The doctrine of the work of Christ is traditionally organized by the offices he fulfilled and the stages of his work.

The Offices of Christ

Christ perfectly fulfilled the OT offices of prophet, priest, and king. These offices or roles in the OT reveal aspects of God’s word, presence, and power. The anointing and empowering of the Holy Spirit and favor of God was essential if these offices were to truly represent God. OT prophets, priests, and kings foreshadowed the Messiah who would one day ultimately and definitively be manifest as God’s Son and Word, bringing access to God’s presence and inaugurating the kingdom of God.

The Prophetic Work of Christ

A true prophet of God proclaims God’s word to people. God promised Moses that he would raise up a messianic prophet who would authoritatively speak for him: “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him” (Deut. 18:18–19). Those in Jesus’ day expected the Messiah to fulfill the prophetic role the OT foretold. As the author of Hebrews tells us, Jesus’ prophetic ministry brought all that previous prophets of God had proclaimed to a definitive culmination: “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Heb. 1:1–2). Jesus equated his own words with the authoritative words of the Hebrew Scriptures, showing that he knew his words were the very words of God. He recognized the unchanging authority of the Mosaic law (Matt. 5:18) and gave his teaching the same weight: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). Because Jesus’ words are the very words of God, they are divinely authoritative, eternal, and unchangeable.

Jesus’ prophetic authority is vastly superior to that of any other prophet because he speaks God’s words as God. The divine authority of his words is based on his identity as God incarnate. He proclaimed God’s truth as the One who is the Truth (John 14:6). His word is the ultimate Word.

Implications of the Prophetic Office of Christ

Since Jesus Christ is the true and perfect prophet, he is the ultimate source of truth about God, ourselves, the meaning of life, the future, right and wrong, salvation, and heaven and hell. The voice of Jesus in the Word of God should be eagerly sought and obeyed without reservation or delay. Even though Jesus perfectly fulfills the office of prophet, God’s plan is for the church to represent him with its own ongoing prophetic voice, proclaiming truth into the world. Paul certainly saw his own ministry as speaking for God: “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

The Priestly Work of Christ

While a prophet speaks God’s words to the people, a priest represents the people before God and represents God before the people. He is a man who stands in the presence of God as a mediator (Heb. 5:1). The priestly work of Christ involves both atonement and intercession.

The Atonement of Christ

The atonement is central to God’s work in the history of salvation (1 Cor. 15:4). Atonement is the making of enemies into friends by averting the punishment that their sin would otherwise incur. Sinners in rebellion against God need a representative to offer sacrifice on their behalf if they are to be reconciled to God. Jesus’ righteous life and atoning death on behalf of sinners is the only way for fallen man to be restored into right relationship with a holy God.

Even with the extensive requirements for the priesthood in the OT, there was nevertheless a realization that these human priests were unable to make lasting atonement (Ps. 110:1; 4; cf. Heb. 1:1–4). Jesus alone was able to make an offering sufficient for the eternal forgiveness of sins. Because Jesus was without sin, he was uniquely able to offer sacrifice without needing atonement for himself. In offering himself as the perfect, spotless Lamb of God, he could actually pay for sins in a way that OT sacrifices could not. Jesus’ atoning offering was thus eternal, complete, and once-for-all. No other sacrifice will ever be needed to pay the price for human sin.

The Necessity of the Atonement

Jesus died because of human sin, but also in accordance with God’s plan. The reality of human sin is vividly seen in the envy of the Jewish leaders (Matt. 27:18), Judas’s greed (Matt. 26:14–16), and Pilate’s cowardice (Matt. 27:26). However, Jesus gave his life of his own initiative and courageous love: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. . . . For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father” (John 10:11, 17–18; cf. Gal. 2:20).

The Father’s divine initiative also led to Jesus’ atoning work: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32; cf. Isa. 53:6, 10; John 3:16). As in all events of human history, God’s sovereign determination works in a way compatible with human decisions.
The Work of Christ

and actions. Even human sin is woven into God's divine purposes, as is seen in verses that say Jesus was "delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23), and that "Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel" were gathered together to do "whatever [God's] hand and [God's] plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27–28).

Christ came to save sinners in order to accomplish God's will. Christ died in accordance with God's sovereign, free, gracious choice—not because he was in any way compelled to offer salvation to mankind because of something inherent in us. God did not save fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4), and he would have been entirely justified in condemning all of fallen humanity to hell; only by reason of his amazing mercy and grace can anyone be saved.

Atonement in the Bible is explained with numerous metaphors and images. The chart below shows the varied images the Bible uses to describe the achievement that is at the heart of the gospel.

Throughout church history, various aspects of the atonement have garnered particular attention. For instance, at different times theologians have stressed the ransom imagery, the selfless example of Christ, and the victory of Christ over evil. These aspects of the atonement, rightly understood, contain true and important insights, but the crux of the atonement is Christ taking the place of sinners and enduring the wrath of God as their substitute sacrifice. This is evident in passages like 2 Corinthians 5:21 ("For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God") and Isaiah 53:4–5 ("Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed"; cf. Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). The fundamental problem of human sin has been solved in Christ's dying for sinners who deserve eternal judgment. Any attempt to diminish the importance of the penal substitution of Christ for us (i.e., the truth that Christ died to pay the penalty for our sins) will diminish God's holiness and wrath, as well as the heinous depth of human sin.

Christ's physical suffering on the cross was outweighed by the emotional, psychological, and spiritual anguish of bearing the sin of mankind and having the wrath of the Father poured out on him. The abandonment and bearing of God's wrath that Jesus experienced on the cross is beyond our comprehension. On account of this merciful, substitutionary sacrifice he will be worshiped for all eternity by those who are his (Rev. 5:11–12). While Jesus' death for sinners was the basis of his atoning work, his life of perfect righteousness in their place was also necessary to win their forgiveness. He not only died for rebels, he also lived for them (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 3:9).

The Intercession of Christ

Jesus' priestly work on the cross atoned for sin once for all. Grounded in that atoning work, his priestly work of intercession continues now and forevermore on behalf of his people: "Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (Rom. 8:34); Christ "is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25). Jesus is alive and always at work representing and bringing requests for believers before the throne of God, intervening in heaven for them. He is the God-man who mediates and represents fallen people based on his fully sufficient work on the cross, and his intervention never fails. Jesus, the sinner's divine lawyer, never loses a case: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

As the people who constitute the church are intended to have a prophetic voice as Christ's ambassadors, God also intends to use the church in a priestly role to usher people into his presence. Because of Christ's work, all of God's people are viewed as priests with priestly access into his presence and with the privilege of representing people before God (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 5:9–10). Prayer, preaching, gospel proclamation, and taking initiative in personal, spiritual ministry are all ways in which God's people can encourage others to seek and know God and can thereby fulfill their call to represent Christ as a kingdom of priests.

The Kingly Work of Christ

Christ is not only the ultimate prophet and priest, he is also the divine king. Unlike the kings of Israel who were intended to foreshadow the Messiah, Jesus' reign as messianic King is in no way limited. He rules over all creation and for all time (Luke 1:31–33; Col. 1:17). This rule most directly touches believers at present, but one day all peoples will bow to his royal authority (Phil. 2:9–10). In addition to his comprehensive rule, Christ the King also defends, protects, and shepherds his people and will one day judge all the world's inhabitants—past, present, and future.

### Biblical Descriptions of the Atonement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Language</th>
<th>Biblical Words</th>
<th>Human Need</th>
<th>The Result</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language of OT sacrifices</td>
<td>Blood, lamb, sacrifice</td>
<td>We are guilty</td>
<td>We are forgiven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of personal relationships</td>
<td>Reconciliation</td>
<td>We are alienated from God</td>
<td>We are brought back into intimate fellowship with God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of righteous anger at wrongdoing</td>
<td>Propitiation</td>
<td>We are under God's holy wrath</td>
<td>God's wrath is satisfied/quenched</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of the marketplace</td>
<td>Redemption, ransom</td>
<td>We are enslaved</td>
<td>We are set free</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of the law court</td>
<td>Justification</td>
<td>We are condemned</td>
<td>We are pardoned and counted as righteous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language of the battlefield</td>
<td>Victory, deliverance, rescue</td>
<td>We are facing dreadful enemies</td>
<td>We are delivered and are triumphant in Christ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
God's people represent their King when they work to see kingdom realities spread in the world. When they seek social justice—fighting to relieve the plight of the poor, disenfranchised, or unborn—they are working to spread the values of their King. When they work hard and live as good citizens, they are salt and light in a dark world, ultimately serving the interest of their King. One day, when Christ makes all things new, those who are in him will reign with their King: “The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him” (2 Tim. 2:11–12a; cf. Rev. 5:9–10).

The Stages of Christ's Work

There is perhaps no more comprehensive yet concise statement on the work of Christ than Philippians 2:5–11:

> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so 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.

These verses teach the profound humility and eventual exaltation of Christ in the history of salvation. The key sequence set out here has been described as the 10 stages of Christ's work, divided into a humiliation phase and an exaltation phase. The stages are: (1) preincarnate glory; (2) incarnation; (3) earthly life; (4) crucifixion; (5) resurrection; (6) ascension; (7) sitting at God's right hand; (8) second coming; (9) future reign (some think this will be a millennial reign; see Introduction to Revelation); (10) eternal glory.

The 10 stages and two phases can be visualized as shown in the diagram, p. 2525.

Preincarnate Glory

To truly understand the humility of Christ in becoming a man, one must ponder what he gave up in order to make this possible. While we know very little about the experience of God before this world's creation, we do know that he has always existed as one being, the three persons within his being perfectly relating in mutual love and glorification as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 1:1:17:5, 24). Along with this intra-Trinitarian glorification, angelic beings (creatures themselves) unceasingly worship the infinite worth of the triune God. Jesus consented to surrender this perfect heavenly state so he could represent humanity in his incarnation. When he took the role of a servant and assumed a human nature in addition to his divine nature (Phil. 2:5–11), his divinity was veiled in his humanity. He willingly surrendered the continuous heavenly display and acknowledgment of his glorious divine nature. This amazing humility is taught in 2 Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he become poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.” Only when the glories of heaven are finally revealed will what Jesus temporarily gave up in coming to earth as a man be most fully understood. What amazing, loving condescension!

The Humiliation of Christ

In the incarnation (lit., “in flesh”) Christ took on a full, complete human nature, including a physical body, so that he could truly represent humanity (Phil. 2:6; Heb. 2:17). God the Son chose to come to earth in the most humble way, defying all expectation. His contemporaries saw him as the son of a poor couple, born in a small, obscure village, and with nothing in his appearance to attract them to himself (cf. Isa. 53:2). In the incarnation, God shows in striking manner that he does not value what the world so often values.

Earthly Life

Christ's earthly life was one of continual humiliation. He subtly and selectively revealed his divine glory, even keeping it a secret at times (Matt. 9:30; Mark 1:44; 5:43). He radically altered the prevalent conception of the Messiah, combining the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 with the glorious Conquering King of Daniel 7. Throughout his life Jesus was poor and at times homeless: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Matt. 8:20). His life was one of great and consistent service for the good of others. The last grand gesture of his life before going to the cross was washing his disciples’ feet (John 13:1–17). Although multitudes followed him during his public ministry, he also faced frequent persecution and rejection, at times even in his hometown (Luke 4:28–29). The creatures' rejection of their Creator epitomizes human rebellion. John 1:10–11 describes this tragedy: “He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

Jesus’ earthly life ended with some of his closest friends betraying him (Judas), denying him (Peter), and deserting him (all the disciples, Matt. 26:56). His life was filled with rejection, loneliness, poverty, persecution, hunger, temptation, suffering, and finally death.

Crucifixion

Christ's humiliation reached its greatest depth when he gave his life on a criminal’s cross for sinful humanity. The cross stands at the center of human history as God’s supreme act of love (1 John 4:10, 17) and the only source of redemption for lost and fallen humanity (Rom. 14:9).

The Exaltation of Christ

Resurrection

While Jesus’ life of humiliation represented the life of human beings living in a fallen world, his victorious exaltation represents a pattern that will someday be reproduced (and is partially reproduced already) in those who believe in him. The exaltation of Christ began when he left his grave clothes in an empty tomb. Sin, Satan, and death were decisively defeated when Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus foretold his resurrection (e.g., Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34) and then actually did rise from the dead (as is shown by convincing historical evidence, such as the empty tomb, numerous eyewitness accounts, the radical change in the disciples’ lives, etc.).
The Work of Christ

In addition to defeating sin and death, the resurrection was the Father’s validation of the Son’s ministry (Rom. 1:3) and demonstrates the complete effectiveness of Christ’s atoning work (Rom. 4:25).

First Corinthians 15 provides the most comprehensive treatment of the benefits of the resurrection. By explaining what would be lost if Jesus had not risen from the dead, Paul provides abundant reason for hope in the truth of the resurrection because “in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (v. 20). Because Christ rose from the dead, the sins of those who rely on him are forgiven (v. 17), the apostolic preaching is true (v. 15), faith in Christ is true and he can be fully trusted (v. 14), those who follow Christ are to be emulated and their preaching is of great value (v. 19), and those who die in Christ will be raised (v. 18). Because of the resurrection, the Christian has great hope that generates confidence in all circumstances. The resurrection is not merely a doctrine to be affirmed intellectually; it is the resounding affirmation that Jesus reigns over all, and the power that raised him from the dead is the Christian’s power for living the Christian life on earth and the assurance of eternal life in heaven.

ASCENSION

The ascension is Christ’s return to heaven from earth (Luke 24:50–51; John 14:2, 12; 16:5, 10, 28; Acts 1:6–11; Eph. 4:8–10; 1 Tim. 3:16; Heb. 4:14; 7:26; 9:24). The incarnation does not cease with Christ’s ascension. Jesus lives, now and forever, as true man and true God to mediate between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). He will come again as he left, fully God and fully man (Acts 1:11).

Jesus’ ascension is a crucial event in his ministry because it explicitly shows his continual humanity and
The permanence of his resurrection. The importance of the ascension is seen in the fact that it is taught in all of the essential creeds of the church, beginning with the Apostles’ Creed. The ascension guarantees that Jesus will always represent humanity before the throne of God as the mediator, intercessor, and advocate for needy humans. Because of the ascension, we can be sure that Jesus’ unique resurrection leads the way for the everlasting resurrection of the redeemed. A human face and nail-scarred hands will greet believers one day in heaven.

Jesus also ascended to prepare a place for his people (John 14:2–3) and to enable the Holy Spirit to come (John 16:7), which he said was more advantageous for the church than if he had stayed on earth (John 14:12, 17).

SITTING AT GOD’S RIGHT HAND

The current state of Christ’s work is called his “heavenly session,” meaning that he is seated at the right hand of the Father, actively interceding and reigning over his kingdom, awaiting his second coming (Acts 2:3–36; Rom. 8:34; Eph. 1:20–22; Col. 3:1; Heb. 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; 1 Pet. 3:22; Rev. 3:21; 22:1). The OT foretold this phase of the Messiah’s work: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’ ” (Ps. 110:1). Jesus told of the heavenly session which would precede his return when he referred to the messianic imagery of Daniel 7: “from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:64). The right hand of God is the symbolic place of power, honor, distinction, and prestige. Jesus “sits” to portray the sufficiency of his saving work on earth; he continues a vital, active ministry as he reigns over all creation.

Jesus’ current ministry is a great source of comfort, authority, and encouragement for the believer because it ensures that his ministry as Prophet, Priest, and King continues and will one day be acknowledged by all creation. From his current exalted position Jesus pours out his Spirit on his people: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (Acts 2:33). His precious intercession on behalf of his people takes place at the right hand of the Father so that the believer need never fear condemnation: “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us” (Rom. 8:34).

SECOND COMING AND FUTURE REIGN

Biblical interpreters are divided as to whether Jesus’ coming will occur in one stage or two (see the article on Last Things, pp. 2533–2534). But all agree that someday Christ will return in great glory and there will be a definitive, comprehensive acknowledgment that he is Lord over all. He will then judge the living and the dead. All people and forces that oppose him will be vanquished, including death itself (Matt. 25:31; 1 Cor. 15:24–28), “so 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. 2:10–11).

ETERNAL GLORY

Prior to the incarnation Jesus was glorious. But by displaying his holy character through his incarnate life, death, and resurrection, he received even greater glory. Jesus’ preincarnate glory was taken to a new level when he entered into his eternal glory not only as God but now as God-Man. Jesus displayed his divine character through the human actions of his incarnate life, death, and resurrection. His majesty, mercy, love, holiness, wisdom, and power have been manifested sinlessly in a true man, and for this Jesus will be praised for all eternity. Therefore, the worship of heaven focuses on the work of Christ as the worthy Lamb who was slain:

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. . . . Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:9–10, 12)

Christ’s eternal glory, which he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is the supreme goal of all that he did. In redeeming a people for himself, he displayed his many perfections in such a way that he will now receive the glory he deserves. That glory will be displayed and acknowledged around his throne, in the songs of heaven forever!