

Docetism.¹ From the Greek word *dokeo* (“to seem”), Docetism was a late-first century and early-second century heresy claiming that Jesus only seemed to be human. Docetism is “the assertion that Christ’s human body was a phantasm, and that his suffering and death were mere appearance. ‘If he suffered he was not God; if he was God he did not suffer’”(Bettenson, 35). This view affirmed Christ’s deity but denied His humanity. Often associated as a subcategory of Gnosticism or Manichaeism, Docetism was probably a separate, though related, sect.

Either Docetism was already present towards the end of the New Testament, or early seeds were being sown for it, as seen in the statement “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (1 John 4:2-3). A few years later, Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch (died ca. 112), warned believers to “be deaf when anyone speaks to you apart from Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, the son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, who was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate and was really crucified and died. . . . If, as some say who are godless in the sense that they are without faith, He merely seemed to suffer—it is they themselves who merely seem to exist—why am I in chains?” (*To the Trallians*, 104-5).

Docetism’s teachings eventually developed and spread. The word *docetae* (“illusionists”) first appears in a letter of Serapion, Bishop of Antioch (190-203) to the Church at Rhossos. Serapion forbade the use of the apocryphal Gospel of Peter, because he had received it from a Docetic group. Thus, both the apostolic and early church shunned Docetism for its heretical denial of Jesus’ humanity.

A Biblical Response. Numerous biblical texts address the full humanity of Jesus Christ. The incarnation, where the second member of the Trinity became flesh, is at the heart of the gospel message. Since Jesus’ “children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same” (Heb 2:14) and although Jesus “has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin” (4:15). A summary of Scriptures’ teachings on Jesus’ humanity follows with only a sampling of the biblical data.

Jesus’ Human Genealogy. Both Matthew and Luke attest to Jesus’ human ancestry. Matthew, writing to Jews, begins with Abraham, the father of the Jews and traces Jesus’ lineage through King David down to His legal father Joseph (Matt 1:1-17; cf. Rom 1:3). Luke, writing to Gentiles to prove Jesus as the Savior of the world, begins with Jesus and traces backwards all the way to Adam, the first human (Luke 3:23-38).

Jesus’ Human Conception. Mary’s conception of Jesus was in her “womb” (Luke 1:31), the same place other humans begin. What was unique with this conception, however, was the Holy Spirit’s supernatural role in Mary’s conception, for she remained a virgin until after Jesus’ birth (cf. Matt 1:20, 25; Luke 1:35).

Jesus’ Human Birth. After Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem, “the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son” (Luke 2:6-7). One should realize that the miracle occurred with the conception, not the birth, for “there was nothing unnatural, or even supernatural, about Jesus’ birth. Mary had a nine-month pregnancy (Luke 1:26, 56, 57), birth pains, and Jesus was born through the birth canal as other natural children are

¹Slightly expanded from the article which appears under Joel R. Breidenbaugh, *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics*. Edited by Ergun Caner and Ed Hindson (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2008), 179-181.

born” (Geisler, 202). Although Christ has always existed as God, there was a point in time that “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14; cf. 1 Tim 3:16), which refers to Jesus’ birth and life.

Jesus’ Human Childhood. Though the Gospels provide little information about Jesus’ childhood, they do point to a normal childhood for any human. He was circumcised on the eighth day, like all Jewish boys, and after forty days, His parents presented Him in the temple “to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘EVERY *firstborn* MALE THAT OPENS THE WOMB SHALL BE CALLED HOLY TO THE LORD’)” (Luke 2:21-23). After these events, Jesus, like most children “continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom” (2:40, cf. v. 52).

Jesus’ Human Adulthood. Several accounts in Jesus’ adulthood confirm His humanity. First, as a human Jesus experienced hunger—“after He had fasted forty days and forty nights, He then became hungry” (Matt 4:2). Jesus’ body plainly needed sustaining food like all humans. Second, Jesus experienced thirst as a human both during His ministry when He asked the Samaritan woman for a drink of water (cf. John 4:7) and during His passion when He cried out, “I am thirsty” (19:28). Just as Jesus needed food to function, so He needed water. Third, Jesus got tired and weary (cf. John 4:6) and slept (cf. Matt 8:24), because humans experience physical exhaustion. Fourth, Jesus experienced a wide-range of emotions, including sorrow through weeping at Lazarus’ grave (cf. John 11:33-35) and at Jerusalem’s failure to repent and trust in Him (cf. Matt 23:37; Luke 19:41). Moreover, Jesus occasionally grew angry, such as cleansing the temple from being a marketplace of financial gain (cf. Matt 21:12-13; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:14-16). Jesus also expressed compassion for the needy (cf. Matt 9:36) and love to all, especially His disciples (cf. John 13:1, 34; 15:12-14).

Jesus’ Human Language. Jesus’ Jewish background and culture placed Him among other Jews of His day. Both of His parents were Jewish (cf. Matt 1:16; Luke 1:55). He probably understood Hebrew but spoke in the common Aramaic of early-first century Palestine (cf. Luke 4:16ff).

Jesus’ Human Temptation. Jesus was tempted by the devil (cf. Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). He was “tempted in all things. . . yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). Jesus must have experienced great temptation, for the thought of suffering and crucifixion brought great distress to His soul (cf. Matt 26:38-42).

Jesus’ Human Suffering. Prior to Jesus’ arrest, He prayed “ferently; and His sweat became like drops of blood” (Luke 22:44). After Jesus’ arrest, He was subjected to numerous forms of punishment, ending in crucifixion. During His appearance before Annas, a temple guard “struck Jesus” (John 18:22). Likewise, before Caiaphas, the temple guards “spat in His face and beat Him with their fists; and others slapped Him” (Matt 26:67; cf. Mark 14:65; Luke 22:63). The Roman soldiers are also known for “treating Him with contempt and mocking Him” (Luke 23:11). Furthermore, Jesus was scourged and had a crown of thorns beaten onto His head (Matt 27:26, 29-30; Mark 15:15-19; John 19:1-3). The ultimate form of suffering came via the crucifixion, where tremendous emotional and physical pain lasted for several hours (cf. Matt 27:35ff; Mark 15:24ff; Luke 23:33ff; John 19:18ff). Obviously, the Gospels are replete with Jesus’ suffering as a human.

Jesus’ Human Death. The passion of Jesus Christ climaxed in His death on the cross. All four of the Gospel writers reference His death (Matt 27:50; Mark 15:37, 44-45; Luke 23:46; John

19:30, 33). Moreover, the Epistles state His death in no uncertain terms: “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3); Jesus was “put to death in the flesh” (1 Pet 3:18); “by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9); Jesus “humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). Jesus’ death further affirms His humanity.

Jesus’ Bodily Burial. Just as human bodies are generally buried after death, so was Jesus’ body. Joseph of Arimathea “asked for the body of Jesus. . . [and] took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb” (Matt 27:58-59). Even the women who wanted to anoint the body “saw the tomb and how His body was laid” (Luke 23:55).

Jesus’ Bodily Resurrection Appearances. The preceding sections cover aspects of Jesus’ life that He shared with humanity in general. What follows is unique in the sense that either it is something only Jesus carries out or it is something the rest of mankind is awaiting to experience. Each of these issues still stresses Jesus’ humanity, albeit a perfected, glorified body.

Shortly after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, the women who came to care for His body met Him “and took hold of His feet” (Matt 28:9). Later that afternoon, Jesus appeared to two men on their way to Emmaus and handled bread (Luke 24:30; cf. John 21:13). Then, He appeared to His disciples and offered proof of His humanity, “‘See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ And when He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. While they still could not believe it because of their joy and amazement, He said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ They gave Him a piece of a broiled fish; and He took it and ate it before them” (vv. 39-43).

A week later when Thomas was present, Jesus appeared again to His disciples, singling out Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here with your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing” (John 20:27). Further proof is found early in John’s Gospel when Jesus cleared the temple and told the religious leaders that even if they destroyed the temple, He would raise it in three days, “speaking of the temple of His body” (2:21). Jesus’ post-resurrection manifestations confirmed His humanity (not to mention His deity).

Jesus’ Bodily Ascension. After Jesus’ forty days of post-resurrection ministry, He got ready to ascend to heaven, but not until “He lifted up His hands and blessed [the disciples]” (Luke 24:50). Once Jesus ascended, two (probable) angels affirmed that “This Jesus” (Acts 1:11; literally, “this same Jesus”) who was taken up would return in like manner (in His physical body).

Jesus’ Bodily Intercession. The writer of Hebrews carefully affirms Jesus’ humanity in His role as the supreme high priest: “since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same. . . . Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest” (2:14, 17). A portion of the high priest’s task is to intercede for others, and Jesus “always lives to make intercession for [believers]” (7:25; cf. Rom 8:34). Thus, even in Jesus’ present ministry, He maintains His humanity.

Jesus’ Bodily Return. Though Revelation 19:12-15 speaks of Jesus having eyes, head, and mouth, these references may be symbolic within apocalyptic literature. It seems clear, however, from Acts 1:11 that the same Jesus who ascended will return (see above). Moreover, the New Testament speaks of a personal return of Christ (cf. Matt 24:30; 25:31; John 14:3; 2 Thess 2:1;

Rev 1:7), and one can safely assume that this feature stresses His continued humanity. Without a doubt, Jesus' past, present, and future includes His work as a human.

A Theological Response—The Necessity of Jesus' Humanity. Obviously, anyone who rejects Jesus' humanity is guilty of heresy, for the Scripture fully affirms both His deity and His humanity. In addition to the biblical errors of docetism, a theological issue is at stake. That is, it is theologically necessary for Jesus to be human in order to represent mankind in the work of redemption. Thus, it is no surprise that "Scripture invariably represents the incarnation as conditioned by human sin" (Berkhof, 334). Numerous biblical authors affirm this truth: "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10); "when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law" (Gal 4:4-5); and "the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

The author of Hebrews goes to great lengths in arguing for both the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ. In order to represent God's children, He "partook of the same" flesh and blood "to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:14-17). Likewise, human sinners need a human mediator, which is why Paul can confidently say, "There is one God, *and* one mediator also between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim 2:5).

Therefore, Jesus, as God (which Docetism affirms), could offer a perfect and eternal, "once for all," sacrifice to God (cf. Heb 9:12, 25-28; 10:10-14), and, as man, could serve as a substitute for sinners (which Docetism denies). Both truths are necessary theologically for Christ's saving work to be sufficient.

A Historical Response. Not only do biblical and theological reasons abound for upholding Jesus' humanity, but church history has consistently affirmed this truth.

Creeds and Church Councils. The Apostles' Creed (ca. 150) states that Jesus Christ was "born of the Virgin Mary." The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed (325; revised in 381) is even more emphatic, saying Jesus "for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man."

Furthermore, the Church councils of the fifth through seventh centuries continually affirmed Jesus' humanity, rejecting as heresy any teaching that downplayed Jesus' full human nature—Apollinarianism, Monophysitism, and Monothelitism, to name a few. Thus, although numerous attempts at redefining the humanity of Jesus have been made, the Church has consistently reflected the biblical portrait. One of the greatest extra-biblical Christological statements, the Chalcedonian Creed (451), underscores both His deity and His humanity, stating that Jesus Christ is "at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body. . . of one substance with us as regards his manhood. . . as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin."

Medieval Era. During the Middle Ages, Anselm, in his *Cur Deus Homo? (Why the God Man?)*, argued that Jesus Christ had to be both God and man to bring reconciliation of sinful men to God. He writes, "If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to

make it” (2.6). Furthermore, if both the deity and humanity “are said to be joined somehow, in such a way that one may be Divine while the other is human, and yet that which is God not be the same with that which is man, it is impossible for both to do the work necessary to be accomplished. For God will not do it, because he has no debt to pay; and man will not do it, because he cannot. Therefore, in order that the God-man may perform this, it is necessary that the same being should perfect God and perfect man, in order to make this atonement. For he cannot and ought not to do it, unless he be very God and very man” (2.7).

Reformation and Post-Reformation Era. The humanity of Christ has not been nearly as big of an issue beyond the early church. The last few hundred years have witnessed numerous attempts to deny the *deity* of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ *humanity*, except for those few who question His genuine existence, is accepted by nearly everyone, as attested throughout numerous personal and denominational confessions of faith.

Conclusion. Undoubtedly, anything less than Jesus’ full humanity could not be effective for mankind. Two thousand years of Church history have stood against the Docetic errors. Docetism is obviously a heresy, for it rejects a central tenet of the gospel, namely that Jesus Christ was both God *and man*. From the first century onward, the humanity of Jesus has been affirmed biblically, theologically, and historically.

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