

Who Is Jesus Christ? Leader Guide

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church was mandated by the 213th General Assembly (2001) to “lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century.” It will make its final report to the 217th General Assembly (2006). In the course of its work, members of the task force have produced a series of lectures and presentations to the task force. Some of these materials have been formatted into videos or placed on the task force Web site (www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity). These resources are intended to inform and involve the broader Presbyterian community during the process of the task force’s work. In that light, these resources are preliminary and provisional, as the task force builds on its work from meeting to meeting and from theme to theme.

INTRODUCTION

About the Video

“Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity” is a series of videos produced in conjunction with the work of the Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church. The series is designed primarily for adults of all ages who have come together as a theological reflection group to use similar processes and to study the same issues as the task force. Other groups, newly formed or ongoing (adult study groups, new member classes, officer training, commissioned lay pastors, and the like), may find the series helpful to adapt for more general use.

The first video in the series presents material on two topics. The beginning segment offers tools for **fostering community and dialogue** within a group that has committed to come together for theological reflection. The tools are also applicable to other small groups, newly formed or ongoing. The second topic is **biblical authority and interpretation**. An overview is presented, as well as an application of the principles of biblical interpretation using a portion of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

This video, “Who Is Jesus Christ?”, is the second in the series. It addresses the topic of Christology—our confession of Jesus Christ, who he was and is for us—which is one of the areas the task force was charged in its mandate to address. The material is based on a series of presentations made to the task force by one of its own members, Dr. P. Mark Achtemeier.

*Mark Achtemeier is associate professor of systematic theology and ethics at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary. He holds the B.A. degree from Harvard University, the D.Min. from Union Seminary in Virginia, and the Ph.D. from Duke University. He served five years as the pastor of the Windermere Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, North Carolina before coming to Iowa. He is co-author with Andrew Purves of *Union in Christ: A Declaration for the Church and A Passion for the Gospel: Confessing Jesus Christ for the 21st Century*. He is*

married to the Rev. Katherine Morton Achtemeier, and they have three children: Rachel, Sarah, and Joshua.

While viewing and discussing video one is not a prerequisite for this second video, a group may find helpful tools in video one to enhance the process of discussing this important subject.

Additional resources from the task force are available to help the church explore many of the topics listed in the task force's "Plan for Moving Ahead." The plan and resources can be found on the task force's Web site at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.

This resource guide is a brief outline for the leader of a group using the video. It provides information for getting started and suggested ways to engage the group.

This is a three-segmented video. Each segment is designed to use for one session.

Segment One: Fully God (Running Time 8:03)

Who is Jesus Christ? It is a question with which Christians and the church have wrestled from the time of Jesus' earthly ministry up to the present. In this first segment, Dr. Achtemeier shares the story of the struggle of the early church over the specific issue of the divinity of Jesus Christ. The struggle came to a head at the Council of Nicaea in the fourth century. The council produced one of the foundational confessions of the church—the Nicene Creed.

Segment Two: Fully Human (Running Time 6:04)

Segment two continues the story of the struggle of the early church to answer the question, "Who is Jesus Christ?" This time, Dr. Achtemeier summarizes the debate over the specific issue of the humanity of Jesus Christ. The struggle over this issue led to another historic church gathering, the Council of Chalcedon, in 451. The outcome of this council has also been foundational throughout the life of the church.

Segment Three: The Work of Christ for Us (Running Time 8:33)

What does it mean for us that Jesus died on the cross? How does Christ's death reconcile us to God? Just what is salvation? Dr. Achtemeier provides a number of explanations that have been given throughout the church's life to answer these questions and goes further to offer some insights on what all of this might mean for us today.

For the Leader

- It is optimal to plan for at least one hour for the group to view and be engaged with each segment of the video.
- Preview the video so that you are prepared to lead the group engagement.

- Make sure that you are familiar ahead of time with the video equipment you will be using.
- The discussion about the person of Jesus Christ may lead to deep personal sharing among group members that runs the gamut from unshakable expressions of faith to deep-seated doubt. It will be important for you to help shape a space in which participants feel safe to express their thoughts honestly and freely. It is especially recommended that a newly formed group spend time getting to know one another and building trust before using this video. You will find helpful tools for fostering this kind of community in the first video in this series, and/or on the task force's Web site at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity.
- Participants may appreciate having a copy of the discussion questions in hand prior to seeing the video segments to focus their thinking and listening.

SUGGESTED PROGRAM FOR VIEWING THE VIDEO

Segment One

Materials needed: Bibles, newsprint and markers or chalkboard and chalk, pens and paper, copies of the Nicene Creed for participants (see page 4)

Begin your time together as a group by sharing personal responses to a community-building question, such as “How did you come to know Jesus Christ?” More examples of community-building questions can be found in the segment “Fostering Community” in video one.

Show this segment of video two in its entirety to the group. Have available pens and paper for those who would like to take notes. Afterward, invite a volunteer to read aloud Matthew 16:13-16. Ask the participants to list the answers the disciples gave Jesus in response to his question, “Who do you say that I am?” Record their answers on newsprint or chalkboard.

Then, as a brief review of the video segment, write the following on newsprint or chalkboard under the heading, “Council of Nicaea:”

Arius—Jesus is an intermediary between us and God, but is not actually God
Athanasius—Jesus is God-with-us in the fullest possible sense

Place a check mark by Athanasius to remind the group on which side of the debate the council sided. (*Note: You may want to save this newsprint to use in segments two and three.*)

Next, engage the group in the following questions. Record the answers on a pad of paper, newsprint, or chalkboard. [If the group is large, consider dividing the participants into smaller groups of five to seven participants in each small group. Provide each small group with newsprint and markers so that they can record the highlights of their discussion to share with the larger group.] You may want to use a listening approach such

as mutual invitation or prayerful listening, which are described in the segment “Fostering Community” in video one.

- What were the driving arguments for and against Jesus’ divinity at the Council of Nicaea?
- Put in your own words the arguments Athanasius used to influence the council.
- Are “ancient” controversies in the church still important? Why or why not?
- Why do you think a conversation about heresy matters?
- Define “confession.”
- What are your non-negotiables for the faith?
- What is the most challenging question you have about Jesus?

If participants have been in small groups, bring them back together as one large group and ask them to share the highlights of their discussions. After all the small groups have shared, ask participants to ponder silently the following questions. Provide paper and pens for those who want to write down their thoughts.

- What significance is there for you that Jesus is fully God?
- What do you think is the significance for the church today to affirm that Jesus is fully God?

If there is time, invite answers from the group.

Close by inviting the group to affirm their faith together using the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed

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, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. 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, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who 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.

Segment Two

Materials needed: Bibles, newsprint and markers or chalkboard and chalk, pens and paper, copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (optional)

Begin your time together as a group by sharing personal responses to a community-building question, such as “Name one thing you cherish about the church and why.” More examples of community-building questions can be found in the segment “Fostering Community” in video one.

Prior to showing this segment, provide a brief review of segment one by sharing with the group the summary of the Council of Nicaea (refer to the material for segment one and/or use the newsprint you saved as suggested from that segment.)

Show segment two in its entirety to the group. Have available pens and paper for those who would like to take notes. Afterward, as a brief review of this segment, write the following on newsprint or chalkboard under the heading, “Council of Chalcedon:”

- Heresy #1 (monophysite): blend of divine and human (donkey+horse=mule)
- Heresy #2 (Apollinarian): brainless body (Mr. Spock)
- Heresy #3 (Nestorian): divine and human not fully united (committee)

Then, on a separate piece of newsprint or chalkboard prepare two columns with the headings “Infinite” and “Finite.” Invite volunteers to read aloud the following passages: Matt. 4:1-4, Matt. 21:18-19, Mark 4:37-39, Mark 15:37-39, Luke 2:6-7, Luke 5:20-25, John 1:1-3,14, and John 20:26-28. As each Scripture is read, ask participants to identify whether the passage is describing Jesus as divine or human or both and write their answers in the appropriate column. When all of the passages have been read, draw a prominent circle around the entire contents on the newsprint or chalkboard to indicate that the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon was to affirm that Jesus Christ was fully God and fully human. (*Note: You may want to save this newsprint to use in segment three.*)

Next, engage the group in the following questions. Record the answers on newsprint or chalkboard. [If the group is large, consider dividing the participants into smaller groups of five to seven participants in each small group. Provide each small group with newsprint and markers so that they can record the highlights of their discussion to share with the larger group.] You are encouraged to use a listening approach such as mutual invitation or prayerful listening, which are described in the segment “Fostering Community” in video one.

- How do you interpret Jesus as fully divine and fully human?
- When you pray to Jesus, to whom are you praying?
- In your own theological reflection, where do you think you tend to place more emphasis—on the humanity or the divinity of Jesus?

- Discuss which you think presents the greater challenge to contemporary Christian faith—the humanity or the divinity of Jesus.
- The Council of Chalcedon defined for the church what the truth about Jesus Christ is *not*. What do you think of this approach for clarifying what we believe?
- Think about a currently contested area of the church’s life. Make a list of what the truth is *not* that you think might find agreement on both sides. Discuss whether you think such an approach helps the church make progress as it struggles with difficult questions.

If participants have been in small groups, bring them back together as one large group and ask them to share the highlights of their discussions.

Close with the following prayer or one of your own:

Only begotten Son and Word of God, although immortal, you humbled yourself for our salvation, taking flesh from the holy virgin Mary and, without change, becoming man. Christ, our God, you were crucified, but conquered death by death. You are one of the Holy Trinity, glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit—save us.

You are the fulfillment of the Law and the prophets. You have fulfilled all the dispensation of the Father. Fill our hearts with joy and gladness always, now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen. (St. John Chrysostom, c.347-407 A.D.)

Optional activity: Divide the participants into small groups of five to seven participants. Provide newsprint and markers and copies of *The Presbyterian Hymnal* to each small group. Ask them to read the texts of the following hymns and identify images of or references to Jesus Christ that emphasize his divinity, his humanity, or both:

- #302: “I Danced in the Morning”
- #309: “Of the Father’s Love Begotten”
- #360: “Hope of the World”
- #367: “Jesu, Jesu, Fill Us with Your Love”
- #408: “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life”

Segment Three

Materials needed: Bibles, pens and paper, newsprint and markers or chalkboard and chalk

Begin your time together as a group by sharing personal responses to a community-building question, such as “Describe someone who helped you become more fully who God created you to be.” More examples of community-building questions can be found in the segment “Fostering Community” in video one.

Provide a brief review of segments one and two (refer to the material in this guide and/or use the newsprint you saved as suggested from the previous segments.)

In this segment, Dr. Achtemeier invites the group to stop the video and engage in discussion with each other. [If the group is large, consider dividing the participants into smaller groups of five to seven participants in each small group. Appoint a scribe in each small group to record, on either newsprint or a pad of paper, the highlights of their discussion to share with the larger group.] You may want to consider writing the quote from Dr. Achtemeier (see final question under “After the third pause”) on newsprint or preparing it as a handout so that participants can read it as they reflect upon it.

You are encouraged to use a listening approach such as mutual invitation or prayerful listening, which are described in the segment “Fostering Community” in video one.

After the first pause:

- What are the implications of Dr. Achtemeier’s view “the more, the merrier” when referring to different explanations of atonement—how Jesus’ death overcomes the effects of our sin?
- With which of these explanations do you most resonate, and why? Are there other areas of the church’s life where “the more, the merrier” would be a helpful approach in the face of differently held views?

After the second pause:

- What does salvation mean to you?
- Compare “I purchase for you the way, the truth, and the life” and “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” What are the differences? What do the differences mean to you?

After the third pause:

- What implications are there for being united in Christ with other Christians?
- Dr. Achtemeier asks at the end of the video, “So, what does all of this mean for the church and for us today... Could all of this mean that the peace, the unity, and the purity of the church are not goals given to us to achieve on our own? Could it mean that the real foundation of our life together is the peace, unity, and purity that belong to Christ himself, and that they become ours as the Spirit unites us all together in him? What if the church’s task is not to construct a peace, unity, and purity by compromises of our own devising, but to grow into the gifts that are already ours in Christ?” What do you think?

FINAL NOTES AND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

“Resources for Fostering Community and Dialogue,” by task force member Victoria Curtiss, offers tools for beginning and sustaining a theological reflection group. This resource, along with the Theological Task Force’s full mandate, covenant, and resources on other topics discussed by the task force can be found on their Web site at www.pcusa.org/peaceunitypurity:

Order the first video in the “Seeking Peace, Unity, and Purity” series. Call Presbyterian Distribution Service (PDS) at (800) 524-2612 and ask for item #OGA-03-069.

Both videos in the series have been combined into one video and translated into Spanish and Korean. They are also available through PDS. Spanish (#OGA-04-070); Korean (#OGA-04-071).

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Mandate of the Theological Task Force

The Theological Task Force on Peace, Unity, and Purity of the Church is directed to lead the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in spiritual discernment of our Christian identity in and for the 21st century, using a process which includes conferring with synods, presbyteries, and congregations seeking the peace, unity, and purity of the church. This discernment shall include, but not be limited to, issues of Christology, biblical authority and interpretation, ordination standards, and power.

The task force is to develop a process and an instrument by which congregations and governing bodies throughout our church may reflect on and discuss the matters that unite and divide us, praying that the Holy Spirit will promote the peace, unity, and purity of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).