

Heresies and Errors

The Real-Life Impact of Theology Gone Bad

Lesson 2: Gnosticism, Docetism, and Arianism

Did God suffer? Could Jesus have been bad at carpentry? Do these questions matter?

Heresy 1 - Christ is Not Fully Man: Gnosticism and Docetism

Gnosticism

Gnosticism (Gnosis is the Greek word for knowledge) was more of a loose collection of religious beliefs than it was a branch of Christianity. Some New Testament statements sounded close to Gnosticism that these ideas began to be picked up by Christians.

Some speculate that these ideas existed before Christianity, but it is clear that it was debated in the first and second century AD. Irenaeus of Lyon (AD 130-200) was the most prominent Church Father to battle Gnosticism.

Basic Beliefs

Prior to the 20th century, we only had their ideas represented in the writings of those who opposed them. Scholars were suspicious that their opponents might have twisted their views. But the discover of Gnostic texts in 1945 in Nag Hammadi affirmed most of what Irenaeus said about them.

- Salvation has less to do with faith or observing the law and more to do with possessing “secret knowledge.”
- One supreme God is silent, yet revealed through Jesus and numerous intermediate gods (good and bad lesser gods)
- Matter is evil; spirit is pure
- Creation is inferior. Human souls are held captive in the prison of creation (secret knowledge will free them)
- Jesus dispels the errors of old pagan religions
- Crucifixion never happened. In *The Second Discourse of the Great Seth*, Jesus says, “... someone else drank the gall and vinegar; it was not I. They were striking me with a scourge, but someone else, Simon, bore the cross on his shoulder. Someone else wore the crown of thorns. And I was on high, poking fun at all the excesses of the ruler and the fruit of their error and conceit. I was laughing at their ignorance.”

Way of Life

The focus on knowledge made them appear intellectual and sophisticated. Many were drawn to its offer of secret knowledge.

The belief that matter is evil and will not be redeemed led some groups to extreme self-indulgence (why seek to discipline the body when it will not be redeemed?).

Other Gnostics drew the opposite conclusion. Matter is evil so they practiced extreme asceticism: deny the body, starve, beat yourself, kill the evil matter.

It also offered power to those who could possess this knowledge. In a sort of self-glorification, people could achieve great things by finding this hidden key. Modern expressions of New Age spirituality offer similar benefits.

What is tempting about Gnosticism?

- We see strong, bodily desires lead to sin and wickedness.
- We can agree that knowledge from God is powerful and transformative.
- The thought of God suffering in the flesh doesn't seem to fit who God is.

Docetism

Docetism is not a sect or a formal heresy on its own. Rather it is a heretical view of Christ that was employed by groups like Marcionites and Gnostic Christians.

Docetism comes from the Greek verb "to seem." It teaches the belief that during Jesus' earthly ministry he only seemed human but was indeed completely divine. Jesus was a phantom with the seeming appearance of a material body

Brief History

The roots of Docetism lie in Greek assumptions about divine inability to suffer and the inherent impurity of matter. This led them to deny the reality of Christ's material body and to state that only a phantom suffered on the cross.

It is one of the earliest heresies in Christianity. We have evidence of it in the first century and early second century, as Christians grappled with the unique dual nature of Christ: fully God and fully man

- Ignatius (35-107 AD) insisted on the revelation of Christ in the flesh as an antidote to this false teaching (Epistle to Smyrna, chap 1, and Trallians)
- Shortly after Polycarp (69-155 AD) was anathematizing those who refused to "confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh."
- Justin (100-165 AD): "There are some who declare that Jesus Christ did not come in flesh but only as spirit, and exhibited an appearance of flesh."

These heresies seem so distant and hard to relate to modern Christianity. It is easy to feel immune to such ideas. Yet, one important way for us to guard against any heresy in our own day is to sympathize with the motivations toward such a harmful doctrine.

Why would it be attractive for us today to deny Christ's humanity or overemphasize his deity to the exclusion of his humanity?

"Noble" temptations toward Docetism

Apologetic

There are certainly enough critics of Jesus' divinity. Critic of Christianity Bart Ehrman wrote a book called *How Jesus became God: The exaltation of a Jewish preacher from Galilee*. We can seek to "defend" Christ by emphasizing Jesus' divinity and downplaying his humanity.

Reverence for Christ

Sometimes we want to honor how amazing Christ was. The scripture illustrates a figure with unique and supernatural abilities. His prophecy, authority and power in performing miracles begin to muddle the categories for us.

Meagerness of our own humanity

We know what it is like to be human. We know our weaknesses and inability. We know our shame and ugliness. What we don't know is what it is like to be sinlessly human. What does it mean for Jesus to be human and sinless?

What was Christ like as a person? Could he have been a bad carpenter? Could he have bad breath or stinky feet? Could he do poorly in math?

What is sinless humanity?

Christ's humanity shapes our understanding of what separates human frailty and limitations (thus not sinful) and what is corrupt? Do we feel guilt over things that are not sin?

What is the difference between sinlessness (or holiness) and perfection? Why is it important?

Dangers in a Docetic Christ

Our understanding of true humanity: What is wrong with feeling guilty for failing at work? What is wrong with feeling shame with our bodies?

What should we do with inappropriate feelings of guilt and shame? What will help protect us from this?

How does a Docetic view of Christ affect our relationship to Christ?

How does it change Christ as our mediator/high priest?

How does it ultimately affect the work of redemption?

Hebrews 4:14-5:4

[14] Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. [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. [16] Let us then with

confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

[5:1] For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. [2] He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness.

[3] Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. [4] And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.

Philippians 2:1-11

[2:1] So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, [2] complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. [9] Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, [10] so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, [11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Heresy 2 – Christ is Not Fully God: Arianism

Arianism

Arius, (AD 256-336) a presbyter in Alexandria, sparked one of the most heated and long-lasting debates in church history. His teachings began by struggling with issues we can relate to: Why is the Trinity so complex? Can't we simplify it to make it more understandable? How can an unchangeable God become man? How can God suffer?

Like many heretics, Arius's motive was to defend God and to make Christianity more accessible and acceptable to others.

Beliefs

Arius's solution was that Jesus was not equal with God the Father. Jesus was the incarnation of the Logos but is not divine in the same way that the Father is divine.

The Son came into existence through the will of the Father and remains eternally subordinate. The Logos was created and even created before the existence of the world, but he was not eternal. He was given the honor of the title Son of God, but that was a special grace given to him by the Father and it was just a title.

God did not suffer on the cross, only Jesus did.

Orthodox Reaction

The Council of Nicaea (called by Emperor Constantine) responded by denouncing Arianism and clarifying the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Father. It introduced the term homoousios (Jesus is of the same substance as the Father).

Athanasius carried on the battle against Arius and his followers. He endured political and populist tensions that often made it very unpopular to uphold orthodoxy. He was exiled five times, and spent only 17 of his 46 years as bishop in his home church.

Constantius (Constantine's son) sought to make a compromise in the face of division. He wanted to say that Jesus was homoiousios ("of similar substance") with the Father. Though an insertion of only one letter, Athanasius argued this put salvation at risk.

What is lost if Jesus is not fully God?

Athanasius argued two points:

1) Only God can save humanity. No creature can cancel a debt owed to God. No mere man can reconcile men to God. Man cannot overcome the power of sin and death and offer eternal life. No matter how high his status, if the Son is still a creature he cannot bring salvation.

2) The church has worshipped Jesus Christ from its very earliest existence. If Jesus is not God, we have been committing idolatry and breaking the First Commandment throughout our history.

Revisiting Arius's Initial Concerns

What should we do with a Trinitarian doctrine that is hard to understand?

Does God suffer? Does God change?

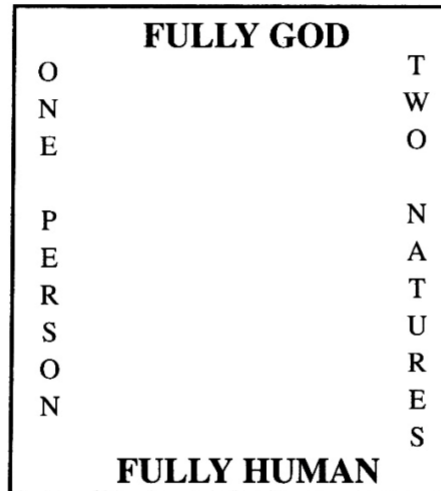
The church wrestled for centuries for ways to articulate what is in scripture.

WCF 2. The Son of God, the second person in the Trinity, being very and eternal God,

- of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come,
- take upon him man's nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance.
- So that two **whole**, perfect, and distinct natures, the Godhead and the manhood, were inseparably joined together in one person,
 - without conversion, composition, or confusion.
- Which person is very God, and very man, yet one Christ, the only Mediator between God and man.

First Council: Nicea (AD 325)
 Condemned *Arianism*
 Soteriological axiom: "God alone can save us."

**Third Council:
 Ephesus (AD 431)**
 Condemned
Nestorianism.
 Specified the one
 person of Christ.



**Fourth Council:
 Chalcedon (AD 451)**
 Condemned
Eutychianism.
 Maintained the two nature
 without confusion or change,
 separation or division.

Second Council: Constantinople I (AD 381)
 Re-affirmed Nicea, condemned *Apollinarianism.*
 Soteriological Axiom: "That which is not assumed is not healed."