

CHRISTOLOGY: WHAT THE CHURCH TEACHES ABOUT JESUS CHRIST

(Second in a series on the *Articles of Religion and Confession of Faith*)

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Biology is teaching about natural life (Greek *bios*); psychology explores the faculties of the soul (Greek *psyche*), and Christology is the church’s logic (Greek *logos*) about the Messiah (Greek *Christos*). In our understanding of Jesus Christ, the United Methodist Church confesses nothing other than the faith of the church catholic, grounded in the testimony of Scripture as read through the lenses of the Trinitarian creeds. Echoing the language of the *Articles of Religion (AR)* and *Confession of Faith (CF)*, our *2004 Discipline* asserts, “We hold in common with all Christians a faith in the mystery of salvation in and through Jesus Christ. At the heart of the gospel is God’s incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth” (43). Using explicit biblical titles, “The United Methodist Church affirms that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, the Savior of the world, and the Lord of all” (87).

The *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England contain three separate statements on the person of Christ: 1) his incarnation and death, 2) his going down into hell (*hades* as the abode of the dead, not *hell* as final punishment), and 3) his resurrection and final judgment. Because of its liability to misunderstanding and slight scriptural support, Wesley omitted the second of these in his editing of the *Articles of Religion* for the Methodists in America. The 1786 Conference also removed this statement from the Apostle’s Creed in The Sunday Service. It’s restoration in the 1989 baptismal services is an indicator that anti-Roman Catholic sentiment has waned and that we are ready to reexplore what it means that Jesus was raised *from the dead*, meaning *from the (realm) where the dead are*. As a confession that the incarnation involved full descent, not just into life but into the realm of death, it makes sense. There is nowhere we go that Jesus has not been. Nothing that is properly human is foreign to him, sin alone excepted. Whether this teaching is to be restored to our Doctrinal Standards is a matter for church wide discernment and Constitutional amendment. In the *Confession* the teaching on Jesus Christ is compressed into one article. Our statements are:

Articles of Religion, Article II—Of the Word, or Son of God, Who Was Made Very Man: “The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God, of one substance with the Father, took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin; so that two whole and perfect natures, that is to say, the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God and very Man, who truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, to reconcile his Father to us, and to be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for actual sins of men” (59-60).

Articles of Religion, Article III—Of the Resurrection of Christ: “Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day” (60).

Confession of Faith, Article II—Jesus Christ: “We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and

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truly man, in whom the divine and human natures are perfectly and inseparably united. He is the eternal Word made flesh, the only begotten Son of the Father, born of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. As ministering Servant he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead and ascended into heaven to be with the Father, from whence he shall return. He is eternal Savior and Mediator, who intercedes for us, and by him all men will be judged” (67).

Those who seek something novel in our views on the full identity of Jesus of Nazareth will be disappointed. Our instruction on the way of salvation and the doctrines of grace have a distinctive Wesleyan spin from our 18th century founder (45-49), but not our core teaching on the Savior which goes behind Reformation controversies to the undivided church of the first millennium. Our teaching is conservative in the sense that it does not seek to improve on the classic faith of the church. It is radical in that it remains deeply rooted and resists the corrosive acids of skepticism and modernity in favor of tested insights that have sustained the church in worship, mission, and martyrdom. We guard the treasures we have received. Our goal is invite understanding and faithful contemporary following, not to alter received teaching. The stated mission of our church “is to make disciples of Jesus Christ” (87). In our teaching on Christ we are informed by the church across the ages just who it is that we are following on the path from baptism towards the kingdom of God.

It is instructive to note the formal ordering of the *Articles* and *Confession* where statements on Jesus Christ follow immediately after confession of the Triune God and just before articles on the Holy Spirit (AR: 59-60, CF:67). It was reflection on Jesus’ identity that drove the early church beyond Jewish monotheism to speak of the one God as Triune. In our U.M. doctrinal definitions Jesus Christ is always described from within the life of God. This is what some have called a *high Christology* or a *Christology from above*. Before Jesus is spoken of as going up in resurrection and ascension, he is first spoken of as coming down from the Father in the power of the Spirit through the mediation of his mother, the blessed Virgin Mary, who provided a human nature in the matrix of her womb. The virginal conception is God’s chosen means of coming in a full incarnation that honors both sexes. If God is to assume humanity, it must be through a female, and for both sexes to be honored the Savior must be male. The offense of outright miracle and a God who intrudes within the limiting structures of creation are there from the start and cannot be avoided. If the Catholics have made too much of Mary, then our error is surely to make too little of her. Pulling her out once a year at Christmas is not enough. She was, after all, her Son’s first disciple, the first to welcome the Savior and say Yes to his peculiar grace. That she is singled out in our *Articles* and named as *blessed* in our *Confession* is theologically significant. Faith is first receptive. There is no contradiction between our teaching and the confession that Mary is *Theotokos* (Council of Ephesus, 431), Greek for *the bearer of God*. The one she bore and nursed was true God and true man.

Because we delight in singing the faith, the *Hymnal* takes a cue from our doctrinal statements and follows the same theological ordering. Hymns on *The Glory of the Triune God* (No. 57-144) are followed by a large collection of 174 hymns (No. 153-327) on the life of Christ. What is confessed in brief doctrinal formulations is expanded in a rich array of hymns. This is followed by a lengthy collection under the heading *The Power Of The Holy Spirit* (No. 328-509). Whatever level of official teaching we inspect, be it the *Articles* and *Confession*, other statements in the *Discipline*, our hymnody, creeds, or the baptismal and communion prayers, Jesus Christ is embedded in and defined by Trinitarian language. United Methodists are not hesitant to offer worship to the Son

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along with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the one God. By my count there are at least forty-four references to Jesus Christ in the *Articles* and *Confession* alone. As the human face of God, Jesus is our window into the fullness of the divine life. In humble obedience he carried out the Father's will by the power of the Holy Spirit. The church invites us to pray for the Spirit's light and then to meditate on his singular life in the Four Gospels with the Trinity in mind.

The church's Savior was not adopted into deity at the end of life because of his performance as a religious genius or his unusual receptivity to divine grace. Jesus is not a guru. He was not just the best among us raised to a higher degree in order to provide a model of enlightenment, as if that was all we needed. The bondage of sin and evil are more than ignorance. Our problems are complex and multi-leveled. There is first the sin and iniquity we inherited, "original sin," then the weight we each have added to the misery of this world, "the actual sins of men" (AR). Jesus is not a human being promoted to deity but God the Son come down in a true incarnation for the sake of divine revelation and human salvation. His death is described in sacrificial terms as a self-giving in order "to reconcile his Father to us and to be a sacrifice..." (AR). God did not recruit a naive victim off the streets to take our punishment; God took it into himself in the person of the Son! To portray this as divine child abuse is to literalize the metaphor of Jesus *as Son* in a way that is unsophisticated and not worthy of the church's ordained teachers. The early church laughed at such.

Since Jesus is indeed from God in the full sense, we trust the truths he brings and the saving actions he performs. His person is the presupposition for his work, and his work the revelation of his person in time. The *Articles* and *Confession* acknowledge this deep logic of the faith. Both begin with the preexistence of his person and only then move to the initial work of his becoming flesh in the incarnation. They then spend time dwelling on the unique person of the incarnate Son, "very God and very man"(AR)/ "truly God and truly Man" (CF) before moving on to narrate the culminating events of his death, resurrection, ascension, and return as judge. In the loaded phrase "As ministering Servant he lived..." the *Confession of Faith* modifies the tendency inherited from the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds to jump from the incarnation to the cross and skip over the intervening years. In worship we sing, "Tell me the stories of Jesus, I love to hear... stories of Jesus, tell them to me" (*Hymnal*, 277). That our Lectionary is built around a three year cycle of the Four Gospels is witness to the fact that the church is nurtured at the bosom of these stories, ever old and ever new. Each story builds up a personal history that leads to the cross and beyond.

It is not just Jesus' death and resurrection that has saving significance but the whole of his incarnate life, even beyond death. That the *Confession* highlights the post-resurrection ministry of Jesus as the "...eternal Savior and Mediator who intercedes for us" enriches our understanding that the work of the risen Jesus continues. There is never a time he is not available as Savior. We are not at a disadvantage because we do not have immediate access to the Jesus of history. That he never ceases to pray for us is a great encouragement because we know his prayers are answered. No wonder we sing "What a Friend We Have in Jesus!"

The one who offers salvation is fully God and fully human simultaneously in one, undivided person. Teaching that diminishes one or the other is outside the bounds of faithful discourse. The uniqueness of Jesus Christ is not to be compromised in the church. The precise language of our Christological articles defends against an array of ancient misunderstandings (called *heresies* from

the Greek for *private opinion*) that raise their heads in new forms. Every word of our Christological teaching was crafted in controversy with both an offensive and defensive purpose that is often not appreciated apart from a careful reading of the history of doctrine.

Jesus is not a half-and-half hybrid of deity and humanity but both fully and simultaneously, without division or separation. He is not to be conceived as a two-level person with a human body and a divine mind. His mind was as human as his body, only without the intellectual clutter and moral distortion of sin. His cognitive capacities, unlike ours, remain cleansed and his responses to life trustworthy. In him were joined childlike responsiveness and mature discernment. He was not the highest of creatures or an angel but God the Son become man without ceasing to be God. The privileges of deity were laid aside and held in abeyance during the ministry as Jesus depended on the Holy Spirit for guidance from beginning to end. In the scenes of the Four Gospels the Holy Spirit is often the invisible party. Jesus knew what to say and do because of the supervision of the Holy Spirit; he was the primal charismatic. In him we see life lived in radical dependence and real delight.

The incarnation was not temporary but an abiding union in one person, “never to be divided” (AR). Jesus’ suffering was not an illusion; in him God the Son “truly suffered” (AR). He is not a divine deception or illusion. The burial certifies the death just as the appearances confirm the resurrection. The resurrection was *spiritual* in that it was the work of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 1:4); it was not *spiritual* in the sense of being less than bodily. It was not an immortal soul that was raised but the whole embodied person. The corpse of Jesus was transformed, as our doctrine teaches, “..and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man’s nature...” (AR). God is the graverobber. Resurrection claimed the whole of Jesus and is the promise of our ultimate transformation and perfection. To reduce salvation to our souls *going to heaven when we die* is much less than we are promised. I want the whole package! In its doctrine of Christ the church guards this blessed hope, and it is in this faith that we bury our dead, “...in sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (*Book of Worship*, 156).

Jesus’ Sonship does not imply that he is second generation, a sort of *junior god*. His origin as “the only begotten of the Father”(CF) is not biological but an eternal relationship without beginning. Sonship is the language of agency. In the ancient Jewish understanding a son is the representative of his Father, possessing full authority. Thus, “He who has seen me has seen the Father”(Jn. 14:9b). This is the purpose of the phrase “of *one substance* with the Father”(AR) behind which lies the Greek philosophical term *homo-ousios* (same being) which the Nicene Creed imported to assure the confession that the Son was of the *same substance* as the Father and not just of *like substance* (*homoj-ousios*). In this case it does make an *iota* (*i*) of difference! *Like* can be construed as similar but inferior, and this view of Jesus the church ultimately rejected. Whatever deity the Father and the Spirit are, Jesus shares fully. To reduce Jesus to the role of one more revealer, one more prophet or wise man, is popular but ultimately incompatible with our official doctrine. He is “The Son, who is the Word of the Father, the very and eternal God...”(AR). Jesus Christ cannot be made to blend in and fit within the mix of the world’s religions with any sort of parity. What is not compatible with him is not to be brought into the church from other faiths. He is the one who stands at the end of history and towards which it moves, “and by him all men will be judged”(CF). The uncritical mixing of incompatible religious ideas and practices, what is called *syncretism*, is ruled out by our UM Doctrinal Standards. The next article is on the person of the Holy Spirit.
