

PERSON

Psalm 108 • Isaiah 42:1–12 • Formula of Concord, SD VIII

PSALM	Psalm 108:5 “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!”
OLD TESTAMENT	Isaiah 42:1 “Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him.”
BOOK OF CONCORD	Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Article VIII: The Person of Christ

The Texts

Isaiah 42’s First Servant Song opens with a paradox that classical Christology was written to resolve. “Behold my servant, whom I uphold.” God upholds His servant, which implies creaturely dependence. Then immediately: I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations; the coastlands wait for his law. Universal divine authority exercised over the entire earth. In the same figure: a servant who is held up by God, and a Lord to whom all nations are accountable. Formula of Concord Solid Declaration VIII addresses exactly this paradox. The servant is upheld in His human nature; the Lord of the nations is the same Person in His divine nature. There are not two Christs; there is one, who is both.

Psalm 108 addresses the same Person from the direction of adoration. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth. Then in the same breath: that your beloved may be delivered, give salvation by your right hand and answer us. The God whose glory is above the heavens is the same God who answers and delivers His beloved people. Psalm 108’s praise of the God whose glory is over all the earth and whose right hand saves is directed at the Person Isaiah 42 describes: the one in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, and who is exalted to the right hand of majesty over everything that can be named.

Discuss: Isaiah 42 presents a figure who is simultaneously upheld by God in human dependence and commissioned to establish justice over all nations in divine authority. Psalm 108 praises the God of universal glory and the God who delivers His beloved in the same breath. SD VIII says these texts describe one undivided Person. What specifically breaks down in the reading of Isaiah 42 if the Servant’s human dependence and His divine authority belong to two separate persons rather than one?

Key Terms

Term	What It Means
<i>Communicatio idiomatum</i>	The communion of properties. Because the two natures are united in one undivided Person, the properties and acts of each nature belong to the whole Person. Therefore it is true to say God died, God suffered, God bled, and that the man Christ is exalted over all the earth.
Nestorianism	The error of dividing the Person: Nestorius taught the two natures were joined only by name, like two boards glued together, with no real communion in deed or truth. This creates two Christs and destroys the Incarnation’s saving power.
Eutychianism	The error of confusing the natures: Eutyches taught the two natures were mingled into one essence, absorbing the human into the divine. This destroys Christ’s true humanity and leaves neither a true God nor a true man.
Glowing iron	The ancient illustration SD VIII adopts: fire and iron remain distinct substances, but their union is so profound that the iron glows and burns with the fire’s properties. The natures in Christ remain unchanged and unconfused, yet are joined in the highest ineffable communion.

Discuss: SD VIII’s illustration of glowing iron uses a natural image to show how two distinct substances can be so profoundly united that the properties of one are communicated to the other without either being absorbed or destroyed. How does that image protect both the reality of Christ’s suffering (he truly bled, truly died) and the reality of His divine power (the blood that was shed is God’s blood) in a way that neither Nestorius nor Eutyches could preserve?

The Personal Union: Neither Divided nor Confused

Solid Declaration VIII was written to resolve a specific sixteenth-century controversy, but the errors it addresses are ancient. Nestorius taught in the fifth century that the two natures in Christ shared only a name; they had no real communion in deed or truth. The divine nature remained entirely separate from the human nature, as if two boards had been glued together. The practical result was two Christs: one divine, one human, loosely associated but not genuinely one person. Eutyches went to the opposite extreme, teaching that the divine and human natures were mixed together into one new essence, the human being absorbed into the divine until neither remained in its original form.

SD VIII navigates between these two errors with precision. The two natures remain unchanged and unconfused in their natural essence and properties; yet they are united in the highest, most ineffable communion, so that there are not two Christs but one. The Formula borrows the ancient illustration of glowing iron: fire and iron remain entirely distinct substances, but when iron is placed in fire the union between them is so profound that the iron glows and burns with the fire's properties. Neither substance is lost; neither is confused with the other; yet the iron genuinely participates in what belongs to the fire. So the human nature in Christ genuinely participates in the divine majesty and power, and the divine Person genuinely participates in what the human nature suffers.

Discuss: *SD VIII says the two natures remain distinct and unchanged, yet united in the highest ineffable communion so that there is one undivided Person. Nestorius divided too cleanly; Eutyches confused too thoroughly. Where do contemporary forms of each error appear in popular Christian piety and preaching, and what does each error cost pastorally when a congregation tries to understand Isaiah 42's servant and Psalm 108's universal Lord as one person?*

Why God Must Die

The Formula quotes Luther's statement of the pastoral stakes with blunt clarity: *"If it were not to be said, God has died for us, but only a man, we would be lost."* The logic is straightforward. The debt of human sin against an eternal and omnipotent God is a debt of infinite weight. A mere human being, however holy, cannot render satisfaction to the eternal God for the sins of the entire world; the finite cannot satisfy the infinite. Only a person of infinite worth can pay an infinite debt. Therefore, the suffering and death on the cross must belong to the Person who is the eternal Son of God, not merely to a detached human nature operating independently.

SD VIII's answer is that the Person cannot be divided. Because the divine and human natures are united in one undivided Person, the works and sufferings of each nature belong to the whole Person. The divine nature itself cannot suffer or die; it is impassible and immortal. But the Person who is God suffered and died in the human nature He assumed, and therefore we can say with complete doctrinal warrant and complete pastoral comfort: God died. God's blood was shed. God's passion purchased our redemption. The blood that Isaiah 42's servant shed, the blood of the one who was upheld by God and anointed with His Spirit, is the very blood of God.

Discuss: *Luther says that if only a man died for us we are lost, and SD VIII's doctrine of the personal union is the theological ground for why it is right to say God died and God's blood was shed. How does a pastor preach the crucifixion to a congregation in a way that makes the weight of the communicatio idiomatum felt, rather than leaving people with the impression that they are moved by the death of a very godly man?*

The Sympathy of the Almighty Brother

SD VIII's most consoling argument is about why Christ's true and permanent humanity matters after the resurrection and exaltation. The Reformed Sacramentarians of Luther's day argued that Christ's human body could only be in one place at a time and was therefore locally restricted to a specific location in heaven. The Formula's response is that by virtue of the personal union, the human nature of Christ has been exalted to the right hand of God, receiving special, high, great, supernatural, and ineffable heavenly prerogatives above everything that can be named. The right hand of God is not a geographical location; it is the almighty power of God, and the human nature exalted to it is not restricted by spatial limitations.

The pastoral conclusion SD VIII draws from this is striking. The Formula warns that if Christ were present with His Church only according to His invisible divinity, He would be to us as a consuming fire to dry stubble. Instead, it offers the great consolation that the entire Person of Christ is with us, including the human nature in which He experienced all troubles, all temptations, all grief. The very man who knows our weakness from the inside, who experienced in His assumed human nature every tribulation His people face, is so with us in our troubles not only as the almighty God but as our brother and flesh of our flesh. Isaiah 42's servant who will not grow faint or be discouraged is the same Person who is present with every servant of His who is growing faint and needs someone who knows why.

Discuss: *SD VIII says that if Christ were present only as invisible divinity, He would be a consuming fire to dry stubble, and that the consolation of His presence requires the whole Person including the human nature that knows our weakness from the inside. Isaiah 42 promises the servant will not grow faint or be discouraged. How does a pastor preach Christ's presence to a member of the congregation who is growing faint, in a way that draws on the full weight of SD VIII's claim rather than offering only the general assurance that God is powerful?*

The Payoff

Psalm 108's God whose glory is above the heavens and over all the earth is the same God who answers when His beloved cries and delivers by His right hand. Isaiah 42's servant who is upheld by God and will not grow faint is the same Person who was exalted to the right hand of all majesty. SD VIII's one undivided Person of Christ is the everlasting answer to the question both texts raise: who is this one who is both held up by God and the Lord of all the coastlands? He is the One in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily, who died as truly as any man has ever died, and whose humanity sits at the Father's right hand knowing what it is to be weary and not to grow faint.