

The Most Human Human

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in five-part series

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Genesis 1:26–27 (NIV)

²⁶Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” ²⁷So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Luke 2:1–7 (NIV)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Mark 15:33–37 (NIV)

³³At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. ³⁴And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” (which means “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”).

³⁵When some of those standing near heard this, they said, “Listen, he’s calling Elijah.”

³⁶Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to take him down,” he said.

³⁷With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last.

1 Corinthians 15:20–23 (NIV)

²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

Jesus ate. And he wept. And he died.

But was he really, truly human – as human as you and me?

This week and next, we’ll be looking at two of the most significant and important heresies in the history of Christianity. Both revolve around the nature of Jesus. Of course they do; it always comes back to Jesus. It is Jesus who sets Christianity apart from all the rest of the world’s religions. Both of these heresies, in their many sub-varieties, have been common among Christians from the beginning. Why? Because these mistaken understandings of Jesus are completely understandable . . . even sensible, logical, and reasonable.

On the one hand, John opens his story of Jesus in this way; “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’ (John 1:1). Ok . . . that makes it pretty clear – Jesus, the Word, is God. Always has been, is now, and ever shall be.

But on the other hand, Matthew and Luke tell us this same Jesus was born to a young Jewish woman named Mary. They also tell us that he died a horrible death at the hands of the Roman governor. That’s what happens to you and me, regular, run-of-the-mill humans. We are born, we live, and we die.

So which is it . . . was Jesus God or was he human? Surely those choices are mutually exclusive. It has to be one or the other. Ask any Jewish person or Muslim if God can be human or if we are little mini-gods? You’ll get a straightforward and resounding no.

Thus, it should surprise no one that for two thousand years, well-meaning, faithful believers have tried to reconcile these two contradictory claims in their own minds, as do

we. Yet when we do, we are led down the seemingly benign path of a mistake that threatens the continued existence of Christianity.

There are two general ways that we can resolve the seeming contradiction. First, we can diminish the claim that Jesus was really human. Perhaps he only *seemed* to be human. Indeed, one of the persistent heresies, *Docetism*, takes its name from the Greek word, *dokéo*, meaning “seem.” This is the denial, in some way or another, of Jesus’ genuine and authentic humanity. But for 2,000 years Christians have insisted that Jesus was as human as you and me, for reasons that we’ll get to in a bit.

The other way to resolve the contradiction between Jesus’ divinity and humanity is to diminish the claim that Jesus was really divine, really and truly God. Perhaps he was only the human closest to God or most “God-touched,” whatever that means. But not really and truly divine. This long-time heresy is called *Arianism*, after Arius, a bishop who lived about 300 years after Jesus. Bishop Arius insisted that there was a time when Jesus did not exist, thereby denying his genuine divinity. Next week, when we examine Arianism, we’ll see how this heresy is bound up with the Christian belief in the Trinity.

This week, however, we are going to look at Docetism. In my experience, at least in this part of the U.S., docetic views of Jesus are more common than Arian perspectives of Jesus; i.e., many Christians more easily accept that Jesus was God than that he was really truly human. In this way, we tend to be a bit like Valentinus, a second century Christian who espoused docetic views of Jesus. Valentinus just couldn’t get past the idea that Jesus pooped and peed. (See . . . right there, you think I’m being blasphemous. Who could say or even think such things about the Lord God Almighty, our Creator and Lord? It’s just too gross. Surely such things are beneath God!) . . . That’s Valentinus. He merely went on from there to its logical conclusion – namely, that Jesus wasn’t really God, for we know that Jesus had to “p&p.”

Docetism – Jesus only appeared to be human

The reason Docetism has been around for two millennia and continues to thrive is that its view of Jesus is grounded in *Gnosticism*, an ancient and attractive worldview most recently popularized by Dan Brown in his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. For the Gnostics, it is only the spiritual that is truly of God. Our material world, on the other hand, was created by a “demiurge,” an inferior and second-rate god who did a pretty lousy job. Thus, the goal of life (“salvation”) is to escape this crummy material existence and achieve the spiritual realm by means of some secret knowledge. This gnostic story is told in many ways, but they all revolve around the same idea: spiritual = good, material = bad. For example, Paul’s letter 1 Corinthians was written to confront the gnostic tendencies of the Corinthian believers who had come to the point of even denying Jesus’ bodily resurrection and, hence, their own. In their minds, Jesus was simply beyond having a body.

And still today, the popular culture always speaks of religion in the sense that it is about the spiritual, about “being spiritual.” Sure, the material world is full of grossness, illness, brokenness, tragedy, and death – but the Christian way has *never* been to elevate the “spiritual” over the “material.” The incarnation of Jesus, the claim that God really did take on genuine human flesh and was born to Mary, refutes all our attempts to see the material world as inherently lesser or somehow unworthy of the God who created it. As believers we have to work every day to fight the popular tendency to elevate the “spiritual” and denigrate the “material.” The docetic view of Jesus is only one small step away from this gnostic view of reality.

Why does this really matter?

What difference does it really make whether Jesus was really, truly human or not? I’m pretty sure that many Christians couldn’t answer that question very well. How could it really be that important, a heresy that if left unchecked would be fatal to Christianity?

To answer that question, let’s first step back and remember that humanity has a problem, which we label “Sin.” It is a darkness that lies in the human heart, causing us to do the very things we know we should not do, and not do that which we know we should. And we, the sum total of humanity, simply cannot overcome or eliminate this monster ourselves. No

amount of good intentions, desire, education, or enlightenment can fully overcome the power of Sin. Further, this darkness called Sin keeps us estranged from God, preventing the reconciliation that God so desires.

This sounds like a pretty harsh assessment of humanity, but, as G. K. Chesterton put it, this business about Sin is the only Christian doctrine that can be empirically proven.

So what is to be done about Sin if we cannot do it ourselves? Well, then God must do it. But God can't simply ignore Sin. God is right and good and just – he is holy and pure. Were Sin-filled humans to come into his presence, they would be consumed – much as a rocket would be consumed by the sun were it to get too near. No . . . the Sin in us all must be dealt with.

So God set about to deal with it. He formed a holy people who could stand in his presence and through whom all humanity would be put right with God. This story began with Abraham and came to its fulfillment in Jesus. The problem of Sin lies in humanity so the solution must lie in humanity – for we are the ones who make one wrong choice after another. Regrettably, the story of the people of God is the long and tragic story of Israel told in the Old Testament. They are anything but holy, unable simply to love God and one another, unable to live up to the covenant God had made with them. Since Sin is a problem that lies beyond our ability to solve, I suppose the tragedy of Israel could be understood as inevitable.

Yes, the problem and the solution must lie in us . . . but Sin has to be dealt with by God. How could this be done? The solution seems simple yet incomprehensible – God will become human. God will take on human flesh. God will become one of us, truly one of us, with all our pains and hurts and joys. This is the message of the incarnation – God became one of us. God, in the person, the very human person, of Jesus became one of us. He would be the one human who would be faithful and loving in all things and at all times. He would be the human the rest of us ought to strive to be, the sort of person we were created to be. Jesus would be the one faithful Jew, a very human Jew, able to keep the covenant that the people of God had entered into at the time of Moses.

Sadly, that very faithfulness put Jesus on a Roman cross. I suppose we should expect nothing else when a man of enduring love and faithfulness meets the dark powers of this world. Nonetheless, in his love and faithfulness, in his sinlessness, Jesus represents all those who entrust themselves to him. He is our “representative Messiah,” in much the same way that once upon a time in our world, if you slapped the King of France you slapped France. The king embodied the people he ruled.

That's why Jesus' humanity is essential to the Good News we proclaim. If he isn't one of us, how can he represent us, how can he embody us on that cross? No . . . the problem of Sin is a human problem and takes a human solution and yet must be God's doing – thus, that human is Jesus, the embodiment not only of us all but of God himself.

The biblical story can be seen as God's achieving the reconciliation with humanity despite the intractability of Sin, by doing and being for us, in the person of Jesus, what we cannot do and be for ourselves – namely people who can faithfully love God and others every day and in every way. In hindsight, we can see that it could be no other way.

The Most Human Human

When we really screw something up, we often say something like, “Well, I was just being human.” But that is completely backward. We aren't being our most human when we get it wrong, but when we get it right. When we embrace and pursue what is good and right and just and loving, *then* we are being our most human, the sort of people that God created us to be, worthy truly of having been made in the image of God.

Thus, in striving to be our best, we must strive for genuine Christlikeness. Not because we are called to do what Jesus did nor be who Jesus is. But because Jesus was the human in whom the image of God shone brightly without any diminishment – a light that was blinding in its faith and kindness and sacrificial love. May that be our light as well.

More on Gnosticism (adapted from Eerdmann's Bible Dictionary)

Beliefs

The central Gnostic doctrine is the ontological dualism between the supreme, ineffable God of love and the material world, considered evil or, at best, indifferent. Between God and matter lie a host of spiritual Powers, collectively termed the fullness (plērōma) of God. From its lowest rank comes the creator, a demiurge identified with the Old Testament Yahweh. Fallen spiritual powers, often linked with astral referents, now rule the world.

Some human beings (i.e., the Gnostics) Possess a divine spark (pneúma), an inner self different from the soul (psyché). Although imprisoned in the body, the Pleroma is their true home. Made aware of their unfortunate plight through revelation (most often mediated by some divine savior), they may now ascend to their home by means of this gnosis. This is not an intellectual, but a mystical Knowledge, a true seeing and hearing.

The focus of Gnostic redemption is not on God, but ultimately upon the individual's self-understanding and the resulting freedom it provides.

Roots in Plato and Judaism

Gnosticism borrowed from many traditions in the Hellenistic world. While the exact relationship between these sources remains cloudy, four areas are discernible, two of which are:

Platonic Philosophy Gnosticism owed much to classical Greek philosophy, particularly Middle Platonism. Prominent ideas included the soul as a divine spark, imprisoned in the body; creation by a flawed demiurge; dualism between spirit and matter; knowledge of the One (tó hén, i.e., God) given intuitively through revelation, often in secret. Similar teachings are found in the so-called hermetic literature, a collection of Greek and Latin mystic writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus. The high value of Plato among the Gnostics is seen in the inclusion of his Republic among the Nag Hammadi codices.

Judaism First-century Judaism shows several points of likely influence upon the emerging Gnostic movement. Apocalyptic literature and the Dead Sea Scrolls both show clear affinities with subsequent Gnostic themes. Both are marked by strong dualisms (e.g., light/dark, the world to come/the present evil age). Both emphasize knowledge. At Qumran it is esoteric, the "hearing of deep things" (1QM 10:11). In apocalyptic, revelation discourses (a protognostic term) and visions unfold God's salvation. Although marked by pessimism toward the world, theirs remains an ethical or eschatological dualism rather than an ontological one.

At Alexandria Philo Judaeus put a Hellenistic face on Judaism. In a series of works for Gentiles he reconciled the Old Testament with philosophy by an allegorical exegesis that found mystical and philosophical truth beneath the literal narrative. This method was widely adopted by Christians and Gnostics. Philo's most important contribution was his identifying the Logos of philosophy with the biblical Wisdom (sophía; cf. Prov. 8), as the intermediary between the transcendent God and a universe flawed with evil.

Gnosticism also liberally borrowed motifs and names from the book of Genesis. By Gnostic allegorization these were twisted so that, e.g., the Fall no longer referred to a human event but to the fall of Sophia ("Eve") from the godhead.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The following are discussion questions written by Rev. Pam White to be used in our fall Connection Groups.

1. What does it mean for the Word to become flesh?
2. We use the word "incarnate" to talk about Christ. What does this word mean?
3. Why do we need a flesh and bones God anyway? What difference does it make if Christ was really human?
4. What is the difference in a relationship with a concept (the idea of God) versus a relationship with a person (Jesus who was a real person)? Consider this to help with your answer--What is the difference between the concept of having a spouse versus actually having a spouse? Or the concept of having a parent vs. actually having a parent?
5. How can we relate to Jesus' words on the cross?
6. What can we learn from this episode with Christ?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, John 1:14-18 The Word becomes flesh</p>	<p>Tuesday, Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus is tested in the Wilderness</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 11:17-37 Jesus comforts the sisters of Lazarus and weeps for Lazarus himself.</p>	<p>Thursday, Romans 5:12-21 Death through the man Adam; life through the man Jesus</p>
<p>Friday, Hebrews 5:7-9 During the days of Jesus' life on earth . . .</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class - now studying Romans

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class - now studying 1 Peter

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Saints and Sinners: True and Not-So-True Stories of the Pope
An entertaining and enlightening history of the Papacy, from Peter to Gregory to Joan(?) to Francis

Scott Engle and Robert Hasley will be leading a trip to Israel in late October 2014. This will be a land-only trip that will include all the major sites in Israel.

For more information go to www.scottengle.org or email Scott at sengle@standrewumc.org

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
