

# Keeping Faith

An Ecumenical Commentary on the Articles of Religion  
and Confession of Faith in the Wesleyan Tradition

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## Jesus Christ

### 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.

### 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.

### Confession of Faith: Article II: **Jesus Christ**

We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and 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 to heaven to be with the Father,

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from whence he shall return. He is eternal Savior and Mediator, who intercedes for us and by him all men will be judged.

**Who Is Jesus?**

**T**he doctrine of the Trinity states that Jesus Christ is “of the same being” as God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. But Jesus also shares “the same being” as humanity. This is why our church teaches that in Jesus, “Godhead and Manhood were joined together in one person, never to be divided; whereof is one Christ, very God and very Man.” Our Confession of Faith states the exact same thing when it says, “We believe in Jesus Christ, truly God and truly man, in whom the divine and human natures are perfectly and inseparably united.” This tells us who Jesus is. He is One Person in two natures. The two natures are divinity and humanity. But it is important to notice that they are united in “one person.” In other words, the natures are not themselves united; they are not turned into each other. Human nature is not turned into divine nature; it does not take on the divine characteristics we examined in the first question such as everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power and wisdom. Humanity remains temporal, bodily, composed of parts and of limited power and wisdom. Likewise the divine nature does not become temporal, bodily, composite, and limited. To transform the divine nature into human nature would be to make God mythological. This would deny the Creator-creature distinction. So we cannot say that divinity becomes humanity per se, nor that humanity becomes divinity per se. Divinity and humanity are not united in general, but the two natures become One Person—Jesus of Nazareth. Our second Article of Religion emphasizes this when it states, “the Godhead and Manhood, were joined together in one person.” The Confession states the same thing when it refers to Jesus as the one “in whom” the two natures are united. The unity of the natures occurs not at the level of the natures, but in the one Person, Jesus. This is a subtle but significant distinction. It allows us to say three things that might appear contradictory, but as we grow in our understanding of the mystery of our faith, we realize they do not contradict each other. First, we confess, “Jesus is God.” This is why we worship him. Second, we confess, “Jesus is

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truly human." This is why he redeems us; he shares in our creatureliness. Finally, we acknowledge, "Divinity is not humanity." This is what prevents Christianity from becoming mythology.

The language used to "describe" Jesus in our articles and Confession is not unique to the Wesleyan tradition. It comes from Holy Scripture as it is interpreted in the ecumenical tradition. The main language comes from the fourth ecumenical council held at Chalcedon. The deliberations of this ecumenical council gave rise to what has become known as the Chalcedonian Definition.

Following the holy Fathers we teach with one voice that the Son [of God] and our Lord Jesus Christ is to be confessed as one and the same [Person], that he is perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and [human] body consisting, consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead, and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; made in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before the worlds according to his Godhead; but in these last days for us men and for our salvation born [into the world] of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God according to his manhood. This one and the same Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son [of God] must be confessed to be in two natures, unconfusedly, immutably, indivisibly, inseparably [united], and that without the distinction of natures being taken away by such union, but rather the peculiar property of each nature being preserved and being united in one Person and subsistence, not separated or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son and only-begotten, God the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, as the Prophets of old time have spoken concerning him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ hath taught us, and as the Creed of the Fathers hath delivered to us.

The Chalcedonian Definition uses four words to gesture toward how Jesus is both human and divine; his two natures are united in One Person, without confusion (unconfusedly), without change (immutably), without division (indivisibly), and without separation (inseparably). Notice that these four terms are negatives; they tell us what Jesus is not in his two natures. He is not confused, changed, divided, nor separated. These terms give us the "playing field" within which we must speak about Jesus. They teach us to avoid two things. On the one hand, we must avoid confusing or changing the natures into each other. In the One Person Jesus of

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Nazareth, divinity remains divinity and humanity remains humanity. But on the other hand, we must avoid so dividing the natures *in the One Person Jesus* that he becomes two subjects competing in one body. Thus the two natures are neither divided nor separated in the One Person. We take this so far that we can even confess that Mary is the "Mother of God." We confess these things always mindful that the drama of Mary giving birth to God occurs through the Person Jesus; divinity itself is without beginning and cannot be born.

All of this is perplexing and seemingly illogical, but then we are pointing toward something that is unique and beyond our usual categories of thought. What we are pointing toward is the second great mystery of the Christian faith. The first is the doctrine of the Trinity. The second is that of the incarnation. It is on these two doctrines that everything else in Christianity depends: its worship, ethics, and practice. The incarnation affirms that God can enter into that which is not God (creation) without ceasing to be God, and that God truly enters into creation, taking it into God's own life. This all occurs in Jesus' incarnation, life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and promised return.

#### **What Has Jesus Done for Us?**

When God spoke to Moses, God said, "I AM WHO I AM" or "I WILL BE WHO I WILL BE." As we noted in the first lesson, this means that to know God's Name we must follow God in the way God leads us, just as Moses and the Israelites did. We can only know God's Name rightly when we follow along the way that leads to God. But who knows the way to God? When Jesus was heading toward his crucifixion in Jerusalem, he told his disciples that he would be leaving them and they could not follow, but he would make a way for them (John 13:36). This frightened the disciples because they did not know the way. To calm their fears, Jesus said to them, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). Jesus is the "way" into the life of God. Thus it is never adequate simply to know *what* he is. For instance, someone might understand and even confess that Jesus is truly divine and truly human, One Person in two natures, but to truly know this *requires* that a person follow him on the "way" to God that Jesus shows us. How is Jesus

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the way into God? We can see this when we think about six moments that characterize Jesus' life and ministry, which are mentioned directly and indirectly in our church's articles. We will divide up the articles into these six themes, gradually building up each theme until we return to the articles in their fullness.

### *Incarnation*

*The Son, who is the Word of the Father, . . . took man's nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin . . . (Articles of Religion)*

*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. (Confession of Faith)*

The incarnation begins in time when the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son or the Word, is made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Both our articles affirm this, and our hymnody declares it. In his hymn of praise to the incarnation, Charles Wesley wrote,

Christ, by highest heaven adored;  
Christ, the everlasting Lord;  
late in time behold him come,  
offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;  
hail th'incarnate Deity,  
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,  
Jesus, our Emmanuel.

The Wesleyan tradition offers this well-known hymn to all Christians, so that the profundity of our teaching can be mirrored in the beauty of our worship.

The incarnation is a creative act of God much like creation itself is. Mary's virginity is a sign that this is God's creativity. As Sojourner Truth (supposedly) put it, "A man had nothing to do with it." In fact, the church fathers understood Mary's virginity as a reversal and completion of the first creation. In the first creation, God brings Eve (the woman) from Adam (the man) without benefit of sexual reproduction. Jesus is

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the second creation in whom the first creation is reversed and fulfilled. Now God brings Jesus (the second Adam) from Mary (the second Eve) without benefit of sexual reproduction. Jesus represents the completion of creation. That is why Christians call the Holy Day on which we worship Him the "eighth day of creation." It is a new act of God's creating power.

The incarnation, however, is not simply the Virgin Birth. The term *incarnation* means "becoming flesh," and while this happens to the Word in Mary's womb, Jesus' entire life, death, resurrection, and ascension are all aspects of his incarnation, his being made flesh. They are how he becomes flesh. He does this in his life by taking on all the aspects of what it means to be human, except that he does not sin. He does this also by taking on that all-too-common experience of what it means to be human—death. Jesus gives himself over to death, even to be dead flesh—as we all will be—flesh that is taken down from the cross only through other people. He gives himself over to this ultimate state of powerlessness and is buried in the tomb. But then Jesus is bodily raised to new life, the first fruits of a new creation where God, human creatures, and all creation will live together in an intimate bond of charity. During his resurrection he teaches his disciples, and it is only from this resurrection experience that the Gospels are written. He then ascends to be with the Father and Spirit where he reigns in glory. This has important political implications, for Christ's victory relativizes all claims to power by nations and peoples. He promises to return again and complete the work of the new creation. All of this is part of God's incarnation—God taking on flesh and living intimately with it in God's own Triune life.

*Jesus' Life*

*As ministering Servant, he lived . . . (Confession of Faith)*

Jesus came not only to die but also to live. How he lived reveals to us what it means to be "truly human." Jesus not only shows us what it means to be God, but also what it means to be human. John Wesley explained this in terms of Christ's active and passive righteousness. Wesley explains Christ's "active righteousness" by affirming that "the whole and every part

of his obedience intended. Another well."<sup>2</sup> Jesus showed obedience. For to the beatitudes (Matt 5:3-11) He is meek and a person as a "minister" his active righteousness that God sees "inherent" in this is the essence he answers, commandments. He thought

In the beatitudes:

Blessed are they who are meek and lowly in heart, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matt 5:3-11)

This final beatitude of his active righteousness. He bore our sins and pursues a path of righteousness at the hands of God. Him at the same time also the sin

1. Wesley
2. Ibid.,
3. Wesley
4. Ibid.,

of his obedience was complete.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, Jesus kept the law as God intended. Another way Wesley explained this was to say “he did all things well.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus shows us what it means to live as fully human through his obedience. For Wesley, this obedience entails living a life that conforms to the beatitudes that Jesus himself gave us in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3–11). Jesus has the proper poverty of spirit and mournfulness. He is meek and hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He is pure in heart and a person of peace. All these things Jesus actively does through his life as a “ministering Servant.” He shares this life with his disciples. In fact, his active righteousness can be ours. It is not only “imputed” to us, so that God sees *Jesus’* righteousness in place of our own, but it can also be “inherent” in us. It actually becomes *our* righteousness as well. For Wesley, this is the essence of the Christian life. “What is religion?” he asks. And he answers, “it is love which ‘is the fulfilling of the law,’ ‘the end of the commandment.’”<sup>3</sup> This is why Wesley gave us “general rules” to follow. He thought we could “keep the law,” but only through the power of grace.

In the above list of the beatitudes, I failed to mention the final beatitude:

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you.  
(Matt 5:10–11)

This final beatitude points to Jesus’ passive righteousness. It is the result of his active obedience. Wesley defines this passive righteousness as “suffering the whole will of God from the time he came into the world till ‘he bore our sins in his own body upon the tree.’”<sup>4</sup> Jesus not only actively pursues a righteous and obedient life, but he also allows himself to suffer at the hands of others. He suffers both the violence that is afflicted upon him at the particular moment of his arrest, torture, and crucifixion and also the sins of the whole world. Both Jesus’ life and death redeem us. He

1. Wesley, *Works*, 1:453.
2. *Ibid.*, 1:452.
3. Wesley, *Works*, 3:189.
4. *Ibid.*, 1:453.



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knows that "the hour" awaits him—the hour when he will give himself over as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is an essential part of the Gospel story and of our church's teachings as well. What does it mean?

### *Jesus' Suffering, Death, and Crucifixion*

*As ministering Servant, he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried . . . (Confession of Faith)*

*. . . 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. (Articles of Religion)*

Jesus is a sacrifice not only for our guilt, but also for our "actual sins." If he were only a sacrifice for our guilt, then he would merely stand in for the punishment we deserve. Some Christian theologians see this as the primary purpose of the cross; Jesus suffers our punishment for us. But our Articles of Religion state that something more (not less) than punishment for guilt occurs on the cross—Jesus takes on our "actual sins." They become his, and he bears their wounds for all eternity. This is a great mystery, but it helps us understand a troubling passage in the Bible—Jesus' cry of dereliction.

When Jesus suffers the physical torment of the cross, he also suffers the torment of abandonment by the Father. He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This is perplexing. If the Father and the Son are one in essence, as the doctrine of the Trinity teaches us, then how can the Father abandon the Son? One answer is based on the teaching that the Son takes on the "actual sins" of the world. God is holy and cannot by nature participate in that which is unholy. In one sense we can even say that God does not know evil. When the Son takes on the evil of the world, the distance between the Father and Son becomes unbearable. The Father must turn from the Son, who even descends into hell—the ultimate act of powerlessness in being-made-flesh. This is a moment of "high drama." We remember it on Holy Saturday, the one day in the church year when we do not preach the Gospel or celebrate the sacrament. For it appears that, with the Son's abandonment by the Father, sin and evil silence even God.

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After Good Friday, we leave the church in silence, but we can do this in hope because we know the silence gives way in light of the resurrection. Otherwise we could only proclaim the words of despair, "God is dead and we have killed him."

### *Jesus' Resurrection*

*As ministering Servant, he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead . . . (Confession of Faith)*

*Christ did truly rise again from the dead, and took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature . . . (Articles of Religion)*

Can the Father truly abandon the Son even when he takes upon himself the "actual sins" of the world? If Jesus' body remained in the tomb, if the story ended with his burial and death, then evil and sin would have the last word. There would be no reason to preach, no reason to celebrate the sacraments, no reason for the disciples to bear witness. But the bond of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, cannot be broken. That God cannot know evil is a mystery, but there is a deeper one yet, and that is the mystery of God's love. It overcomes sin, death, and the devil, so that the cry of dereliction turns into a cry of exaltation:

And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the Name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:8-11)

Our actual sins are taken into the very life of God and redeemed. The seriousness of this teaching should not be underestimated. Every act of violence, every betrayal, every deceit, every instance of manipulation, abuse, sloth, cowardice, pride, lust, and greed, and even our indifference towards others is taken into Christ's body and redeemed. This means that he bears the wounds of sin throughout eternity for our sake. If our sins are not to have the last word, then they must be overcome by life, not death. Death

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is not redemptive. Life is. For this reason, Jesus must be *bodily* raised from the dead; this is what our church teaches, and it is the only way to believe in the resurrection. He "took again his body, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature." When the church teaches that he "took again his body," it teaches us that the tomb was empty. The resurrection is not just an idea that life goes on in some way after death; it is a full-bodied reality that reminds us that God seeks a place for *creation* in God's own Triune life. To be a creature is to be embodied. If the resurrection does not include "bodies," then creation will not be redeemed. Christ's bodily resurrection is the first fruits of the new creation. Indeed, this resurrection is not a mere resuscitation of a dead corpse; it is not the Night of the Living Dead! But no one in the church's official teaching tradition has ever taught that it was. Christ's risen body is odd. He shows up behind locked doors and asks for a fish. He is both recognized by others and not recognized. He seems limited by space and time at the same time that he transcends them. In fact, the nature of his risen body is so odd that it has always made me think that if the disciples were simply making it up, they should have done a better job. But they were proclaiming a mystery. God does not redeem us from creatureliness, but *in* it, for it is "good."

### *Jesus' Ascension*

*As ministering Servant, he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven to be with the Father . . . (Confession of Faith)*

*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 . . . (Articles of Religion)*

Jesus' resurrection is not the end of the story. He also "ascends" to the Father. The Acts of the Apostles tells us the story. Jesus has been with the disciples since his resurrection. The disciples ask him a question: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). This is a good question, because the resurrection is the beginning of the restoration of God's creation when a new Jerusalem will be the center of a redeemed

creation. But Jesus which the Father power when the witnesses in Jerusalem the earth" (1:7-8) they were looking sight" (2:6-9). I the disciples as to us through the Sacrament, but go to wait for the be witnesses that and his return

### *Jesus' Return*

*As ministering Servant, he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead and ascended to heaven to be with the Father . . . (Confession of Faith)*

*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 . . . (Articles of Religion)*

Until he returns. We will our Confession not awaiting deceit, and be decisively judge heaven and are given a gift

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creation. But Jesus tells them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (1:7-8). Then Scripture tells us, "And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (2:6-9). In the ascension, the risen Jesus is no longer present to the disciples as he was prior to the ascension. He is of course still present to us through the Holy Spirit, who works through the Word and in the Sacrament, but in one sense all our churches are "empty tombs" where we go to wait for the Ascended Christ to return. During this time, we are to be witnesses throughout the world. The time between Christ's ascension and his return is the time of witness.

#### Jesus' Return

*As ministering Servant, he lived, suffered and died on the cross. He was buried, rose from the dead and ascended to 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.*

*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.*

Until he returns, we wait. But for what are we waiting? We await judgment. We will examine this more closely when we look at Article XII of our Confession of Faith. Suffice it to say now that the judgment we await is not awaiting punishment. It is waiting for that day when violence, greed, deceit, and betrayal no longer have power over our lives, when they will be decisively judged so that they cannot rule. We await the vision of the "new heaven and new earth," of which Christ's risen body is the first fruits. We are given a glimpse of this vision in the book of Revelation:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband . . . And I saw no*

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temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, and its gates shall never be shut by day—and there shall be no night there; they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. But nothing unclean shall enter it, nor any one who practices abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life. (Rev 21:1–2, 22–27)

#### Questions for Consideration:

1. Who is Jesus Christ?
2. What are the three things about Jesus Christ that appear contradictory but are necessary to vital faith and knowledge of God?
3. What must we avoid when speaking about Jesus?
4. What has Jesus done for us?
5. How is Jesus the way into God?
  - a. Incarnation
    - i. What is the incarnation?
    - ii. Read: John 1:1–5
    - iii. What are the implications of the incarnation for political, economic, and family life?
  - b. Jesus' Life
    - i. Why is "active righteousness" important to the Christian life?
    - ii. What is "imputed" righteousness?
    - iii. What is "inherent" righteousness?
    - iv. What is "passive" righteousness?
    - v. Read: Philippians 2:5–11
  - c. Jesus' Suffering, Death, and Crucifixion
    - i. What does it mean to believe that Jesus is not only a sacrifice for our guilt but also for our actual sins?

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- ii. Read: Mark 15:1-47
- iii. What does it mean to say that Jesus took into his body our sins?
- d. Jesus' Resurrection
  - i. What does it mean to say that Jesus was raised bodily from the grave?
  - ii. What does it mean to believe that Jesus "took again his body"?
  - iii. How are resurrection and creation related?
  - iv. Read: Mark 16:1-8
- e. Jesus' Ascension
  - i. How is the church an "empty tomb" waiting for Christ to return?
  - ii. What is the ascension?
  - iii. When is the ascension celebrated in your church?
  - iv. Read: Acts 1:2-8
- f. Jesus' Return
  - i. What is the Day we await?
  - ii. What popular misconceptions are there about Jesus' return?
  - iii. How shall Christians live between now and that Day?
  - iv. Read: Revelation 21:22-27