his will to have it applied to all believers; answering all accusations against them, and procuring for them quiet of conscience, notwithstanding daily failings, access with boldness to the throne of grace, and acceptance of their persons and services. (WLC 55)

What an amazing thing – to believe that even now, *this very moment*, Jesus sits in heaven “declaring his will to have [the merit of his obedience and sacrifice] applied to all believers; answering all accusations against [us], and procuring for [us] quiet of conscience...” Praise his name!

Important Questions

1. Why must we insist upon an orthodox understanding of Christ’s person – that in the one person of Christ there are two natures without *separation, conversion, composition, or confusion*? What is at stake if we fudge?
2. Hebrews 4.15 tells us that Jesus “in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” Could Jesus have sinned (see footnote 117)?
3. If Jesus never sinned, how can he truly “sympathize with our weaknesses,” (Heb 4.15)?
4. Which office(s) of Christ is/are most commonly denied in the broader church in our community? Which office(s) is/are most commonly denied in the Reformed church?
5. A brother or sister in the congregation confesses to you that, in the midst of various outward trials – some of them prolonged and severe – they are finding it hard to feel love toward Christ. What questions would you ask of this person? How would you counsel them?
6. What comforts can we derive from the humiliation of Christ? From his exaltation?
7. Given what the resurrection proves about all of Jesus’ claims, where is the best place to start with an unbeliever skeptical about the claims of Christ?

Additional Resources

Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick

J.G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism: A Commentary*

For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44 (*review*). We will consider what this section teaches about the atonement:

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28