



**Docetism:**

**Was Jesus Really Human?**

**Hebrews 2:14-18**

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January 29, 2023

*Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. For it is clear that he did not come to help angels but the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.*

I stumbled up on two different surprise pieces of correspondence this week. The first came to me in the mail. It was a typed letter, calling me a heretic for teaching all of you about heresy. The letter was postmarked from far away, so I assume it was none of you, but it did say it wanted to issue a warning to all of you, to be aware of false teachers. So, ah, consider yourselves warned.

The second I found tucked in back of an old notebook — my History of the Early Christian Church notebook. It was a memo given to our class at the end of a lecture by our professor, Dr. Rebecca Weaver. It was a lecture on the Trinitarian Controversy, and the nature of the persons of the Trinity, and she said: "If any of you ever go into a church and simply summarize this by saying, well, it's a mystery, I will come back and haunt you from my grave." Now, as it turns out, Dr. Weaver is still among us, so I am not too worried about haunting. But we asked her, how on earth did she recommend sharing all of this complicated information — including the stuff of last week's sermon about the nature of Christ's divinity and this week's sermon about the nature of Christ's humanity — how did she recommend sharing all of that without calling it a mystery? She said, "You explain it all. You explain substance and being and creator and creation. You give them nuance and history and debates and divides. You all but bring them to their knees begging for a release from the minutia. And then, only then, may you tell them — it is a mystery. It is one giant, beautiful, bewildering mystery well beyond the capacity of any one of us to understand it, thanks be to God."

It is a mystery. Last week we were reminded: Jesus Christ was fully divine, made up of the same substance as God, infinite and omnipresent, the very Word of God, and "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Arianism was the movement, led by a priest named Arius, that denied that divinity, believing that if we lift Jesus up to that level, we then by default place limitations upon God. The Church ultimately denied Arianism. But perhaps it is no surprise to you that while some folks wanted to deny Jesus' divinity, others sought to deny his humanity.

Docetism comes from a Greek word, "to appear" — as in, Jesus only *appeared* to be human. It was an illusion. In reality, he was actually only divine. I have to tell you, for a long time I assumed Docetism was more like the other heresies we've encountered — trying to resolve the tension inherent in holding two seemingly

contradictory things together. If Jesus was fully divine, he couldn't be fully human. I assumed it was a heresy born out of the limitations of the human mind.

But in fact, Docetism was born out of something else entirely. Docetism was born out of displeasure with the human body in general. Because did you know? Bodies do some things that are best not discussed. Have you seen a human birth? It's messy. And even eating. Eating is super human because while it might be fine on this end, the human digestive system is impressive, but surely the Son of God was never actually reduced to the sorts of things that happen in the restroom. The very suggestion sent some theologians into fits. God would never suffer the humiliation of needing a toilet. And don't even get them started about what happens to a human body when it dies — even a death of natural causes. Human bodies are just ... too impure, too imperfect, too disgusting for God to really inhabit. And that God would suffer, that God could be subject to human pain, well, that was just equally insulting and incomprehensible.

There were two stories told to get around all this. The first was that Jesus seemed human, appeared human, but was really just a phantom. A really good phantom, and very compelling one, but still not actually real. This expression was always a minority expression, though, because it is indeed a historical fact that a man named Jesus died a terrible death at the hand of a ruler named Pontius Pilate.

The second story was that Jesus was indeed truly human. And at his baptism, a divine Christ-Spirit entered into him. This divine Spirit remained in him and enabled his powerful words and deeds, but then departed, returning to the Father before the person of Jesus was crucified. That way of thinking yielded impressive compartmentalization: born a human, died a human, not a human in between.

One of the main problems with Docetism, though, is that they were left with a limited understanding of resurrection. If Jesus never really had a body, resurrection was only a matter of the spirit. Or resurrection could, at best, be understood as finally and fully escaping the body. But the New Testament goes to great lengths to make clear — Jesus' resurrection was a bodily resurrection. Every account of the tomb tells us — there was no body left behind. And Thomas cried out for all of us, saying, "I need to see the marks on his hands, and I need the touch his wounds." I need to see his body, his same body, his real body, Thomas was saying. And because Jesus knew that bodies would always matter, that's exactly what Thomas got.

And don't forget the words that Meghan read, from Paul's letter to the Hebrews: "Since children share flesh and blood, Jesus himself shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy death ... He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect ... because he himself suffered, he is able to help those who suffer."

To deny the humanity of Jesus Christ is to deny the incarnation. The reason we say that God is with us in our suffering, the reason we find comfort when the worst things have happened, is because we believe that Jesus knew exactly what it felt like to be afraid, or to be betrayed; he knew exactly what it felt like to have a broken heart and he knew exactly what it felt like to have a broken body. And he demonstrated, through the resurrection, that brokenness of every sort could be healed and made whole again. In dying a human death, Jesus destroyed death — not keeping it from us, but ensuring it does not get the final word. Because Jesus was human, death has lost its sting forever. If we deny Jesus' humanity, we deny the full power of the resurrection.

The truth is, Docetism never got near as much traction as Arianism. It didn't end with a treaty or a convention or a creed. I wonder, though, if it might not be one of the more insidious heresies, one that still plagues us today more than we realize. In Genesis, God created the human body, shaped in the image and likeness of God, and called it good. But in case that was not enough for us, God then came to earth in a human body. Both of these separating, but even more so together, mean: the human body is holy. The human body is where God has chosen to dwell. Which means, I believe it is not too much a stretch to say we are guilty of heresy every time we forget that bodies are holy.

Late last night, I woke up to my phone receiving a flurry of text messages, friends trying to confirm that another friend and his family was okay, because there was a shooting in Baltimore, uncomfortably close to where they live. Our friend was okay, but someone else's friend and someone else's children, are not. This is what happens when we forget that bodies are holy.

Last week, we prayed prayers laced with lament, when 10 lives were lost and 10 others were wounded after a Lunar New Year celebration was interrupted by terror and horror of the highest kind. This is what happens when we forget that bodies are holy.

This weekend, the city of Memphis, and all the rest of us, recoiled at the release of video footage showing Tyre Nichols being beaten so badly he would later die in the hospital. This is what happens when we forget that bodies are holy.

When we forget that bodies are holy, what happens is not of God.

An early theologian named Iraeneus, attempting to shout down Docetism in the second century, said "Jesus Christ became what we are, that he might bring us to be even what he is himself." These words are sometimes paraphrased, "God became man that we might become God." Now, before you think we've just quickly traded in one heresy for another, what Iraeneus was getting at — and what he went on to describe at great length — is the truth when Jesus came to us, we were brought before God in a new way. When Jesus came to us, we were meant to see God in a new way, but we were also meant to see ourselves and others in a new way, too. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, "In as much as you have cared for, or in as much as you have failed to care, for any one of my brothers or sisters, that is exactly what you have done to me."

The truth of Jesus' humanity comes with both comfort and cost. We trust that because Jesus knows what it is to be human, and that we are never left alone to face anything this life throws at us. But because Jesus has been human, every human body has divine fingerprints all over it, and how we treat bodies, both our own, and anyone else's, really and truly is how we treat God.