

HERESIES, ANCIENT and MODERN.

Lecture 6 – The Necessity of the Cross

Introduction

We are approaching Christmas and one of the songs we like to sing is entitled: Away in a Manger. The second stanza is interesting:

*The cattle are lowing, the poor Baby awakes
But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes
I love Thee, Lord Jesus! Look down from the night sky
And stay by my side till morning is nigh*

I don't know why Martin Luther added the line "no crying He makes", but Luther was no heretic. But one could imagine that this little baby is somewhat different than other babies. It is natural. It is human, so to speak, to cry. One of the early heresies that rejected the normal, human experience of Jesus was called Docetism. It was very much like Gnosticism.

Docetism

"The word *Docetism* comes from the Greek *dokein*, which meant "to seem"; according to Docetism, Jesus Christ only *seemed* to have a human body like ours . . . Docetism allowed that Jesus may have been in some way divine, but it denied His full humanity. Hardcore Docetists taught that Jesus was only a phantasm or an illusion, appearing to be human but having no body at all. Other forms of Docetism taught that Jesus had a "heavenly" body of some type but not a real, natural body of flesh. Docetism was closely related to Gnosticism, which viewed physical matter as inherently evil and spiritual substance as inherently good."¹ "Although he seemed to have a human body, he was not subject to any kind of human experiences. This included being immune to human "birth, fatigue, thirst, hunger, suffering, [and] death."²

"The reason that Christ's humanity was such a puzzle was not because people considered the gospel to be legend or mythology but because it seemed impossible that anything good, spiritual, pure, and divine should mix with anything evil, ugly, filthy, and decaying."³

Justin Holcomb writes, "Docetism developed to make Christianity more acceptable to pagan societies. Many societies, especially those influenced by Greek or Persian dualistic thought, viewed flesh as evil. The very thought of God incarnating as a man was unthinkable. The incarnation inevitably implied suffering. As a man, Jesus Christ was subjected to the humiliation of being a helpless baby. He required

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/Docetism.html>

² Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 56). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

³ Ibid (p. 55).

food and drink to survive. When he was fasting in the wilderness for forty days, he was tempted. He was spat upon, beaten, and crucified. All these events were thought to be beneath a great and spiritual God who transcends everything.”⁴ Notice again Holcomb’s assessment: Docetism tried to make Christianity acceptable to the pagans!

The Response of the Early Church

“The same thought occurred spontaneously in Christian circles. It is the reason why ‘Greeks’ (some Gentile Christians, as well as non-Christian Gentiles) consider the doctrine of Christ crucified “foolishness” (See 1 Corinthians 1:23⁵) . . . The fact that Docetism frequently recurs within Christendom illustrates the truth of Paul’s statement that the preaching of the Cross is “folly to the Greeks”⁶.

Ignatius of Antioch lived from A.D. 50-117. He was one of the earliest to defend the truth against this heresy. Ignatius was a disciple of the Apostle John. “Docetism prompted Ignatius to formulate one of the earliest, albeit informal, Christian creeds:

“Stop your ears, therefore, when anyone speaks to you at variance with Jesus Christ, who was descended from David, and was also of Mary; who was truly born, and did eat and drink. He was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate; He was truly crucified, and [truly] died, in the sight of beings in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth. He was also truly raised from the dead, His Father quickening Him, even as after the same manner His Father will so raise up us who believe in Him by Christ Jesus, apart from whom we do not possess the true life.”⁷

“At the end of his life, Ignatius was sentenced to suffer the fate of a martyr, which he gladly accepted. He dissuaded fellow Christians from protecting him, because he wanted truly to experience death and truly to rise from the dead like his Savior. Otherwise, he argued, ‘If the Lord were in the body in appearance only, and were crucified in appearance only, then am I also bound in appearance only.’ Then he rhetorically asks, ‘And why have I also surrendered myself to death, to fire, to the sword, to the wild beasts? But [in fact,] I endure all things for Christ, not in appearance only, but in reality, that I may suffer together with Him.’”⁸

If we understand Ignatius’s view it would have been insane for him to go to his martyr’s death believing in a phantom – someone who only appeared to live and die for his sake. The point is this:

Salvation depends on Christ’s really being a man who suffered and was resurrected, so that those in Christ may die and rise with him.

⁴ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 56). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

⁵ ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.”

⁶ Brown, Harold O.J., Heresies, Heresy and Orthodoxy in the History of the Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 1988, Page 52-53

⁷ Schaff, Philip. Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 1 - Enhanced Version (Early Church Fathers) . Christian Classics Ethereal Library. Kindle Edition.

⁸ Holcomb, Justin S.. Know the Heretics (KNOW Series Book 2) (p. 58). Zondervan Academic. Kindle Edition.

Docetism Today

In our Church Statement of Faith we affirm in Article 8: “Christ voluntarily suffered a vicarious, expiatory and propitiatory death; that justification is by faith alone in the all sufficient sacrifice and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.”⁹ That word “vicarious” means “in our place”. We affirm that Christ truly suffered and truly died and rose again in our place. As Ignatius proclaimed, “truly, not in appearance.”

While on earth, Jesus experienced hunger (Matthew 4:2) and thirst (John 19:28), showed compassion (Matthew 9:36), was tired (John 4:6), felt sorrow to the point of weeping (John 11:35), and grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52). Yet in all of his humanness, Jesus never sinned (Hebrews 4:15).

The most obvious modern-day version of Docetism is the religion of Islam. Muslims do not believe that Jesus actually died. The Qur’an states:

“That they said (in boast), “We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah”;- but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not.”¹⁰

The Necessity of the Cross

The question that we must be certain of is this: Is it necessary to our salvation that Jesus really suffered and really died; and really rose again?

Here’s the Biblical logic: If Jesus did not have a real body, then He did not really die. If Jesus had no physical body, He could not have risen bodily from the dead. Without the actual death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have no salvation, we are still in our sins, and our faith is futile, so says 1 Corinthians 15:17 (ESV):

“¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

Jesus had to be born as a human being for several reasons. (The Book of Hebrews is a key study in this topic)

1. The first is outlined in Galatians 4:4–5.

Only a perfect and real human could perfectly keep the law and perfectly fulfill the law in our place. Jesus accomplished our redemption on the cross, exchanging our sin for His perfect righteousness (2 Corinthians 5:21). We read in Hebrews:

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the

⁹ <https://www.elkpointbaptistchurch.com/about/our-beliefs>

¹⁰ Qur’an, sura 4 (An-Nisa) ayat 157–158

devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.” (Hebrews 2:14–15, ESV)

2. Another reason Jesus had to be fully human is that God established the necessity of the shedding of blood for the remission of sins (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22).

The animal sacrifices in Israel were temporary and unable to take away sin. Hebrews 10:4 reminds us that Jesus Christ, the perfect Lamb of God, sacrificed His human life and shed His human blood to cover the sins of all who would ever believe in Him. If He were not human, this would have been impossible.

3. Hebrews 4:15 reminds us that we have a High Priest that can relate (sympathize to us in every way).

Only a human could sympathize with our weaknesses and temptations. In His humanity, Jesus was subjected to all the same kinds of trials that we are, and He is, therefore, able to sympathize with us and to aid us. He was tempted; He was persecuted; He was poor; He was despised; He suffered physical pain; and He endured the cruelest death.

4. Lastly because Jesus was real and his life and death were real, we who are in Christ belong to a new Adam. A new head of a new creation. As we see in Romans 5:14–19 (ESV)

¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come . . . ¹⁷ For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. ¹⁹ For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, turn to Hebrews 5:8–9 (ESV):

“⁸ Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. ⁹ And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.”

The basis, the ground, for your salvation and mine, is the lifelong, perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. Without His perfection, we would have no hope. I love the truths that many of our good hymns contain. Here we hear from the pen of Isaac Watts¹¹:

¹¹ At The Cross, Isaac Watts | Ralph E. Hudson, © Words: Public Domain

Verse 1 Alas and did my Savior bleed And did my Sov'reign die Would He devote that sacred head For sinners such as I	Verse 2 Was it for crimes that I have done He groaned upon the tree Amazing pity grace unknown And love beyond degree
Verse 3 Well might the sun in darkness hide And shut His glories in When Christ the mighty Maker died For man the creature's sin	Chorus At the cross at the cross Where I first saw the light And the burden of my heart rolled away It was there by faith I received my sight And now I am happy all the day