

Of Christ the Mediator (Part 2)

Col 1:15-23; WCF 8.2

Reformed Church of Wainuiomata, 26 May 2019, 16:30

(Sermon put together by Pieter van Huyssteen with due acknowledgement)¹

Intro

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It is vitally important for you & me to understand who Jesus Christ is!

You see, if Jesus was only a human being, then our faith is null & void, for, then, Jesus had no strength in Him to appease God's holy anger against man's sin; and then He had no power over satan, which means, then, that He could not be our Saviour!

Perhaps you say, "But, Pastor, *I myself* don't struggle with Jesus' identity!" "I'm *sure* He was perfectly human (just without sin) and perfectly God!"

Well, if you can say that from your heart, then rejoice & be glad! But can you *defend* that beautiful view before a sceptic at work or in town!?

You see, there are sceptics and then there are *sceptics*!

The one sort of sceptic does not know much of the Bible – has hardly ever read it! These are usually the ones who are easier to enter into a discussion with! But then there are those sceptics who have read the Bible fairly well, yet not so well that they can explain verses which need a deeper understanding. And it's to help *them* and to be able to defend our faith, that you & I need to be mature in the Scriptures!

Well, by way of WCF 8.2, let's delve deeper into three points re our Lord Jesus. Here is the first one...

Of One Substance & Equal with the Father

My brother & sister, those who have rejected our Lord Jesus' divinity, are those who have often stumbled over some words and phrases in the New Testament – also over the word "firstborn" in our NT passage!

Please hear again Col 1:15, which says about Jesus that, "***He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.***"²

You see, some sceptics, like e.g. Arius who lived in the third century,³ have taken "firstborn" out of context and interpreted it in its literal sense, as if "firstborn" says that the Son was *born*!

So, they have argued that, if the Son was born, then it means that there was a time when He did not exist, which means that the Son is not co-eternal with the Father!

But where such people go wrong is that they do not understand the meaning of "firstborn" within the ancient Hebrew culture!

You see, apart from having a *literal* meaning, "firstborn" also had a *non-literal* meaning, i.e. "highest ranking."

¹ In writing this sermon, I am greatly indebted to my two main sources whose guidance I appreciate: 1) Van Dixhoorn, Chad. 2014. *Confessing the Faith: a reader's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith*. Carlisle, PA : The Banner of Truth Trust. 484p.

2) Sproul, R.C. 2006. *The truth we confess*. (In: Sproul, R.C. ed. *Truths we confess: a layman's guide to the Westminster Confession of Faith – in three volumes*. Vol. I (chapters 1-8 of the Confession) Phillipsburg, NJ : P&R Publishing. 279p.).

Many words & phrases I have written, I have gladly borrowed with great thankfulness from this source.

² Emphasis mine

³ For Arius, cf. e.g. Wikipedia "Arius (/əˈrɪəs, ˈɛəri-/; Koinē Greek: Ἄρειος, 250 or 256–336) was a Libyan presbyter and ascetic, and priest in Baucalis in Alexandria, Egypt. His teachings about the nature of the Godhead in Christianity, which emphasized God's uniqueness and the Christ's subordination under the Father,[3] and his opposition to what would become the dominant Christology, Homoousian Christology, made him a primary topic of the First Council of Nicaea, which was convened by Emperor Constantine the Great in 325...." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arius>

For example, in Ps 89:27, God says about King David (and ultimately about King David's Son, Jesus Christ), "**And I will make him the firstborn,⁴ the highest of the kings of the earth."**⁵ See? In this verse (Ps 89:27) the Hebrew author explains "firstborn" with "highest..." – "I will make him the firstborn, i.e. (that is) the highest of the kings of the earth!"

The same thing happens in Job 18:13 where a deadly disease is described as "the firstborn of death" – in other words, the *highest-ranking of diseases*.

Again, in Isaiah 14:30 we find that the words "firstborn of the poor," mean "the highest ranking in poverty," – in other words "the poorest!"

And, again, in Jeremiah 31:9 God describes Israel as His *firstborn* among all of the nations – i.e. as God's *highest ranking* among all nations!

See how the word "firstborn" was at times used in the Ancient Hebrew culture? It's almost like the Americans who said they would unleash the *mother of all wars* against Saddam Hussein – or that they would explode the *mother of all bombs* on the Taliban! If they were ancient Hebrews, the Americans would have said they would unleash the *firstborn of all wars* against Saddam Hussein, and they would throw the *firstborn of all bombs* on the Taliban!

So, what does this say for our NT passage – for Col 1:15?

Well, it says that Col 1:15 means, "*He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the highest ranking of/above all creation!*"

And this cannot mean that, of all creatures, Christ was the highest-ranking *creature*! No, for this is clear by what the very next verse (Col 1:16) says, i.e. that, "...**by him (Christ) all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.**"

And so, it's clear that Col 1:15 & 16 describe our Lord Jesus 1) as the highest-ranking in the universe, and 2) not as a *created being*, but on the contrary, as One who has created all things in the universe!

So, where does this put the Son in relation to the Father?

Does it not place the Son's status as *equal* with the Father!?

See why the WCF 8.2 says that *The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, (is) equal with the Father...*?

Well, so far re the word "firstborn" in Col 1:15!

Here's another word over which careless Bible-readers (like Arius) have stumbled, i.e. the word, in John 1:14⁶ which refers to the Son as the "**Only-begotten from the Father.**"

At first glance, it seems that the word *only-begotten* must be understood literally, like when a father fathers/begets a child – just one child who has no siblings from the same father!

But what the superficial/hasty Bible reader does not see is that also *this* word was often in Bible times used with a non-literal meaning – yes, with the meaning *unique*!

You see, take e.g. Hebrews 11:17!

What do we see here?

Well, that even *Isaac* is described by the exact same word – yes, that Isaac, who was *not* the only son fathered/begotten by Abraham, is also described as Abraham's "only-begotten!" Heb 11:17,

⁴ In Hebrew, bēkhōr (בְּכוֹר).

⁵ Emphasis mine. For other instances where the Old Testament uses "firstborn" in a figurative sense, cf. Jb 18:13 where a deadly disease is described as the "firstborn of death" (בְּכוֹר מְוֹת) i.e. a highest-ranking [most serious] disease).

Also cf. Is 14:30 where "firstborn of the poor" means "poorest" (בְּכוֹרֵי דָלִים) i.e. highest ranking in poverty). Also cf. Jer 31:9 where Israel (also known as Ephraim) is described as the "Firstborn of Yahweh among the nations." For this figurative (non-literal meaning of "firstborn" in the Hebrew Old Testament, cf. e.g. Brown, F., Driver, S. R., & Briggs, C. A. (1977). [Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon](#) (p. 114). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁶ Also in Jn 3:16 and 1 Jn 4:9

“By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and (yes)⁷ he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son...”⁸ (NASB).

My brother & sister, as said, Abraham did have another son called *Ishmael* (and also later sons by Keturah), but Isaac was a *unique* son in the sense that he was a son born as the result of certain promises made by God. And so, Isaac could be called an *only-begotten* son, since he was the *only one of his kind*.⁹

So, what do we see re the word “only-begotten”?

Well that it describes that which *is unique in the sense of being the only one of the same kind or class—‘unique, only.’*¹⁰

So, what does “only-begotten” then say regarding Jesus?

Well, that He is *unique* – and particularly unique in the sense that He is *One of a kind*, i.e. different to all other human beings; and that He is the only One of the same kind as the Father! See why the WCF 8.2 says that “*The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, (is)... of one substance and equal with the Father...*”?

Indeed, *only-begotten of the Father* describes the Son’s unique (one-of-a-kind) relationship with the Father!

But not just that! No, it also means that one should not read into the word “begotten” the possibility that there was a time when the Son did not exist – as if “begotten” would indicate the start of the Son’s life!

No! That was the error Arius made when he looked at the word “only-begotten” and said, “Aha, then the Son could not have existed from eternity past!”

What a heresy (false teaching), for we have just explained that “only-begotten” had nothing much to do with fathering/begetting,¹¹ but rather with uniqueness – yes, that it rather describes the unique relationship between the Son and the Father!

And, in that relationship, the Son is of the same substance of the Father and equal with the father. Is that not what Col 2:9 talks about when it says, “***For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form...***”?

⁷ The explicative use of “and” – in Greek, *kai* (καί).

⁸ Πίστει προσενήνοχεν Ἀβραὰμ τὸν Ἰσαὰκ πειραζόμενος καὶ τὸν μονογενῆ προσέφερεν, ὁ τὰς ἐπαγγελίας ἀναδεξάμενος (Underscoring mine).

⁹ My adaptation from Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 590). New York: United Bible Societies.

¹⁰ **μονογενής, ἕς**: pertaining to what is unique in the sense of being the only one of the same kind or class— ‘unique, only’ ... (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). [Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains](#) (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 590). New York: United Bible Societies).

Also cf. Bauer, W. 1979. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature. Chicago, IL : The University of Chicago Press. p.527).

Also cf. Reymond, R.L. 1998. A new systematic theology of the Christian faith. Nashville, TE : Thomas Nelson. p. 325 for *Regarding the second, there is a general consensus among scholars today that **μονογενής, monogenēs**, does not mean “only begotten,” alluding to some form of generation, but rather “one and only” or “only one of a kind” or “unique.” Warfield, for example, writes: “The adjective ‘only begotten’ conveys the idea, not of derivation and subordination, but of uniqueness and consubstantiality: Jesus is all that God is.”*

¹¹ Yes, nothing to do with *biological beginnings of someone by way of procreation or any creative act* (My adaptation of Sproul, *ibid*:242)

Thus, the men of the Westminster assembly were biblically correct in stating (in WCF 8.2) that, “*The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, (is) truly and eternally God, of one substance and equal with the Father...*”¹²

– which brings us to point 2...

In the Fullness of Time

The WCF 8.2 says that, “...when the fullness of time had come, the Son of God... took upon Himself man’s nature...”

The fullness of time...

Where did the WCF get these words?

From Gal 4:4 ***But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law...***¹³

Fullness of time... What else does this boil down to but that God placed the redemption of His loved ones fairly & squarely in the arena of ordinary human history!!?

You see, from Adam & Eve to Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and through all of the Old-Testament period, there is a progression in God’s redemption plan!

Then came the fullness of time!

RC Sproul illustrates this fullness with a glass of water which I have not just filled to the brim, but which I have put under a running tap with water cascading over all sides of the glass – full to the point of overflowing!¹⁴

Why so?

Well, because all of history – from creation onward – was converging upon that moment when Jesus Christ would be born; yes, that moment in real history of which the Bible gives the real names of real people and of real places – indeed, that moment when a real historic figure called Caesar Augustus had decreed that a census be held throughout his whole empire; that moment when Quirinius was governing Syria;¹⁵ that moment in history when Pontius Pilate was Roman governor in Judea; yes, that moment which is introduced not with “Once upon a time...” as if it were a fairy-tale, but with “***And it came to pass (or Now it happened)¹⁶ in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus...***”

Yes, in the fullness of time, the Father sent His Son!

As someone has said, “Christianity is married to time and space, not something that occurs merely in some spiritual space!”¹⁷

Here is point 3...

Two Perfect yet Distinct Natures

My brother & sister, right through the history of the church, many a debate or council has been held to come to a pure interpretation of what the Bible says regarding the two natures of Christ!

And one has to admit that, if it was not for false teachings about the two natures of Christ, then pure doctrines would probably never have been formulated!

¹² Underscoring mine. For the full first sentence of WCF 8.2 (MESV) cf. *The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being truly and eternally God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time had come, take upon himself man’s nature, with all its essential properties and common frailties, yet without sin.*

¹³ Emphasis mine

¹⁴ Cf. Sproul (ibid:242)

¹⁵ Cf. Lk 2:1-2 ***In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered.***

² ***This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria*** (ESV).

¹⁶ ***Now it happened that in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to register all the empire*** (LEB version). Ἐγένετο – a Second Aorist Deponent Indicative 3rd Person Singular of γίνομαι to be, become, happen

¹⁷ Sproul (ibid:242)

So, let me briefly remind you of two men of the fifth century – Eutychus and Nestorius! They both had a go at describing the two natures of Christ, but whereas the one went too far in the one direction, the other went too far in the opposite direction!

Remember what Eutychus said (by the way, Eutychus means ‘Good Luck’)! He said that Christ’s divine & human natures were so closely mixed within Him that He had a divine human nature and a humanised divine nature!

So, it’s almost like when I take milk and egg and totally mix them up with our food blender that they are so well mixed into each other that you cannot identify any one of them! And what you see when you look at my mixture is neither egg nor milk, but something by a new name!

Thus, said Eutychus, Christ is neither completely man nor completely God!

But that is wrong, for that’s a total confusion of Christ’s two different natures!

Well, then came Nestorius! He went so far in the opposite direction that he separated Christ’s divine nature too much from His human nature – almost to the point of having two completely separate personalities!

So, the result was that the church council of Ephesus (in 431) charged Nestorius with dividing Christ into two persons, and then they condemned him!

In a way, you want to feel sorry for both Eutychus and Nestorius, for with frail/defective human words they tried to describe the impossible! I mean, will any human being, at least in this life, ever fully understand the two natures of Christ!?

Well, then – twenty years later (451) – the church met again; this time at a place called Chalcedon.

And it was at this church council that the church leaders wrote the best summary which any human being has ever been able to write regarding the two natures of Christ!

You see, those brothers took a wise path! Instead of trying to do the impossible – i.e. to describe the composition of the two natures of Christ – they rather decided to describe what these are *not*!

Thus, in reaction to Eutychus and Nestorius, the church leaders at Chalcedon (451) came up with the famous “four negatives,” saying that the two natures of Christ are...

- without mixture
- without confusion, yet...
- without division, and...
- without separation.

But here is yet another important phrase which the brothers at Chalcedon added, i.e. “...*each nature retaining its own attributes!*”

Very, very important! For, you see, often you & I hear words in hymns or even in sermons – words that say that the Son “set aside His deity when He became incarnate.” That’s false doctrine, for the Son did not give up one single ounce of His divinity when He clothed Himself with human nature! In the same way, does His human nature not lack any ounce of its humanity!

Yes, Christ is without sin,¹⁸ but that’s the only difference between *His* human nature and *ours*!

Well, we’ve heard a lot! So, perhaps someone feels like saying, “Pastor, is this not all very abstractive theological hair-splitting?” “How does all of this help me in my Christian living?”

Well, in at least two ways...

In the way that you will need to defend your faith before so many liberals, unbelievers, and people of other faiths who will say to you that your Lord Jesus was just a great and insightful human being! So, these people – be they Jehovah’s Witnesses, agnostics, atheists or Muslims or

¹⁸ Cf. Heb 2:14-17 ***Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil,***
¹⁵ ***and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.*** ¹⁶ ***For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham.*** ¹⁷ ***Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.***

Also cf. Heb 4:15 ***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.***

Hindus or from whatever other faith – could do what Arius did to those who were not well-trained in the Scriptures, i.e. they could lure you away from the Bible and from Jesus Christ!

Secondly, regarding the two natures of Christ, every time when the church celebrates the Lord's Supper (which we will do next Lord's Day), this becomes relevant.

You see, how is Christ present at the Lord's Supper?

Roman Catholics believe that the bread & wine become the actual body and blood of Christ!

But this can't be, because *Christ's* humanity is not different to *our* humanity. So, just as *our* bodies cannot be everywhere present, so can *His* body (even though glorified) not be present everywhere in the world at once where the Lord's Supper is celebrated!

Yet, Jesus *is* present – and *really* so – at the Lord's Supper, but in His *divine* nature, and indeed in such a way that His divine nature is *not separated* from His human nature which is fixed in heaven!

Yes, like light is not restricted by the bulb of the lightbulb from which it shines from the ceiling, but beams out from it and fills the whole room, so is the divine nature of Jesus not restricted to His human nature in heaven, but at the same time fills it and stretches far & wide out from it!

So, although Jesus is not in His body (human nature) with us, yet, in His divine nature He is not absent from us for one minute!

Yes, herein lies great comfort: Jesus says (in Mt 28:20), “...***And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.***”

AMEN (2610 words excluding footnotes)