

Fully Human, Fully Divine

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a six-part series

May 27, 2018

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John 1:1,14(NIV)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . ¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Colossians 1:15-20 (NRSV)

¹⁵He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; ¹⁶for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

The big question --- where it all begins.

Who is Jesus? . . . That simple question consumed the early church. All of the major heresies that threatened the church swirled around the question of Jesus' identity and nature. To this day, anyone who has heard of Jesus has had to confront this question.

From the beginning, Christians clung to two seemingly contradictory statements: (1) Jesus was human, born to a young woman from Nazareth, crucified by a Roman execution squad, and (2) Jesus was divine, he was "the Word, "who was "with God," and "was God" (John 1:1).

But how could such a thing be? It seemed like nonsense and some well-meaning folks in the first century set about to make it sensible and reasonable. Various, they made suggestions about Jesus' nature that the Christian community, in the end, rejected as heretical. For a heresy isn't simply a mistake; rather, it comes from within the church and is a distorted, vulnerable, and fragile form of Christianity that cannot sustain itself. Christian heresy retains the *appearance* of Christianity while contradicting its *essence*. Here's a couple of the heresies that arose about the nature of Jesus:

- The *ebionite* ("the poor ones") Jesus: Jesus can be explained with the existing Jewish categories of prophet, priest, rabbi. Jesus was a human who was singled out by God for divine favor much like the prophets of old, even given the power to do miracles.
- The *docetic* Jesus: The denial of Jesus' genuine humanity. *Dokein* in the Greek means, "to appear." Jesus only appeared to be human. Basically, Jesus wasn't really what he appeared to be.

Despite the efforts of some to "solve" the puzzle of Jesus' true nature, the church continued to proclaim to all who would listen, two truths: Jesus was fully and completely God and Jesus was fully and completely human. It took a few centuries for the Christians to be able to fully articulate their beliefs about Jesus, but from the earliest days we see in the writings of the New Testament and elsewhere that the believers worshipped Jesus as Lord and God.

But of all the heresies that arose around Jesus, none threatened the unity of the church as much as the proposal of a bishop named Arius from Alexandria – the claim that Jesus wasn't really truly God, that there was a time when Jesus did not exist.

Bishop Arius

In six months, most children and all retailers will be totally into Santa Claus again. The origins of Santa are varied, but many trace Santa back to an actual person – St. Nicholas, a fourth century Christian bishop from Myra in modern-day Turkey who had a reputation for secretive gift-giving. At a large conference called by the emperor Constantine in AD 325 to confront the doctrinal challenge posed by Bishop Arius, it was reported that St. Nick struck Arius right in the face at one point in the proceeding. Yes, one and the same Nicholas. Whether true or not, the story illustrates the amount of heat generated by the *Arian* controversy in the fourth century. John Julius Norwich fills in some of the backstory:

It was Pope Sylvester's ["Pope"/the Bishop of Rome from 315 to 335] misfortune to witness, during his papacy, the appearance of the first of the great heresies that were to split the Church in the centuries to come. This was first propagated by a certain Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, a man of immense learning and splendid physical presence. His message was simple enough: that Jesus Christ was not coeternal and of one substance with God the Father but had been created by Him at a specific time and for a specific purpose, as his instrument for the salvation of the world. Thus, although a perfect man, the Son must always be subordinate to the Father. Here, in the eyes of Arius's archbishop, Alexander, was a dangerous doctrine indeed, and he took immediate measures to stamp it out.

In 320 [Arius] was arraigned before nearly a hundred bishops from Egypt, Libya, and Tripolitania and excommunicated as a heretic. The damage, however, was done: the teaching spread like wildfire. Those were the days, it must be remembered, when theological arguments were of passionate interest, not just to churchmen and scholars but to the whole Greek-speaking world. Broadsheets were distributed; rabble-rousing speeches were made in the marketplace; slogans were chalked on walls. Everyone had an opinion: you were either for Arius or against him. He himself, unlike most theologians, was a brilliant publicist; the better to disseminate his views, he actually wrote several popular songs and jingles— for sailors, travelers, carpenters, and other trades— which were sung and whistled in the streets. Then, a year or two later, Arius— who had hurriedly left Alexandria after his excommunication— returned in triumph. He had appeared before two further synods in Asia Minor, both of which had declared overwhelmingly his favor, and now he demanded his old job back.¹

To sum it up, Arius claimed that “there was a time when Jesus was not.” In other words, there was a time when Jesus did not exist, making him a creature just like the rest of us and not the eternal Word – for there was never a time when God did not exist.

Constantine's conference, the famed Council of Nicaea, was the first of the great universal Ecumenical Councils called by the burgeoning and now officially-sanctioned Christian churches. More than 300 bishops came to Nicaea in AD 325 to consider the Arian controversy. After much work and debate they drafted and all but a couple signed a creed that is still recited in churches worldwide and is printed in our UMC hymnals: The Nicene Creed. In part, this is what they wrote about the Jesus:

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father. Through him all things were made.”²

¹ Norwich, John Julius (2011-07-12). *Absolute Monarchs: A History of the Papacy* (Kindle Locations 372-381). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

²From the UMC hymnal. “Begotten” isn't a word we use much more anymore. Human children are begotten of human parents. Puppies are begotten of canine parents. We beget our own kind. Thus, to call Jesus God's only begotten Son is to make clear that he uniquely shares God's DNA, to use an analogy.

The Creed could not be clearer. No one could possibly misread the claim in the Nicene Creed that, yes, Jesus is God.

“All the fullness of God”

In the New Testament, we find passage after passage that helps us to understand the near unanimity of the bishops. For example, in his letter to the Colossians, Paul composed a hymn of sorts to Jesus, lifting up his unity with the Father. Here is how Eugene Peterson paraphrases Colossians 1:15-17 in *The Message* (the whole Christ-hymn is one of today’s Scripture passages):

“We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God’s original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels — everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment.”

For any Jew, this sort of language could be used only with respect to the Lord God. Paul was a Jew and not just any Jew, but an educated, zealous Pharisee. He knew the meaning of what he wrote. He knew that he was speaking of Jesus as one would speak of God. Yes, Paul struggles to find the right language, just as Christians have been struggling for two thousand years to make sense of a mystery. On the one hand, Paul says that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” (v. 15) which might make us think he is about to lump Jesus in with the rest of creation. But no. In the next phrase, Paul says the opposite – all things are created in, through, and for Jesus. It takes an expansive, open, and imaginative mind to hold together seemingly contradictory truths about God.

And what is God’s purpose in all this? The reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God, the undoing of the tragedy of the Garden. And how is all this done? Through the crucifixion, the “blood of his cross.” This is the good in Good Friday – that, in a way we cannot fully explain, we and the entire cosmos have been put right with God through Jesus’ death on the cross. To some, such a claim is not only bizarre but offensive, but for almost 2,000 years, Christians have proclaimed that it is so.

Why does this matter?

Our proclamation that Jesus is fully human and fully divine matters because it is the incarnation – God taking on human flesh – that reveals to us who God really is and his relentless pursuit of us and all humanity out of nothing more than love.

With the passing of each decade, we Americans seem more and more consumed with our rights. But Jesus certainly enjoyed rights and privileges that you and I could not imagine. He was God . . . existing from God’s beginning . . . equal with God . . . all-knowing . . . all-Good – however, we might choose to phrase it, Jesus had it all! But he gave it all up. He didn’t cling to his inherent rights and privileges, he instead “emptied” himself, taking on the “form of a slave . . . in human likeness.” (see another Christ-hymn in Philippians 2:5-11). Jesus gave up the privileges of God so that he might be obedient – obedient all the way to an excruciating and humiliating death on a Roman cross.

Sometimes, Christians get off track with this. We get too consumed with trying to tease out the meaning of “form” or “emptying,” wondering whether Paul is talking about Jesus’ surrendering his omniscience or omnipotence. But this is not Paul’s point. As Morna Hooker wrote, “Christ did not cease to be in the ‘form of God’ when he took the form of a slave, any more than he ceased to be the ‘Son of God’ when he was sent into the world. On the contrary, it is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he reveals what God is like.” God is love (1 John 4:16b). Love is selfless sacrifice. How do we know this? Because “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9).

Thus, those bishops from long ago wisely and overwhelmingly voted down Arius. It is why they wrote the enduring creed of Nicaea. It is why we must be bold and confident when we proclaim to the world the birth of the Christ-child – for in this lies the deepest and most important mystery of all.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. John's first claim about Jesus is clear: Jesus, the Word, is God. But what if John is wrong and Jesus isn't really God? Why do you think the early church fought so hard to protect the claim of Jesus' genuine divinity? What happens to the Good News if Jesus isn't really and truly and fully God?
2. Do you see how even in these few verses (1:15-20) from Colossians, Paul blasts away any notion that we could think of Jesus as a mere man? Why do you think this is so important to Paul? We have to be careful not to give up our claim that Jesus was fully human while we proclaim his divinity, though this is not Paul's emphasis here (see Philippians 2: 5-11 for that). In the Da Vinci Code Robert Langdon says at the end of the movie, "What really matters is what you believe." What do you think Paul would say to that? Why?

Daily Bible Readings

This week: More on the genuine divinity of Jesus

Monday, Matthew 8:23-27 Even creation is obedient to Jesus.

Tuesday, John 4:7-14 Jesus introduces a woman at a well to the Living Water.

Wednesday, Mark 14:53-65 What do you think Jesus claims about himself when he replies to the high priest in v. 62?

Thursday, John 10:31-42 The crowds certainly seem to understand that Jesus is claiming a unity with God.

Friday, Mark 2:1-12 Who can forgive sins? God can . . . and Jesus.

Saturday, John 1:1-19 John's entire prologue about Jesus.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

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

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying Colossians.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday 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 must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

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

Current series: *Razing Hell??*