Class 2 Summary – Docetism

What is Docetism?

Docetism is the heresy which denies the full humanity of Jesus Christ. The name comes from the Greek verb *dokein*, which means “to seem”: Docetists hold that Jesus only seemed to be human. This belief became particularly prominent in the second century, especially among the Gnostics, but was a tendency in theological thought rather than a fully formulated doctrine, which helps explain why it is not named after an individual. However, by the fourth century, this tendency led Apollinarius of Laodicea (310-390 AD) explicitly to deny that Jesus possessed a human mind or soul, and this particular kind of Docetism became known as Apollinarianism. It was ruled to be heretical by the Second Ecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in 381 AD.

Docetism has much to do with appearances: the word comes from the Greek verb meaning “to seem” or “to appear”. If many Jews (like all Arians) found it hard to believe that the man Jesus was really God, for many Greeks it was even harder to believe that the Christ that they worshipped as God could have been really human. Therefore, they asked, might he have just *appeared* to be human?

For God to be human, to be mixed up in matter – that was demeaning, disgusting, and unthinkable to the Greek mind; and for God to suffer was a contradiction in terms. Therefore, there were two stories told to get around these problems.

First, Jesus appeared to be human but was really a phantasm – a lookalike phantom. But there was not much mileage in that story, because it was too well known that Jesus was a real man and died a horribly real death under Pontius Pilate.

Therefore, there was a second, more plausible story that said that Jesus was indeed truly human and that only at his baptism did the divine Christ-Spirit enter into him (this is the heresy of Adoptionism which is the fifth heresy we will deal with in this class). This divine Spirit enabled his powerful words and deeds, and it left him, returning to the Father, before the man Jesus was crucified.

In the fourth-century, the theologian Apollinarius of Laodicea thought he was simply restating traditional orthodoxy: he believed, like many before him, that Jesus was truly “flesh”, God incarnate, but with the divine Logos as his mind.

He was quite clear that Jesus did not have a human mind, did not learn and develop morally, and could not have been humanly ignorant.