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CHURCH HISTORY MONTHLY

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Timeline of Topics

- Quote:
- Jim Elliot, 1900s
- Early Church
- Heresy: Docetism: Mentioned in I & II John
- Middle Ages
- The Second Nativity Scene
- What is the origin of stained glass in churches?

The first Christian heresy: Jesus was not physical: Which two Bible verses describe this?

Out of all the ideas within Christianity, the incarnation is the one which causes the most discontent with people outside of Christianity. The incarnation, the Christian idea that part of God, the Son, came to earth in a physical body as Jesus, is unacceptable to many people and to all other religions (including Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses). But this denial is very old: this idea was the seed of one of the first major controversies which Christians had to deal with; it is even discussed in the New Testament.

Some people in the first 100 years of after Jesus accepted parts of the faith (such as loving everyone) and altered other parts (such as the incarnation). This is how it worked. As Christianity was developing, another unrelated belief system also developed known as Gnosticism, which had three main points:

- 1. Levels of gods. The highest god—referred to here as GOD—was only concerned with spiritual matters.
- 2. Far below, a lesser god—referred to here as god—was not drawn to spiritual matters and, instead, created everything physical, including the earth.
- 3. Therefore, if people want to understand spiritual matters, they have to reject the lower god and pray to the highest GOD, who gave them a higher, secret, spiritual knowledge. These people were called Gnostics.

Some people liked parts of Christianity, such as Jesus' teaching on love, but not the incarnation. They decided to combine Gnosticism and Christianity and create a "better" understanding of Jesus; this belief is known as Docetism. Instead of God becoming human, these Gnostic Christians believed that

- 1. GOD sent a messenger to earth,
- 2. who was Jesus,
- 3. and then, since Jesus came from the highest GOD, who focused on spiritual matters, Jesus was pure spirit and not physical: this rejected the Incarnation.

Note: The words "gnosticism" and "docetism" do not appear in the New Testament. These teachings were not given that name for hundreds of years, yet Docetism specifically is described in the New Testament. For example:

- I John 4:2b: "Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God."
- II John 7a: "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world."

These two verses clearly describe Docetism.

And now you know which two Bible verses describes the first Christian heresy.

"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Jim Elliot wrote this in his journal on October 28, 1949; he was martyred for his faith 6 1/2 years later.

How did illiterate people learn Bible stories in the Middle Ages? Read this and you will say, of course, that makes perfect sense!

The answer? Stained glass. To those who could not read, a visit to church would show them the Christian message in the windows of the church or cathedral. For the illiterate peasants, this was their "Bible."



Free, online classes scheduled for next year:

- All 2000 years of Church History
- How we got the New Testament
- How we got the Old Testament
- False books not included in the Bible
- How to develop a deeper Christian maturity
- Overview of the Old Testament
- Overview of the New Testament

Questions, comments, or want to join a free class contact Mark at marknickens@gmail.com

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The Second Nativity Scene

One scene that appears at Christmas time is the Nativity Scene. But who started the practice of remembering that scene through figurines and sometimes live characters? For that, we have to go back almost 800 years to what I call "the Second Nativity Scene," and Francis of Assisi.

Francis of Assisi (St Francis for Catholics) (1181-1226) is mainly remembered today because of a monastic order he founded which bears his name, the Franciscans. The purpose of this order (also known as the Order of Friars Minor) was preaching and works of charity to people.

Francis was raised the rich son of a cloth merchant. As a young man, he engaged in the mindless activities of other wealthy sons. After being captured in a local war and going on a pilgrimage to Rome, Francis decided to devote himself to God. He soon attracted followers, like-minded men and women who also wanted to minister to others' needs. The Franciscan Order was officially sanctioned in 1209.

Francis desired to alleviate suffering and to teach people about God. As for teaching, Francis followed the practice of the day, namely to preach. Yet Francis lived in the Middle Ages. This meant that illiteracy was widespread. So most of the people received their knowledge of the Bible only from what they heard and saw. The hearing part was easy (preaching), the seeing part more difficult.

Christmas had always been Francis' favorite holiday. He realized that he could present the Christ message in a visual form so that the illiterate peasants could better understand what happened. Therefore, in 1223, Francis and some of his followers took an ox, donkey, and trough filled with hay and reenacted the scene of the birth of Christ. He led the townspeople of Greccio (where he was staying at the time) to this reenactment on Christmas Eve and had a worship service in front of this Second Nativity Scene.

And the rest is history. From one man's desire to visually represent the scene of Jesus' birth to illiterate peasants has come to us the practice of Nativity scenes seen around the world every Christmas.

Extra credit: A Nativity scene is also known as a crèche.