

Adult Education – St. Luke’s Church – Sedona, AZ – Class 26

Heresies I – Docetism and Modern Variants

March 1, 2020

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I. Opening Prayer

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin; Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. **Amen.** (*Collect for the Nativity of our Lord, or the Birthday of Christ, commonly called Christmas Day.* BCP, p. 96.)

II. Introduction

- A Church in crisis:

The identity of a Church comes not only from its changing historical and cultural forms but pre-eminently – some of us will argue – from what it believes. The early Church established its teaching about the Person of Christ and the Trinity in the famous four Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon. The victory did not come easily. Orthodoxy was challenged by deviant teachings presented by attractive and sincere apologists. Such heresies were examined and found wanting. The Creeds of the Four Councils have since formed the faith and the mind of the universal Church with its cornerstone being the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as Son of God and Savior.

But this teaching is under attack again. Plausible, but ultimately superficial, teachings both from within and outside the Church force us to re-examine the place of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity. Isn’t it time, we are being urged, for the Church in this pluralist age to accommodate itself to a world in which Christianity is just one religion among many? Isn’t Jesus just one among many “Saviours”? Isn’t it time to recognize “truth” in heresy and “heresy” in truth? (George Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, *from the Foreward to The Cruelty of Heresy*, by C. FitzSimons Allison. Harrisburg, PA: 1994.)

- “A sense of disorder pervades our culture and our churches...Not since the early centuries have [the Creeds] been under as serious assault as they are today *both from without and from within the churches.*” (*Cruelty*, p. 16; emphasis added.) And this was written in 1994 – 26 years ago!
- Heresy is attractive because – like the old Burger King slogan: Have it your way! – it allows us to have *God* our way.
- Ultimately, though, the heretical path is a cruel one because “the Christian faith is distorted, and people who follow these teachings are hurt...As a skull and crossbones on a bottle

warns that the contents are poison to our bodies, so the label ‘heresy’ warns us that it is poison to our souls.” (*Cruelty*, pp. 20, 27.)

- In a perverse sense, early heresies were beneficial because they helped the Church define its beliefs. Today, however, they are serious threats to the spiritual health of Christians and the Church.
- When it comes to heresy, **everything old is new again**. Nearly every historical heresy has some form of modern expression. It is the duty of *every generation* to “earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” *Jude* 1:3. This duty includes recognizing, avoiding and suppressing heresies.

III. Contending for the Faith: Orthodoxy vs. Heresy

- The word “orthodox” derives from *orthos*, meaning straight, right, correct or true, and *doxa*, meaning opinion or teaching.
- For centuries the Church has relied on the statements and Creeds emanating from the first four Ecumenical Councils to determine what is or isn’t orthodox. These Councils did not and could not answer all possible questions, but they did set limits – like bowling bumpers – to keep the Church and its decisions on a straight path.
- “Heresy” is opinion or doctrine at odds with orthodoxy. In Christianity, heresy arises most often from wrong belief about the person of Christ or the nature of the Trinity – issues that were repeatedly addressed at the first four Ecumenical Councils.
- The Wikipedia page, “List of Heresies in the Catholic Church” lists over 50 heresies, but nearly all of these heresies fall within two major categories: **Docetism** and **Adoptionism**.

IV. Whom Say Ye That I Am?

- “When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, **Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God**. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” *St. Matthew* 16:13-17.
- Despite Peter’s confession, the Early Church was vexed by the question of what it really meant for Jesus to be the “Son of the living God.” The study of this question is called **Christology**. Before this question was fully answered by the first four Ecumenical Councils, many believers answered this question (incorrectly) in one of two major ways:
 - Jesus was fully God but not fully human: Docetism
 - Jesus was fully human but not fully God: Adoptionism

V. Docetism

- “Docetism” is derived from *dokein*, meaning to seem, or to appear.
- Docetists found it incomprehensible that Jesus, being divine, could actually have suffered. The idea of a suffering god was particularly untenable among Greeks, whose gods would *never* have submitted themselves to the suffering that Jesus endured. Similarly, some Jews rejected the notion of a Messiah who was neither politically victorious nor able to avoid suffering. Others generally had no appetite for a religion which suggested that personal suffering might be an inescapable (or even desirable) aspect of belief.
- Instead, Docetists maintained, that Jesus only *appeared* to weep, to suffer hunger, to sweat bloody drops in the Garden of Gethsemane, not to mention being crucified and dying. They went so far as to claim that Simon of Cyrene, who was pressed into carrying Jesus’ cross, was also crucified in his place.
- To the Docetists, Jesus was like a projected image or a hologram.
- Docetism’s error is clearly refuted in the writings of St. John:
 - And *the Word was made flesh*, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. *St. John* 1:14.
 - Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that *Jesus Christ is come in the flesh* is of God. *I John* 4:2
 - For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. *This is a deceiver and an antichrist*. *II John* 1:7.
- As for suffering, the New Testament is replete with references to both the necessity and the desirability of suffering for Christ’s sake. *Hebrews* 12:1-14; *Philippians* 3:10; *Romans* 5:3-4, 8:17; *I Peter* 2:19; *I Peter* 3:14; *2 Corinthians* 1:3-7.
- If Christ was not *fully* human – and thereby did not suffer *as fully* human, how could he have *fully* redeemed humanity? As the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus) succinctly stated: What he did not assume he does not redeem.
- “Although this version of Christianity was repudiated early, human hope that religion will provide escape from suffering and from the offense that Christ suffered an excruciating execution, has caused it to recur repeatedly in church history, in varied and often more subtle forms.” *Cruelty*, p. 29.
- The tendency of Docetism to deny Jesus’ full humanity and to abhor suffering is repudiated, not just in Scripture and in the Creeds, but also in the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Collect for the Monday before Easter is a miniature theological treatise refuting Docetism and reflecting what our response should be to suffering:

- Almighty God, whose *most dear Son* went not up to joy but *first he suffered pain*, and entered not into glory *before he was crucified*; Mercifully grant that we, *walking the way of the cross*, may find it *none other than the way of life and peace*; through the same thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.* (BCP, p 138)

VI. Montanism

- If Jesus was not fully human, and if he did not truly suffer on the cross for our sins, there must be other paths to salvation – or so the Docetists believed. This erroneous thinking opened the door for the Gnostics to infiltrate Christian theology – an infiltration that persists today. Gnostics believe, among other things, that salvation may be achieved only through special – often *personal* – knowledge and revelation.
- Montanus (2nd century) founded a movement then known as the New Prophecy (now known as Montanism), a form of Gnosticism. In many ways, Montanus was a devout Christian, but he claimed to have received personal, prophetic revelations. He had two well-known “prophetesses,” Priscilla and Maximilla, both of whom left their husbands to follow Montanus.
- All three practiced frenzied, ecstatic “prophecy” and claimed to receive revelations directly from the Holy Spirit – prophecies that could even directly contradict the teachings of Jesus, St. Paul and others.
- They claimed the power to forgive sins (even though not ordained by a bishop in Apostolic succession).
- They recognized women as bishops and presbyters.
- On the other hand, they were ethical, rigorous and ascetic.
- Montanists were excommunicated by the Church c.177, but remnants of its adherents survived into the 9th century.
- Recommended reading: *Montanism*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Montanism>.

VII. Docetism Today

- All modern denominations or movements which de-emphasize Christ’s redemptive suffering on the cross, the important role of suffering in the individual Christian life, or which emphasize personal revelation, ecstatic utterance, etc. have succumbed to the Docetic heresy, largely Montanist in type.
- Christian Science: teaches that if one has “true and complete faith there would be no pain or suffering (and no death).” *Cruelty*, p. 30.
- Islam: honors Jesus as a great prophet but teaches that he escaped the indignity of the cross. *Cruelty*, p. 29

- Mormonism: relies heavily on numerous “revelations” to its founder, Joseph Smith, in the 1820’s. A principal heretical belief is the teaching that God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit are independent beings, and taken together they form the Godhead. Mormons do not accept the traditional Christian view of the Trinity – that God is three beings of one substance: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/14/us/politics/14mormon.html>.
- Jehovah’s Witnesses:
 - Assert, among other heretical beliefs, that Jesus is God’s son but inferior to Him; and that Jesus was the first of God’s creations.
 - Recommended reading: *Distinctive Beliefs of the Jehovah’s Witnesses*. <https://www.catholic.com/tract/distinctive-beliefs-of-the-jehovahs-witnesses>.
- Progressivism:
 - This is *widespread* in mainstream American denominations. Key identifiers include:
 - Diminished view of the authority of the Bible (*e.g.*, the Bible is “profoundly human” – meaning, of questionable doctrinal value)
 - Emphasis of feelings over facts (*e.g.*, “I could never believe in a God who...”)
 - Essential Christian doctrines are open for reinterpretation.
 - Historic terms are being redefined (*e.g.*, “inspired” is reinterpreted as “inspiring” and as “Divine Wind”)
 - The heart of the Gospel is shifting from sin and redemption to social justice
 - Recommended video: *Why Progressive Christianity is a Dangerous False Gospel: Alisa Childers*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxg4wHywv-s&list=PLQ9-50qJL_Dabu0DuHeYolHJQ-nO60LtJ&index=20.
- New Apostolic Reformation
 - The New Apostolic Reformation (NAR) is a movement which seeks to establish a fifth branch within Christendom, distinct from Catholicism, Protestantism, Oriental Orthodoxy, and Eastern Orthodoxy. The movement is largely associated with the Pentecostal and the Charismatic movements and advocates the restoration of the lost offices of church governance, namely the offices of prophet and apostle. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Apostolic_Reformation.
 - Particularly popular among youth; worship often has a rock-concert atmosphere and includes bizarre rituals and initiations (*e.g.*, barking like a dog, laughing uncontrollably for hours, writhing on the floor)
 - Recommended video: *Ex-Bethel Student Tells All: Lindsay Davis Testimony* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=winCHM9yuY4>
- Contemporary Christian Music (Bethel, Hillsong, and Elevation music):
 - Predominantly centered on self and feelings rather than Jesus and the cross
 - Poorly vetted theologically (*e.g.*, God’s “*Reckless Love*”)
 - Music is used as a marketing tool to draw listeners to the churches they operate, which are predominantly NAR
 - Bill Johnson, pastor of Bethel Church is on record as saying that Jesus was not God until after he was resurrected (the heresy of Adoptionism, to be discussed next week)
 - Recommended video: *Why We Should Avoid Bethel Music*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mxg4wHywv-s&list=PLO9-50qJL_Dabu0DuHeYolHJQ-nO60LtJ&index=20

- Contrast: *The 1940 Hymnal* has been thoroughly vetted for theological soundness
- Canon 24: “It shall be [the Minister’s] duty to suppress all light and unseemly music and all irreverence in the rendition thereof.”
- Pentecostal & Charismatic Movements:
 - Place special emphasis on a direct, personal experience of God through baptism with the Holy Spirit
 - Many Pentecostals insist that speaking in tongues is a necessary sign of being filled with the Holy Spirit
- Prosperity Gospel:
 - A religious belief among some Protestant Christians that financial blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth.
 - Preachers such as Joel Osteen (*Your Best Life Now*), Joyce Meyer (*Name it and claim it!*), and Kenneth Copeland have mega-church followings
 - Recommended reading: *What You Should Know About the Prosperity Gospel*. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/what-you-should-know-about-the-prosperity-gospel/>
- New Agism:
 - Covers a wide range of religious and spiritual beliefs – oftentimes claimed to be Christian.
 - Frequently involves fortune-telling, tarot cards, psychic readings, etc. (think Sedona)
 - Recommended video: *Doreen Virtue Testimony: Why I Left the New Age to Follow Jesus* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZSH8mvIbdk&t=1417s>
 - *Deuteronomy* 18:10-12: There shall not be found among you any one that...useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch. Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee.
- All of the above are direct descendants of Docetism through, predominantly, Montanism.

To be continued next week: Heresies II – Adoptionism and Modern Variants

VIII. Concluding Prayer

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who, of thy tender love towards mankind, hast sent thy Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, to take upon him our flesh, and to suffer death upon the cross, that all mankind should follow the example of his great humility; Mercifully grant, that we may both follow the example of his patience, and also be made partakers of his resurrection; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.** (*Collect for the Sunday next before Easter, commonly called Palm Sunday.* BCP, p. 134.)

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