

The Heresies of Arianism & Docetism & How They Impact Us Today

The Early Church battled many false teachings about the Bible. Gnosticism was a common practice then, which promoted false beliefs concerning theology, the Bible, and Jesus. Depending on which heresy we are looking at, whether Gnosticism, Arianism, Docetism, or something else, it challenges Jesus' divinity, His personhood, and/or His role in history. The Early Church was quick to expel immoral individuals and heretics; however, the modern church isn't so keen on imitating this strong biblical stance.

There are many churches within the modern day that have elements of heretical teachings, whether Protestant or Catholic. As believers, we must be cautious concerning erroneous teachings because they are often rooted in heresy and could lead us away from God. This is why we must be discerning, knowledgeable about the Bible, and firmly rooted in the Gospel of Christ.

One of the most common heresies being taught as Christianity today is the Jehovah's Witnesses. I have known many Jehovah's Witnesses, and they are unbelievably kind. One would think they are Christians by their devotion to saving lost souls, evangelism, and being anti-war. However, in truth, Jehovah's Witnesses are just a modern take on Arianism. The Early Church refuted this false belief, yet Christians today aren't aware of what it is.

Arianism

Arianism denies that Jesus is equal to the Father. The founder of Arianism, Arian, taught that Jesus hasn't existed since the beginning of time. In the words of Eusebius and Pamphilius concerning the main belief of Arianism; "It will be seen that we have here, at least in germ, all the essential elements of Arianism proper: the creation of the Son out of nothing, and consequently the conclusion that there was a time when he was not; the distinction of his essence from that of the Father" (Schaff, Phillip. "Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine." *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, 13). Thus, Arianism denied the deity of Christ and, instead, viewed Him as a created being.

Arianism rejects the Trinity. The Jehovah's Witnesses also deny the Trinity because they believe God is one person, not three distinct persons in the form of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that Jesus is God as they claim that Jesus never claimed to be God, that Jesus did not see Himself as being equal to the Father, and that the Apostles as well as the Early Church did not recognize Jesus to be God (Watchtower. "Is Jesus Almighty God?" Jehovah's Witnesses, par. 1-2). The official website of the Jehovah's Witnesses even goes as far as to claim that "Paul did not believe that Jesus was Almighty God" (Watchtower. "Is Jesus Almighty God?" Jehovah's Witnesses, par. 1-2).

How Should Christians Respond to Arianism?

The Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe that Jesus was always in existence, as they believe Jesus was the first thing Jehovah created. They also connect Jesus to being the same as the Archangel Michael. These are clearly unorthodox beliefs. From all of these findings, it can be concluded that the modern-day heresy of Jehovah's Witnesses is an updated form of Arianism due to their erroneous views of Jesus as well as their rejection of the Trinity.

The denial of the Trinity is unorthodox, as the Trinity is a core belief in Christianity, and if one rejects this, they reject Jesus' divinity. The belief that Jesus is not equal to the Father is heresy because Jesus is equal to the Father just as the Holy Spirit is equal to the Father (John 10:30). As Jesus stated, anyone who has the Father has the Son, but anyone who does not have the Son does not have the Father either (1 John 2:23). Jesus has existed since eternity, as He was present at creation and has always been with the Father because He is God (John 1:1-4).

Challenge Questions:

- Do you feel confident that you could healthily debate someone who adheres to Arianism? If not, how can you increase your understanding of Arianism?
- What are some ways you can dismantle the false belief of Arianism?
- The Early Church was quick to eradicate heresy. Why do you think the church is accepting of them today?

Docetism

Another heretical belief the Early Church battled that can be seen today is the practice of Docetism. Docetism teaches that Jesus only appeared to suffer on the cross and that He did not actually suffer or die on the cross. This is in direct alignment with the false belief of Islam. Islam teaches that Jesus did not really die on the cross, but rather that Judas died on the cross in place of Jesus, or someone else did. Since Islam teaches that Jesus is a prophet, they reject the idea that Allah would allow one of his prophets to die such a horrific death.

Today, the Docetistic teaching is known as the Substitute Theory. In addition to Docetism being taught in Islamic beliefs, the Gnostic teachings held by Basilideans and Nestorians most likely influenced Muhammad's writings of the Quran as well. Without a doubt, Muhammad was influenced by numerous false teachings as he completed the Quran. It is also known that he had access to Scriptures, which is why he includes so many sections of God's true Word; however, he manipulates them.

Rather than seeing Jesus as the Son of God, thus making Him God, Muhammad stripped Jesus of His divinity and only saw Him as one of Allah's prophets. Allah's prophets were to be seen as more important and superior, yet they are still not God. There is much to be learned concerning Islam's false teachings, but most Christians are not taking the time to educate themselves. Since they don't personally know any Muslims, they are ignoring the mission at hand. Or worse, they know Muslims, but are more concerned with keeping the peace than making disciples.

How Should a Christian Respond to Docetism?

Christians need to get out of the backseat and begin driving in the race set before them. Sadly, many of us are aware of mosques in our area, yet we are choosing to stay in the safety of our church, allowing people to continue down a path of delusion.

Jesus has called all of us to take His gospel to all people (Matthew 28:18-20). How can we do this if we are not even reaching those around us? Rather than being indifferent, we need to take a stand for the Lord and help the lost come to know Him. By seeking out mosques, connecting with Muslims, and pointing them to Jesus, we will truly be the hands and feet to them. If we choose to neglect the calling to reach the lost, we will not be faithfully following the Lord. This will come with its own troubles and pain down the road.

Challenge Questions:

- Are you going to take the gospel to all people? Does this include the Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims? Why or why not?
- What is preventing you from sharing the gospel with those who are lost?
- Are you going to be the hands and feet of Jesus to the lost, or are you going to be someone who turns away from them?

Applying These Lessons to Our Lives

In conclusion, heresies of the Early Church can still be seen today. Just because the Early Church condemned these practices does not mean that these heresies were completely eradicated. Modern-day evidence demonstrates that these heresies are still prevalent. The Jehovah's Witnesses have the heretical teaching of Arianism since they do not believe that Jesus is equal to the Father. They do not believe that Jesus existed from all eternity, and they deny the Trinity. Docetism is still being taught within Islam today because they believe that Jesus only appeared to suffer on the cross, and there was a substitute instituted for Him. Whether that be Judas Iscariot or someone else, they reject Jesus as being the one to die on the cross.

Similar to the Early Church, we need to reject these false beliefs, but we also need to educate people on why they are wrong. It is not beneficial to shut the door on every Jehovah's Witness or glare at Muslims. These actions are not in accordance with the love of Jesus. Instead, we need to be involved in the lives of those who are trapped in these false belief systems, build a relationship with them, and share the truth of the gospel with them (John 3:16-17).

Challenge Questions:

- How can you get involved with the Jehovah's Witnesses and share the gospel?
- Is there a mosque in your area? What are some ways you can build a relationship with a Muslim?
- What is holding you back from going against false teachings and spreading the truth of Jesus?

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