

It is about the money: Against docetic offertory prayers

by [Dean Snyder](#) in the [March 7, 2012](#) issue



Docetism is an ancient Christian heresy—one of the earliest, in fact. Docetism taught that Jesus' physical body was an illusion. That meant that Jesus' crucifixion was illusory as well. Jesus only seemed to have a physical body and only seemed to die on the cross. The docetists taught that Jesus was pure spirit, incorporeal, so he could not have done the kinds of earthly things real people do, the most earthly of all being to die.

The rationale behind docetist thinking was that the material world is too base and grubby for God to have actually entered it. Death, especially death on a cross, is too undignified and messy for God in Christ to have experienced. The realm of the spiritual is pure and holy, whereas the material world is impure and unholy. God belongs to heaven and could have had nothing to do with the crass world in which we live. So Jesus must have been an immaterial spirit that God sent to communicate with us; he could not have been a flesh-and-blood human being like the rest of us.

Docetism is a well-known heresy. Yet sitting in church the other Sunday as I listened to the offertory prayer, it occurred to me that we were praying docetic prayers. Then I thought about all the docetic prayers I have prayed over the years.

A docetic prayer goes something like this: "God, we present to you our offerings, but we know that it is not what is inside these offering plates that is important but the love and commitment that is in our hearts. So we offer our hearts to you." Or like

this: "These offerings we place on this altar, O God, are merely symbols of what we truly offer to you, our very selves."

Some docetic offertory prayers can be sophisticated: "We offer to you, O God, what we give and what we don't give. We offer to you what we share and what we won't share. We offer you our passions and our reservations, our trust and our distrust. We offer you our complicated selves."

These are all offertory prayers I have prayed. Docetic offertory prayers imply that the money inside the envelopes in the offering plates has little importance. In fact, the prayers imply that the presentation of money itself may be a little embarrassing, and so it is best not to actually mention the money part. Any references to the money in the offering should be minimal and dismissive. As we pray our docetic offertory prayers, I suspect there could be a bubble above our heads with these unspoken words: "Please don't let people think that we care about money here like the TV evangelists do. Please don't let anybody feel bad if they can't or don't give much. Please don't let anybody make the connection that some of this money goes for the minister's salary. Please don't let me think about whether I, of all people, am giving enough. Money is such an uncomfortable topic, so please don't let anybody, including me, think too much about it here in the middle of this beautiful worship service."

Once in a while I would like to hear somebody pray—or bring myself to pray—an offertory prayer like this: "We offer to you, O God, this money and rejoice in all it will buy and pay for. We thank you that some of it will pay for baloney and cheese from Costco to feed hungry people in this city. A portion will help pay teachers' salaries in Haiti. A few dollars will pay for the work sheets our children carry home after Sunday school. May what they learn here help shape their character and life values.

"Some of this offering will buy sheet music for the choir so that your name might be glorified. Some will pay the electricity and heat for this building where we come to worship you, where homeless people come for help and where AA groups meet to help each other stay sober.

"We thank you that this offering will pay for the pastor's salary and the salaries of the church staff who devote themselves to organizing this congregation to make disciples of Jesus to transform the world. May our work be wise and courageous. And a small portion of this money will help pay our bishop's salary and support the work

of all of our bishops around the world. We pray for our bishops that they might lead us boldly.

"We thank you also, God, that the money will not be spent on things that we might desire but that will not really bring us happiness. We thank you that when we give to you, we learn to seek our happiness not in things but in you, and we find a truer happiness this way.

"We thank you, God, that when we give to you rather than spending more on ourselves we fulfill the trust you have placed in us by blessing us with so much. You have blessed us with life, strength, intelligence, abilities and resources, and we thank you for the opportunity to give you joy by being generous to you and others. It is a great blessing to be able to give this money.

"We know that the way we use the money and resources we have shapes our hearts and affections. So we are grateful that we will love you more as a result of giving this treasure to you. May we give even more to you this coming week so we will love you even more.

"We also remember that some of us who have given the fewest dollars have been the most generous, and some of us who have given more dollars have not given as sacrificially. Still we rejoice in this money we present to you, God. We delight in it. We delight in what it will buy and what it will not buy because we didn't keep it for ourselves. We love giving you this money, God. Thank you that the Word became flesh and began this earthly Christian movement of love, inclusion, justice, beauty and joy so that we might give our dollars to help fuel it. In gratitude for the blessing of being able to give our money, we pray. Amen."

Not every Sunday maybe, but every once in a while.